Module 5:  
Culture, Communication, Ethics and Family Engagement  
Module 5 introduces the connections between culture, communication, ethics and family engagement. In order to provide quality services that are inclusive to all individuals and groups, child welfare social workers must develop awareness and competencies in these areas. This module provides a foundation for you to build on as you cover these topics in greater depth during classroom training.

Module 5 Overview  
Module 5 consists of four chapters:  
1. Awareness of Culture and Diversity in Child Welfare Practice  
2. Communication  
3. Appropriate Use of Authority, Ethics and Confidentiality  
4. Family Engagement.  
This module has several web links, references to statutes, and articles for you to read. Questions regarding the information, concepts and principles in these additional resources may appear in Check Your Understanding questions or the module Post-Test questions.

Module 5 Learning Objectives  
When you have completed Module 5, you will be able to:  
• Explain concepts of culture and diversity as they relate to child welfare practice.  
• Recognize the influence of your own culture on perceptions and behavior.  
• Identify ways to apply cultural knowledge in child welfare practice.  
• Recognize and explain the different types and styles of communication.  
• Identify basic communication behaviors and differences.  
• Apply effective listening techniques.  
• Describe ethical practices for use of authority, dual relationships and confidentiality.  
• Identify and explain essential components for building relationships.  
• Recognize strengths-based, safety-focused family partnership strategies for engaging families.

Module 5 Chapter 1:  
Awareness of Culture and Diversity in Child Welfare Practice  
Overview  
Chapter 1 introduces the influence of culture and diversity on our daily lives through our perceptions and interactions. The introduction of cultural variables helps you develop a basic understanding of how culture impacts child welfare practice. As a social worker, it
is important for you to identify your personal culture, and recognize ways in which your values influence your ability to understand and respond to cultural differences.

This training does not provide information about specific cultures; it is only an introduction to the complex topic of culture and diversity.

Role of Culture
Your view of the world is shaped by your cultural background, and so it may be difficult to view your personal culture objectively. We often take culture for granted or remain largely unaware of how culture and diversity affect our daily lives, because they are such integrated parts of us. Developing insight regarding your own culture can increase your ability to recognize and understand the cultural elements in other people’s thinking and behavior.

In child welfare, we serve families from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, social and economic backgrounds. When differences are recognized and appreciated, barriers to communication can be overcome and the worker’s ability to make fair, informed judgments about clients’ lives and situations increases.

No single training or experience can make you culturally competent…you have to strive for competence. On your journey towards cultural competence, you must first understand the role of culture in your own life and be aware of your own potential biases.

Race, ethnicity, and culture are often used interchangeably; in reality, they are very different concepts.

**Race** is a social construct that categorizes people according to physical characteristics that are determined by heredity. People who share genetic backgrounds and have similar physical characteristics constitute a racial group.

The important point to recognize about race is that race categorizes people and impacts the lives of individuals and groups assigned to specific categories. Social workers must be aware of the adverse impacts of racial stereotyping, the affects of racism on all people, and how personal perceptions of race and culture influence your work with families.

**Ethnicity** is a classification based upon national origin, such as German or Korean. People in an ethnic group may be of the same race and they may share similarities in their cultural backgrounds, language and history. Ethnicity and culture, however, are not interchangeable because people from the same ethnic group can differ widely in their cultural traits and come from different racial heritage.
**Culture** is the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions and standards of behavior that regulate life within a particular group of people. While race is determined by biology and ethnicity by national origin, culture is made by people. Cultural components are created by individuals and incorporated into group life to regulate social organization and to assure the survival and well-being of the group’s members.

While you are working on this chapter, consider your own culture. What cultural groups do you belong to? Take time to think about various aspects of your culture and jot some notes down.

**Diversity** is a broad range of human differences. It includes, but is not limited to, differences in ability and disability, age, educational level, ethnicity, gender, geographic origin, race, religion, faith, spirituality, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, marital status, parent status, and values.

You can embrace diversity through acknowledging and respecting differences, understanding an individual’s right to self-identification, recognizing that no specific culture is superior to another culture, and accepting that categories of difference may be fluid.

**World view** means the general perspective from which you view other people and your environment. Your world view is a product of your own culture and is shaped by your past experiences. The world view of each individual is different and unique.

When differences in world views and culture aren’t respectfully acknowledged, these differences can become barriers to healthy working relationships and engagement with families. Barrier – or lack of understanding – can lead to misunderstandings, and incorrect or unfair judgments about other people and their lives.

**Cultural sensitivity** is being aware of and able to understand other people and their feelings. Sensitivity to culture helps professionals build competence.

**Cultural competence** is possessing a set of behaviors and attitudes that enable the professional to work effectively with families. Cultural competence is vital to developing healthy, productive working relationships with families. Knowledge of the relevant cultural experiences and processes which have shaped the world views of the families you work with is paramount. Go to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) website at http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWCulturalStandards.pdf for a more detailed exploration of cultural competence.
As a child welfare worker, cultural competence does not require you to be proficient in another culture; cultural competence does, however, require you to respectfully recognize cultural values and differences. From the Module 5 Chapter 1 Attachments tab, print and read the article, “The Myth of Cross-Cultural Competence.”

