Cultural Perspectives on Child Rearing

There is not a universal standard for child rearing, nor for child abuse and neglect.

This fact presents a dilemma. Culture, no matter whose it is, is never an excuse for hurting children, and virtually all cultures have as a value that children may not be damaged. In every culture, members of the community have a responsibility to intervene when children are being hurt. However, what behavior we label as abusive or neglectful, how we go about intervening, how we understand the causes of problems, and what we do to help alleviate the stresses, have much to do with our understanding of the family’s culture and what is normal or acceptable within that culture.

Western cultures consider, for example, the harsh initiation rites that occur in other parts of the world abusive. During such rites, pre-adolescent boys may undergo genital operations, facial scarring, beatings and are sometimes deprived of food or forced to vomit.

At the same time, many Western child rearing practices would be viewed as equally abusive or neglectful by these same groups. Practices of isolating children in beds or rooms of their own at night, making children wait for food when they are hungry, forcing young children to sit in a classroom all day, or allowing infants to “cry themselves to sleep” would seem as bizarre, exotic and damaging as their behaviors seem to us.

Consider the following case:

It was reported to Child Protective Services that a mother had cut the faces of her two young sons with a razor blade and rubbed charcoal into the lacerations. The boys were removed from her care and placed into foster care. She was prosecuted for child abuse. However, the mother was a member of an East African tribe that traditionally practiced face scarring. Her actions were simply an attempt to assert the cultural identity of her children. Without such markings, her boys would be unable to participate as adults in their African culture. A failure to assert ones' children’s rights by such scars would be viewed as neglectful within the cultural context of her tribe.

Another example, often misunderstood, is the Vietnamese practice of “coin rubbing” in which heated metal coins are pressed forcefully on the child’s body
leaving bruises. This practice is a traditional curing technique that is believed to reduce fevers, chills and headaches. While bruises are indeed inflicted, in this context it is hard to define it as abuse.

How would we explain to the East African or Vietnamese mothers the practice of orthodontic work? In our culture, it is not only acceptable but often desirable. All these practices inflict pain on the child. However, viewed within cultural contexts, they are practices aimed at benefiting the child by making him or her physically acceptable to other members of the culture.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

When working with people who are new to your culture, there are a number of unspoken elements that can significantly affect behavior. Consider that they:

- Often are unable to relax or feel fully "at home" here for a long time
- May not want to leave their homeland but may have been forced to for political, religious or economic reasons
- May themselves be victims of oppression, famine, torture, murder or lost families, or have suffered other atrocities of war.
- May have been highly educated or held professional standing in their own country but have not been able to replicate that status here.
- May be learning English for the first time. Hearing a new language, trying to understand it and translating in your head all day is exhausting and stressful.
- May be confused by the tone of voice, gestures, joking behavior, physical distance between people, customs around food or drink, behavior with the opposite sex. Things we take for granted as "communications" are not so obvious to newcomers.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS WHEN WORKING WITH MINORITIES

Many minority families are not recent immigrants to this country. They may fully be members of this society, but maintain the values, traditions, communication patterns and child rearing practices of their original cultures.

Consider this visit summary written by a home visitor:

During the home visitation, I observed that Billy did not have his own room and in fact had to share his room with several other people. Billy’s grandmother seemed to play an overly important role in Billy’s life and in fact, it was she who did most of the parenting when I was there. When talking with his grandmother, Billy never looked directly at her and always spoke with a bowed head. It appeared that he was afraid of her and did not want to get within arm’s reach. I observed in Billy’s family signs of disrupted attachment in that Billy did not kiss or hug his grandmother even though she had been away for several weeks. I also observed that the living quarters did not adequately provide for Billy’s need to have a space of his own. I would therefore recommend that Billy’s stay in foster care continue and that supervised visitations continue until the family can get more settled and provide for Billy’s emotional and physical needs.
Differences in child rearing style can also contribute to misinterpretations of neglect or inadequate parenting. Many Western cultures believe that each child should have his or her own bed, if not his own room. Many other cultures - Hawaiian, Japanese, Native American, among others, believe that such a practice is detrimental to child development and is therefore potentially dangerous.

It would be important therefore, to know that Billy's family is Native American. For Billy, it is normal to live in close quarters with other family members. What the writer observed as chaotic was normal family interaction. Billy's averted glance and lack of eye contact was not from fear but a sign of respect and other expressions of his grandmother were more meaningful to him than hugs and kisses.

Comparing the observer’s conclusions with the reality of Billy’s family strikingly emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural differences.

There has to be give-and-take on both sides in order to accomplish the goal of making sure the children are safe and well cared for. Education about how physical maltreatment is not acceptable in this country and is against the law is one vital step in the process. Providers have to learn that what they see might not be what they think they see when dealing with families from other cultures. This means that we must be respectful of the differences and to be prepared to accommodate them when there is no chance of harm to a child.

From Comprehensive Training for CASA - Cultural Awareness.

Taking Appropriate Action

The discovery of non-standard disciplinary or folk medicine practices places the educator in a difficult position. With the present-day emphasis on cultural tolerance, educators should respect practices and values different from their own.

HOWEVER, THE TEACHER’S SENSE OF PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PROTECTING ONE’S CHARGES FROM ABUSE MUST REMAIN INTACT.

-Max Weber, Hunter College