

When Cultural Expectations for Behavior Differ

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™

Culture as Part of the Whole

In a relationship-based approach to guiding behavior, culture is a part of the whole child, whole educator, and whole relationship. How and when adults guide children's behavior is shaped by the social groups to which we belong, including cultural groups. Our interpretation of the appropriateness of young children's behavior is shaped by our culture. Cultural differences are also evident in the approaches and methods adults use to guide young children's behavior.



Cultural Variation in Behavior Expectations and Guidance

The following lists provide a few examples of child behaviors and adult guidance that are viewed differently by different cultural groups. Each example represents a range of behavioral values, goals, and expectations. A given family's beliefs and practices can fall anywhere along the continuum.

Differences in behavior considered appropriate for children

- The degree of "personal space," physical contact, eye contact, and physical affection demonstrated toward others
- How one greets another person, especially someone older or revered
- The value of individual success and pride vs the value of humility and focus on the good of the group
- Independence (e.g., in feeding and self-care, making choices) vs interdependence and deference to adult caregivers
- Degree of verbal loudness and talkativeness; when it is appropriate to speak and when one should be silent

Differences in approaches toward guiding children's behavior

- Beliefs about the age at which children can be held accountable for their behavior
- The degree of power exerted by the adult and the appeal to their own authority
- Attitudes toward physical punishment or shaming as effective strategies to respond to inappropriate behavior
- Letting a child learn through experiencing consequences of their behavior vs direct instruction
- The degree to which adults, besides parents, in the family and community are involved in disciplining and guiding children's behavior.

Addressing Differences in Expectations

It's inevitable that infant–toddler educators will encounter situations in which their beliefs and expectations about appropriate behavior and how to guide children toward it are different from either another educator's or those of a family. Beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about children's behavior and how to guide it are often very strongly held. Navigating these differences between adults who care for the child can be a challenging aspect of guiding behavior.

As you encounter various situations in which behavior expectations differ, it will be helpful to keep in mind three observations from child development experts and researchers:



Observation 1: The behaviors children (at least) initially display in a classroom will reflect the behaviors that are encouraged and modeled at home. In healthy families, these are the behaviors that the child needs to be a successful member of his family's social or cultural group. It's important to respect that a different social environment may require a different set of behaviors to thrive in that environment.



Observation 2: Young children are masterful at adapting. Just as young children can learn and adapt to a new language spoken in the early learning setting, they can also learn and adapt to new behavioral expectations that are different than those at home. With sensitive support, it does not need to be confusing. However, it is a learning process that takes time.



Observation 3: The quality of the relationship between the child's educator(s) and adult family members can have a tremendous effect on even very young children. Babies and toddlers are very sensitive to the emotional states of the important adults in their lives and notice the emotional tone of conversations between the adults who matter most to them. Making the time and effort to respectfully and sensitively work through conversations with families to arrive at a coordinated approach to behavior expectations has emotional benefits for all involved.

Common Ground

During such challenging negotiations with families, it can also help to keep in mind the principles of valuing the diversity among families and the importance of collaboration. And perhaps the most important idea to remember is that, with rare exception, all of the adults involved in caring for a child ultimately share the same primary goal of providing safe, loving, and nurturing care and education. With that common goal always at the center of the conversations, listening to one another and negotiating is more likely to lead to an approach toward guiding behavior that satisfies everyone.