**Cultural Characteristics**
Culture is more complex than ethnicity or race – and most of what constitutes culture may be invisible to a casual observer.

This photo illustrates the relationship between visible and invisible cultural characteristics.

Visible characteristics like gender, language, dress, music, behaviors toward other people, and food make up a small part of a person’s or group’s culture. Eye contact is a visible, communicative behavior that is often related to cultural background.

Invisible characteristics, like values, beliefs, perceptions, child-rearing practices, faith, religion, spirituality, customs, citizenship and behaviors, constitute a very large part of a person’s or group’s culture. Invisible characteristics are important to you as a child welfare worker. The ability to identify these characteristics and adapt to them helps you empower the family to achieve the best possible outcomes.

**Values** are principles or ideals related to worth and conduct that a culture holds to be important. The values of any culture form the foundation for life within the culture. Values describe strongly-held beliefs about what life and people should be like, what is right or wrong, what is considered appropriate behavior, and what is considered to be important in life. Some examples of value statements are:

- Each person should be as industrious and productive as possible.
- Being a good person is more important than attaining wealth.
- The sanctity of life is more important than the quality of life.
- Harmony in the group is the healthiest way to live.
- Personal worth is measured by success in a career.
- Personal worth is measured by the good you do for others.
- Personal worth is measured by raising a happy family.
Cultural Values
The values of a group may be influenced by historical experience. Some values express a group’s perception of what is necessary for survival and the well-being of members.

For example, a persecuted group may have very different values from a group that has a position of power. A group that has experienced persecution may have strongly held values regarding loyalty, the commitment of members to one another and community survival. A group that has benefited from a position of power in a competitive environment may have strongly held values regarding individuality, achievement and success.

Cultural Norms, Standards and Rules
Cultural norms are situations or patterns of behavior that are usual or expected.

Cultural standards are levels of quality for behaviors that are normal or acceptable for a particular person or in a particular situation.

Cultural rules are statements of what may, must or must not be done in a particular situation.

All of these encourage behavior that is consistent with a culture’s values and define acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Most cultures have systems of rewards and punishments, or sanctions, that reinforce culturally-appropriate behavior. Examples of norms, standards and rules are:

- Assert yourself; don’t let people take advantage of you.
- Don’t discuss personal business with strangers.
- Don’t show your emotions in public.
- Spare the rod and spoil the child.

Values and Behavior
Cultural values affect the behavior of group members. At the same time, members of different cultures can interpret the same behavior in very different ways. Cross-cultural miscommunication can result from incorrectly interpreting the meaning of specific behaviors.

As an example, children are universally held in high regard and valued within all cultures. No major cultural or ethnic group sanctions maltreatment of children. However, specific behaviors that constitute maltreatment may differ widely between cultural groups.

**Non-physical discipline teaches right and wrong**
Some cultures consider any form of physical punishment damaging to children, and believe children should be disciplined by using non-violent strategies, such as
verbal reprimand and restriction of privileges. Physical discipline is seen as abusive, intrusive, painful and harmful to the child.

**Physical discipline teaches right and wrong**

Some cultures value physical discipline and see it as one way to assure children learn right from wrong. Refraining from physical discipline can be viewed as shirking parental responsibility and can be considered neglectful. In this cultural context, physical discipline is equated with being loved and looked after.

**Natural consequences teach right and wrong**

Some cultures strike a middle ground. Parents allow their children to learn right from wrong through experiencing natural and logical consequences that result from their actions. Natural consequences teach the child valuable and lasting lessons about the world, and are an example of non-physical discipline. Physical discipline or other types of punishment are typically limited to specific situations.

**Meaning of Behavior within the Cultural Context**

The values and beliefs that underlie each position in the previous interaction are similar. They are: “Children must learn proper behavior to assure their survival and safety in a complicated and sometimes dangerous world,” and “A parent is negligent if a child is not taught proper behavior.” However, the expression of these values and beliefs can be very different.

Without understanding the meaning of the behavior within the cultural context, you could easily misinterpret the parent’s intent as overly restrictive, abusive or uninvolved.

**Implications for Child Welfare**

Understanding cultural context is critical to assure the family’s case plan and your service interventions are appropriate.

For example, while parental behavior in two different cases may appear equally abusive, your intervention will be very different if the abuse stems from uncontrolled hostility and rage, or from excessive demonstrations of culturally-condoned expression of caring and responsibility.

**Common Errors in Assessing Culture**

There are several ways in which a lack of cultural competence can cause you to misinterpret or misjudge other people. These errors include:

- Ethnocentrism
- Stereotyping

**Ethnocentrism** is the idea that your own culture is at the center, or is superior to all others. Ethnocentrism is primarily characterized by a lack of exposure to people from other cultures and an unwillingness to objectively consider
alternative ways to live. To someone with an ethnocentric perspective, his or her own world view is the “best one,” the “right one,” or even the “only one.”

