

CULTURAL HUMILITY & FAMILY-CENTERED ADVOCACY

OVERVIEW

Culture is a set of beliefs, values, traditions, and practices shared by a group of people, and it profoundly shapes how families raise children, understand hardship, and engage with systems. Cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection, critique, and discovery that involves examining our own beliefs, values, and assumptions and remaining genuinely open to learning from the people we serve. It is not a destination, but an ongoing practice of building honest, trustworthy relationships with people whose backgrounds and experiences differ from our own.

Effective advocacy requires us to critically self-reflect, reserve judgment, and bridge cultural divides so that we can develop and maintain mutual respect and collaborative working relationships. The families we encounter often face systemic challenges including racism, discrimination, and poverty, and as advocates, we must acknowledge the power imbalance inherent in a system intervening in the lives of families in crisis. When we approach families with empathy, curiosity, and a genuine regard for their strengths and experiences, we make space for equity, dignity, and trust. Treating families as experts in their own lives and experiences is foundational to this work.

BRIDGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Cultural humility begins with self-awareness and extends into every interaction with children, families, and the professionals involved in a case. How we listen, speak, and carry ourselves communicates as much as the words we choose. Advocates must be intentional about building rapport across differences and ensuring that every family feels heard, respected, and understood.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Use reflective and active listening when interviewing children and families by nodding in encouragement, repeating back what you have heard using the speaker's own words, and affirming worth and value even when perspectives differ.
- Be attentive to subtleties in tone of voice, attitude, body language, and word choice, as these shape rapport and convey empathy or its absence.
- Reserve judgment by remaining open-minded while learning about a family's situation and background.

- Remain objective and make space when you find yourself wanting to offer opinions based on personal beliefs and values.
- Acknowledge differences and be sensitive to circumstances that are partly beyond a family's control or the result of systemic imbalance.
- Self-reflect and analyze implicit biases to ensure personal values do not interfere with advocating for the child's best interests.
- Create a safe and brave space with every child and youth that conveys a genuine willingness to listen and talk about anything significant in their life, including aspects of their identity, relationships, and sense of belonging.
- Respond with affirmation and support when a child or youth discloses something personal about their identity or experience, recognizing that the decision to share reflects trust.
- Understand that identity is complex and may evolve over time; avoid defining any young person by a single aspect of who they are.

THE LANGUAGE WE USE

The words we choose reflect how we think about families and shapes how we and others perceive and engage with the people we serve. Language that reduces a person to their circumstances, diagnosis, or involvement with the system creates distance and reinforces stigma. Language that centers the person and acknowledges their full humanity builds trust and reflects the values of culturally humble practice. This applies equally to conversations with families, communications with professionals, and the reports and recommendations we submit to the court.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Use person-first language that centers on the individual rather than their circumstances. The distinction signals that a person is more than their current situation. One way to do this is to describe the children we serve as “children experiencing foster care” rather than “foster kid.”
- Use strengths-based and non-stigmatizing language when describing families. Words that reflect a family's capacity and effort, rather than reducing them to their challenges, is precise and respectful, and allows room for advocacy to address those challenges. Refer to parents by their given names in your court reports.
- Avoid emotionally charged or dismissive characterizations. Instead of describing a parent as “crazy” or “unstable,” state what is known factually and clinically — the diagnosis, its effects on functioning, and the efforts being made to address it.
- Be consistent in how you speak about families in and out of their presence. The standard for respectful language does not change when a family leaves the room. How we talk about people in their absence reflects and shapes how we treat them in their presence.
- Use affirming and neutral language when engaging with children and youth about their relationships, identity, and experiences. Ask open questions that do not assume and leave space for the young person to share on their own terms.
- Be intentional about the language used by others in meetings, court, and case communications. Gently and professionally redirecting stigmatizing or disrespectful language is an act of advocacy.



The families involved in the child welfare system are not defined by their involvement with it, and our advocacy should reflect that.

FAMILY-CENTERED ADVOCACY

Family-centered advocacy means viewing every family through a lens of strength, recognizing their wisdom in their own experiences, and supporting their capacity to care for their children. It means resisting the pull toward judgment and instead investing in the family's success. The families involved in the child welfare system are not defined by their involvement with it, and our advocacy should reflect that.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Treat families as experts in their own lives and experiences, seeking to understand their perspective before drawing conclusions.
- Explore, research, and consult with experts to understand the child's culture, identity, and values and provide culturally informed recommendations.
- Examine and expand your personal knowledge and perspective by learning about the family's unique experiences.
- View the family from a resource lens, identify their strengths, and recognize their wisdom in their own experiences.
- Encourage and empower parents in meeting their case plan goals to promote timely reunification.
- Remember that a minimum sufficient level of care supports children being reunified whenever they can be kept safe or placed with relatives whenever possible to promote familial bonds.
- Request supports for both the child and the caregiver to help maintain kin placements.
- Recommend family time with extended family and relatives to promote cultural experiences, customs, and familial bonds, even when those relatives are not able to serve as a placement.
- Share family strengths in the court report; ensure all recommendations are supported by facts and best interest findings, challenging any unsupported assumptions.
- Advocate for equitable access to court and system processes, including language translation and ADA accommodations.
- Address cultural insensitivity displayed by others involved in the case directly and professionally. CASA staff can assist when these situations arise.

KEY PRACTICE NOTES

POWER AND POSTURE

The child welfare system holds significant power over the families it serves. Advocates who enter that space with humility, curiosity, and respect are more likely to build the trust needed to understand a family's true circumstances and advocate effectively.

BIAS AND ADVOCACY

Personal beliefs about culture, family structure, or identity must never drive advocacy. When you notice those beliefs surfacing, pause, self-reflect, and refocus on the child's best interests and the facts of the case.

CONSISTENCY

Cultural humility is not a set of rules applied to specific groups. It is a posture applied to every interaction, every family, and every child without exception. Trust is built over time through reliability, transparency, and follow-through. Doing what we say we will do, communicating honestly when circumstances change, and showing up consistently are practical ways cultural humility becomes visible in advocacy.