



ASK THE EXPERT

ZERO TO THREE's board members answer your questions about best practices and provide practical information you can use in your work with infants, toddlers, and their families.



MEET: Hirokazu Yoshikawa, PhD

Hirokazu Yoshikawa is a researcher at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. As a developmental and community psychologist, he conducts research on the development of young children in immigrant families and on the effects of public policies (particularly antipoverty policies and early childhood intervention) on children's development. His currently funded work examines how public policies, parental employment, and transnational contexts influence very young children's development in Chinese, Mexican, Dominican, and African American families. This work combines longitudinal survey, observational, and ethnographic methods. In collaboration with faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the director of Early Childhood Programs of

the Boston Public Schools, he is also beginning work on a comprehensive age-3-to-third-grade intervention to address multiple domains of school readiness and achievement. Dr. Yoshikawa regularly advises government agencies, foundations, and educational and nongovernmental organizations in the United States and abroad.

QUESTION: I'm uncomfortable talking with parents about culture, but I know it's important for a child's development. How can I break the ice?

Hirokazu Yoshikawa: Sometimes there is this feeling that you can't talk to parents about culture. One strategy is to ask parents with young children what goals they have for their children's development and what role the parents want to play in fostering those goals. You could also ask, "What role do you think this program could play?" "What role do you think your

child's caregiver could play?" There is a lot of evidence that the goals for young children's development vary greatly across different cultural groups. In addition, there are many experiences associated with culture that practitioners can ask about. You can ask parents about, for example, whether they ever had experiences with discrimination or unfair treatment. That is one way to think about what culturally specific experiences families may encounter in this society. Understanding what these experiences mean to families can be enormously useful to practitioners.

Q: I work in a child development and family support program for low-income parents. How can I develop program services that are culturally relevant to our families?

HY: Organizations have their theories of what is the best way to facilitate optimal development among children. Every agency will have its own "theory of change," if you will. These programs should bring in the voices and experience of the diversity of groups that they target by talking directly with program participants about what they want for their children and their family. Instead of this idea that the theory comes first and then you apply it across different groups and see how it holds and whether it is truly universal, the theory can also be generated from the specific experience of a particular cultural group. The "experts" around culture and around behavior change and development can often be the people who are working most closely with families on a daily basis. Thinking about service providers and front-line staff as experts regarding the norms of the families with whom they work can be a way to develop theories of intervention. And often you find that the practitioners' views are more diverse than the social science theories might be and they give you a new perspective. For example, they might tell you more about the contextual influences on children's development than an individually based or an individual-level behavioral theory would.

Q: My Early Head Start program serves a large immigrant population. What have you learned about the barriers facing immigrant families in accessing American welfare programs?