Unquestioned acceptance and valuation of your own culture prevents you from recognizing shortcomings and limitations within your culture and causes prejudice against anyone or anything that is different.

Ethnocentrism prevents effective communication with people from other cultural backgrounds.

**Stereotypes** are generalized statements about the presumed characteristics of a cultural group and its members. Stereotypes frequently communicate misinformation and promote misjudgments.

While members of a cultural group share many common values, traits and characteristics, it is not true that all members of a cultural group are alike in all ways. There is always a range of differences in values, attitudes and behaviors among persons of any group.

Stereotyping often causes us to draw conclusions where no conclusions are warranted. As a result, we can be sure that our conclusions will often be wrong!

References to stereotyping and cultural groups frequently bring to mind major cultural groups: African Americans, Anglo-Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and Latino Americans. Consider your cultural assumptions about:

- The middle class
- The very wealthy
- Poverty-stricken groups
- Teenagers
- Teenage parents
- ‘Tweens
- Baby-boomers
- The very old
- Urban and rural dwellers
- Suburbanites
- Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender
- Religious minorities.

No doubt you can think of many cultures and subcultures that aren’t listed here. When you consider the sheer volume of cultures and subcultures, it is evident that stereotyping people from any group is counter-productive to effective engagement and genuine family-centered, strengths-based child welfare practice.
Engagement with Families from Diverse Cultures

Here are several suggestions you can follow to help you engage in meaningful interactions and working relationships with families from diverse cultures. If interactions are not meaningful, families may appear resistant to engagement, and to developing and following a case plan.

**Suggestion 1:** Strive to understand the values, attitudes, traditions, gender and family roles, norms and beliefs of the cultural and ethnic groups served by your agency. Understanding a family’s culture can prevent inadvertent insults, criticisms or misinterpretations of behavioral meanings.

*Example:* Tell me where you learned your values about discipline. How do those experiences influence how you discipline your children?

**Suggestion 2:** Actively listen and learn from the family to identify areas of commonality and demonstrate respect for the family's individuality.

*Example:* I understand the benefits of setting firm boundaries with children; my parents set firm boundaries for me that helped me grow into adulthood.

**Suggestion 3:** Acknowledge cultural differences. Request the family’s guidance to understand and to avoid being offensive. If lack of cultural knowledge leads to an error, apologize and assure the family that no insult was intended.

*Example:* Thank you for sharing your Alaskan Indian heritage with me. Help me understand how your history influences our working relationship…what cultural norms, standards and rules do I need to be aware of so that I don’t offend you?

*Example:* Your body language is telling me that I may have offended you. Have I offended you? I’m not sure what I did wrong. Please tell me how I have offended you.

**Suggestion 4:** Become knowledgeable in the general norms, standards and rules of behavior for a particular group and abide by them.

*Example:* Ask the family how they would like to be addressed, i.e., Mr., Ms. or by first name. Ask how they would feel most comfortable addressing you.

**Suggestion 5:** Use interviewing techniques that clarify family communication subtleties. Never assume what the family means or that the family understands your intentions. Ask families for clarification and clearly explain the meaning of your own responses and behaviors. Use qualified translators or interpreters to help you communicate when language or other cultural factors may act as barriers.

*Example:* Mr. Vang, I notice that Mrs. Vang looks to you before she speaks even when I ask her a direct question, and she still looks at you...
when she answers. I’m not sure what this means. Please help me understand how I should best talk with you and Mrs. Vang.

**Suggestion 6:** Endeavor to use the family’s cultural preferences in case planning and service provision. Interpreters, not other family members, may be very beneficial in helping the family choose and receive appropriate services; and, interpreters can help you understand the family’s strengths and needs.

**Example:** An American Indian family may express a desire to work with a therapist who is familiar with tribal values and customs or participate in a healing ceremony to help them meet child safety goals. Consult and work with the tribe to ensure services or ceremonies occur.

**Summary**

The concepts of race and ethnicity are sometimes confused with culture and diversity. Culture is the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions and standards of behavior that regulate life within a particular group of people. For each of us, our culture informs our world view. Diversity is knowledge of and comfort with relating to qualities and conditions of people and groups that are different from our own and outside the groups to which we belong.

Cultural competence is a set of behaviors and attitudes that enable you to work effectively with people. Cultural competence includes the ability to understand cultural differences, recognize your own biases, and transcend differences when working with children and families whose cultural context is different from your own.

In Chapter 2, we begin to explore how cultural differences can be expressed in communication.

**Next Steps**

Continue to build your training binder with documents and printouts from this chapter. File this transcript behind the Module 5 Transcript tab.

From the Attachments tab, locate and print:

- “Acknowledging Your Cultural Heritage.” Complete the worksheet as you think about your own culture. File it behind the Classroom Activities tab; be sure to bring it to your first day of classroom training for facilitated discussion.
- “The Myth of Cross-Cultural Competence,” by Ruth G. Dean. File it behind the Module 5 Resources tab. There may be questions from this article on the Post-Test.

Consult with your supervisor about further training to develop a greater understanding of cultural groups you work with.

When you are ready, begin Chapter 2.