

CULTURE & CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Culture is the individual and unique expression of the sum total of all of one's connections to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic level, interests, family, and etcetera.

Cultural Competency involves several elements:

- An orientation or openness on the part of the worker to understand the client as the client wishes one to understand the client. The worker must want to know the client and be open to learning from the client.
- Understanding the client through a general awareness of the characteristics of the reference groups to which the client relates. These reference groups include, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and etcetera. This general knowledge helps to orient the worker to pursue a deeper understanding of the client and to avoid behaviors that the client may find blatantly inappropriate or offensive. The worker must take care not to draw fixed conclusions about the client based on these reference groups alone; otherwise, the worker may stereotype the client.
- The worker must become aware of his/her own cultural bias. Inevitably, the worker views the client and all information related to the client through the worker's own cultural lens. Blind spots and misperceptions are inevitable.
- Ultimately, the worker only accurately understands the client when the worker goes beyond a general understanding and seeks specific information from the client and asks the client for validation of the worker's perceptions. The skills of tuning into self and our possible bias and blind spots, tuning-into the client, focused-listening, displaying an understanding of feelings, and reaching for feedback are important skills in the worker coming accurately to know and understand the client.

The proof of the worker's cultural competence is the formation of a partnership with the client in which the mission of the child welfare worker and the client family collaboratively reconcile, pursue, and accomplish the goals of the client family. In those instances where individuals cannot reconcile congruence of goals and process, an underlying and mutual sense of respect gives evidence to culturally competent practice on the part of the worker.