



Understanding Cultural Differences Activity

Description of this Activity

Cultural competence is a critical component of intercultural exchange. As a Community Representative, you will serve families and au pairs from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, social, and class backgrounds. Failure to understand the implications of these differences may interfere with program participant's ability to develop healthy relationships, or to make fair and informed judgments about their lives and situations. By contrast a thorough understanding of culture can help one assess both problems and strengths, and access culturally relevant differences that can help a family and au pair deal with potential problems, and also support and sustain them when the Community Representative is not around.

Core Concepts Implemented by this Activity

- 1) Cultural differences must be acknowledged openly and mutually understood in order for a trusting, healthy relationship to develop between the au pair and host.
- 2) When program participants are unfamiliar with a culture's norms of personal and interpersonal behavior, they may misjudge or misinterpret communications or actions, resulting in inappropriate assessment and action. They may also inadvertently offend a family member, or communicate disregard, disrespect, and devaluation.
- 3) A sincere interest in the values and beliefs of another person communicates respect and acceptance. This strengthens the relationship and promotes collaboration.
- 4) A thorough understanding of a family's culture can help to accurately identify and draw upon a family member's strengths and provide culturally dynamic exchanges.

Definitions

A refresher regarding the terminology used in this exercise is important. Culture, race, and ethnicity are, at times, used interchangeably. They are, in fact, very different: Race refers to an anthropological system of classification based upon physical characteristics determined by heredity. People who share a genetic heritage and who, as a result, have very similar physical characteristics constitute a racial group. Most ethnologists now recognize only three primary divisions of race; Caucasian or white, Negroid or black, and Mongoloid or yellow, each with many subdivisions. Racial characteristics include color and texture of hair, color of skin and eyes, stature, bodily proportions and bone structure. Many anthropologists and ethnologists are questioning the fundamental validity and utility of racial classification. Ethnicity generally refers to a classification of people based upon their national or regional origin, such as "Nigerian," "Serbo-Croatian", or "Chinese." The word "ethnic" is derived from a Greek word that means "national or foreign." People in an ethnic group are usually of the same race, and they may share a common cultural background. However, ethnicity and culture are not interchangeable, since people from the same ethnic groups. Culture is more complex than either ethnicity or race. Culture refers to the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and standards of behavior that regulate life within a particular group of people. Culture includes components that organize people into social groups and that regulate both individual and group behavior. Culture includes cognitive systems such as beliefs, attitudes, and values. It includes norms, which are rules regarding appropriate ways of behaving. It includes spiritual or religious systems and institutions. Culture may also include the art and artifacts produced by the group. While race is determined by one's biology and ethnicity by one's national or regional origin, culture is made by people. Cultural components are created and incorporated into group life to regulate social organization and to assure the survival and well being of group members.



Instructions For This Activity

Your support and management of this activity are particularly critical if it is to be successful. First, you must be knowledgeable of cultural variables and how they can affect cross cultural exchange. It is important that you do not "interview" the family or au pair using the interview guide. Finally, the exercise has little utility if it is not adequately Processed. Therefore it is important to conclude the exercise by asking the questions in the conclusion of this exercise. This activity has been distributed to the au pair and host family in their handbooks and should be done with the CR mediation during the au pair host family orientation. Before you begin your discussion, take time to review this document. Remember, **DO NOT** read the questions during the discussion or have the participants read their answers. This is a tool to guide your discussion, not a questionnaire. The order of the discussion topics is designed to help you address the issues in a comfortable sequence. This should help establish culturally acceptable interpersonal patterns for the discussion itself, including who should be included in the discussion and how you will address each other. Relax! This is an exciting opportunity and should be informative and fun. Remember, we are alike in many ways, despite different cultural backgrounds. This is an opportunity to learn about different styles of being and doing, and a chance for au pairs and the host family shares a part of themselves with interesting and interested people. Ask the family if there are other members of the household who should be, or would like to be, included in this discussion. Invite participation of all interested members.

Establishing Protocol for The Discussion

Thank the family and au pair for choosing the Au Pair Foundation Program and for their willingness to explore new cultures. Explain the purpose of this activity, to learn how to work together and develop cultural awareness. Explain that a lack of understanding across cultures promotes misjudgments this exercise helps avoid this. Encourage everyone to answer honestly and to feel free to ask questions. Ask them to each other know if they find any of the questions or behaviors offensive. If so to discuss them openly and explain why so everyone may understand why they perceive it that way. Ask family members what they would prefer the au pair call them and do the same with the au pair.. Ask them to explain what calling someone by their first name, or using a title, communicates about the nature of the relationship and about respect in their culture.

1) History

- Where were you born and raised?
- What was the ethnic background of your parents and grandparents?
- What country did they emigrate from, and when?
- Why did they come to America?
- Do you know anything about your family's early experiences in this country? What were they like?
- What characteristics, traditions, and values help by your parents and grandparents do you still maintain? Which have you changed?

2) Family Child Rearing Practices

Introduce this section by explaining that because child welfare deals with appropriate and inappropriate child rearing and parenting practices, it is particularly important that you recognize cultural differences in these areas.

- What is the most important thing a family can provide for a child?
- What is your preferred form of discipline for misbehavior, and why?
- How do you view physical forms of discipline, and what do you call it?
- How do you know when a person has "gone too far"? Are there general beliefs about child discipline that many people from your culture share?
- Do you expect different things for boys and girls? What are they?



- Do you expect different things from older children and younger ones? What are they? And, at what age does a child become "older?"
- What is your family tradition about meals? Who cooks, who eats when, do children feed each other, what kinds of foods do you prefer?
- Who cares for the children when the parents have to go out? At what age were you first left alone? At what age are children in your family given responsibility to care for other children?

3) Family Roles and Rules

- Who makes what kinds of decisions in your family? What decisions can you make by yourself without input from anyone? What decisions does your (wife, husband, mother, boyfriend) make?
- Would you call your family "intergenerational?" That is, do extended family members play a large role in your life? (Parents, sisters and brother, aunts and uncles, grandparents, non-blood "relatives" such as godparents, friends, etc.)
- What kinds of things do you think are "personal" and shouldn't be talked about with people outside the family?

4) Family Support Networks

- To whom do you turn when you are in trouble or need help?
- Is your family involved with a church? How big a role does religion play in your lives?
- Did anyone other than your parents care for you for any extended period of time? Who? How did you feel about being cared for by people other than your parents?
- Who in your life has had an important influence on your development?

5) Intercultural Experiences

Explain if, and how, discrimination has this affected your life?

- How do you decide if you can trust people or not? Do you have trusting and friendly relationships with people from other cultures or ethnic backgrounds?
- What kinds of pre-judgments do you think other people make about you because of your race, ethnicity, or culture?
- What would you want a person of another, culture, like me, to know and understand about your culture?

6) Closure

- How have you felt about this discussion? Have I done or said anything that you found offensive or disrespectful? What can you tell me to help me better understand and work with other families of your cultural or ethnic background? Did any of their preconceived ideas change as a result of the activity?
- What did they learn about family structure, relationships, child rearing practices, and discipline that might affect an assessment of abuse or neglect in a family from this culture?

*** Remember, after you have completed this exercise, remind everyone that this is just one step of many steps toward becoming more culturally competent. Throughout the program year, they will have many more opportunities to explore each other's culture and they may have very different experiences and opinions. They must commit themselves to ongoing cross-cultural learning.