**CULTURAL AWARENESS** – on Home page of Cultural Awareness

When considering the creation of a new or enhanced outreach program, a crucial element is the development of cultural awareness. Culture can be defined as the sum of one’s beliefs, rituals, customs and behaviors that guide one’s life; they are learned through one’s family and environment and passed down through generations. The ability to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, in a manner that affirms their worth and dignity, is cultural competence. There is a growing awareness among health and social services professionals that failure to address cultural differences leads to mistrust, conflict and potential ineffectiveness or failure of a program.

There is a **culture of poverty** as well, as there is with all economic classes. The focus of the Christ Child Society is on people in poverty, so combined with all of the other cultural issues we need to be aware of, we need to understand the culture of generational poverty. Read more

**EXPANDED CONTENT**

Culture is everywhere …in ethnicities, businesses, churches, CCS chapters, economic classes, even within families. Culture is our behavior, our values; it is “**how we do things here**.” Cultural barriers can negatively impact our interactions with clients because how WE do things isn’t always how THEY do things. We are typically part of many different overlapping cultures – our church, CCS, a country club, a neighborhood.

We are often unwittingly unaware of cultural differences because we only understand them from our perspective, through the filter of our own culture. Think about the hidden aspects of culture, the hidden rules that we internalize. For example, how do different cultures, even families, celebrate holidays? Sometimes, misunderstanding of cultural differences causes anger or confusion.



 The stranger sees only what he knows.

 *African proverb*

**Meet Them Where They Are**

Cultural sensitivity begins with awareness of one’s own biases and knowledge of the diverse elements of our clients’ “story.” This awareness should infuse programs with a non-judgmental approach and respect for cultural, class, and economic differences. In other words, meet your clients where they are, not only physically, but within the context of their experiences, history, economic status, language, values and patterns of behavior.

Avoid making negative assumptions about clients based on stereotypes, prejudices and broad brushstrokes. What one culture views as “traditional” in terms of parenting, manners, or work ethic may not reflect the values of another culture. Chapters should be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact by developing programs that reflect an understanding of the differences and build on the cultural strengths our clients bring to the table. For example, a child from a Spanish speaking home can be congratulated for being bilingual rather than chastised for speaking Spanish with his peers.

**Understanding your cultural comfort Zone**

Try the exercise **here** (link to Hidden Rules exercise) to determine your cultural comfort.

Although you may cross over into other skill lists, your comfort zone tends to be in one economic class. We assume everyone knows brown shoes don’t go with the black suit, but if you have one pair of shoes and one decent pair of pants, that doesn’t matter. Awareness of the rules is essential for moving from one class to another or dealing with interactions that involve other ‘rules.’ Many “fish out of water” stories (think *Beverly Hillbillies*) are based on this knowledge gap. But for those in poverty, this is not a comedy and that gap is seldom crossed.

**How does this information affect what we do in our CCS chapter?**

We need to respect the families we serve, understand behaviors and attitudes that are cultural, provide resources that are needed, and offer them in an appropriate way.

*1. Consider viewing our clients (and really, a good rule of thumb for any encounter!) from a different perspective.*

For that unruly child, that teen mom…. **Don’t ask, what is wrong with her? Instead, ask, what happened to her?** What was her morning like? Was that child awakened by gunshots last night? Is that teen searching desperately for someone to love her? Has that Mom’s beater of a car broken down again? Has that child had any breakfast? Is Grandma here because her daughter just overdosed? Is Mom really sleepy because she just got off the night shift?

Have the stresses of poverty, the lack of resources, the difficulty with planning ahead, impacted that person in front of you?

*2. So, what can we do to make the place we volunteer a cultural friendly place? How do we apply this?*

* You don't have to like or accept "different" behavior, but you should try to understand where it comes from. Some behaviors are alienating to us personally. It’s ok to not like the fact that many poor people have tattoos. We think of the cost. They think of acceptance.
* Check negative attitudes at the door. There are opposing viewpoints on immigration, ‘welfare queens,’ food stamps… Just keep in mind that we are serving people who lack resources, people who are struggling, people who are “the least of our brothers.”
* Think about how your daily conversation sounds to a person living in poverty*. How was your Thanksgiving; did you make the turkey? What is Santa bringing you? I really need a Starbucks!*

*3. Maybe we can start conversations about some of the choices we make.*

* Think about clothing choices: what helps a 12-year-old girl fit in at her own school? Are we giving quality better than they can find themselves at the Dollar Store? If we are building self-esteem, we need to ask ourselves, how do we best do that?
* Think about our schedules – are we thinking about Moms are getting kids on the bus for school? Or the reality that many minimum wage earners get fired if they are late? Is Sunday church day?

Let’s be honest. Talking about other cultures is **uncomfortable** because we all have prejudices and fears, or awkward self-consciousness. Our culture is who we are; asking us all to step out of the ‘box’ we are in can be a challenge to how we live and think.

Understanding where our clients are coming from is beneficial to our program’s success. All of our clients are God’s children, deserving of love, respect and caring, each with one life here on earth, just like us.



The purpose of cultural awareness is not to change our culture or anyone else’s culture.

 It is to recognize that 6 can also be 9.

**Getting Started: Addressing Culture in Programs**

How can cultural diversity be addressed when developing a program?

* Begin with developing cultural awareness and sensitivity among chapter members. Consider educational opportunities, sharing resources listed **here**  (link to Cultural Awareness resource list), and asking your community partner how they address cultural differences. Most schools and organizations have a discrimination policy, processes for addressing cultural issues, and often have cultural diversity training. Ask if your members can be part of that.
* Consider initiating a cultural awareness training session for volunteers in all capacities.
* When developing a program, focus your goals: offer resources, not disapproval.
* Work with a community partner to identify the resources that are really needed, not just what you think people in poverty should have.
* Rather than ‘fixing’ behaviors that are not like yours, demonstrate what behaviors can lead to successful outcomes. Be aware that parenting norms, etiquette and values differ across cultures. No one wants to be told their traditions are ‘wrong’ any more than the British want to be told they drive on the ‘wrong’ side of the road!
* Seek to develop relationships with your partners and clients of mutual respect and understanding. As James P. Comer, Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, stated, “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.” When teachers, mentors, tutors, and parents trust each other and value the positive outcomes of any program, they feel good about themselves, feel invested in the program, and work toward positive outcomes for the children together.
* Avoid stereotypes. Be sure your literature, lessons and marketing materials represent your clients’ culture, not just that of white middle class.
* Know that our attitudes are reflected in tone of voice, posture and facial expressions. As Pope Francis said, “Do you touch the hand of the one to whom you give alms, or do you toss the coin? (*Vatican City 5.21.13*)
* Create a ‘survival vocabulary list’ for volunteers in the languages most often encountered during your programs. Even basic greetings are a welcoming gesture. If necessary, work with an interpreter. Retired language teachers make wonderful CCS members!

**Conclusion**

Cultural Competence is a journey that requires ongoing self-reflection on the part of both CCS volunteers and clients about how culture impacts personal values and attitudes. The result will be a mutual respect for our commonalities and differences, an appreciation of the endless variety in God’s creation.