**Practice Note for all Practitioners,** Managers**and Staff:**

**Cultural Competence in Practice**

Culture is a term which might have different meanings to children, young people, families and professionals at various points within their lives. It can be evidenced in human behaviour and relates to thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group. It is shaped from our early childhood development and informs our values, ideas, knowledge, perceptions and understanding of the world in which we live.

Sandwell has one of the most ethnically diverse communities within the West Midlands, and a diverse workforce of practitioners. Throughout our involvement with children, young people and families in Sandwell, we are likely to encounter ideas, beliefs or traditions they are unfamiliar to our own. By remaining respectful and open to learning about individuals’ cultures, we will have a deeper understanding of what this means to them. In addition to this, as practitioners having an awareness of our own values and beliefs, and how this may influence our work with families, is more likely to enable us to work with children and families holistically. This involves taking into account their culture and identity and undertaking assessments and plans that have considered the individual needs of each child, whilst also recognising where there are risks.

The purpose of this practice note is to outline what is cultural competence and how this approach strengthens our work with children and families in Sandwell. Next, how using the Practice Framework and model develops our cultural competence by focusing on using Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS, and Cultural Genograms. Finally, this note illustrates how practitioners can use the Practice Framework and Model to strengthen our work with children and families from different communities as part of reflective supervision whilst considering good practice points and links to further reading.

**What is cultural competence?**

Cultural competence is a ‘process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures ... in a manner that recognises and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities’ (Edwards, 2015). Cultural competence is an approach that identifies the importance of every family’s culture and encourages practitioners to develop their cultural knowledge, which results in services that are developed to meet culturally specific needs and provide our children and families. This differs from being culturally sensitivity which is ‘the concept of being aware that cultural differences and similarities between people exist without assigning them a value; positive, negative, worse, better’ (Research in Practice, 2017).

The terms cultural competence and cultural sensitivity are often used interchangeably and may mean different things to different practitioners. In Sandwell we are committed to developing practice which is culturally competent, as an approach throughout our interventions with children, young people and their families.

**Why it important to develop cultural competence?**

Developing cultural competence is important as practitioners will be building on their knowledge that multiple different cultures with different attitudes and worldviews exist, by accepting those differences and not believing that our own culture is better. Working in a culturally competent manner emphasises that practitioners must understand that an individual’s identity and interactions with the world are not solely based on one aspect of their identity, as not all diversity is visible.

****In order to illustrate this, in 1976 Hall developed the Iceberg analogy of culture (see left), highlighting that while practitioners can see some superficial aspects of culture such as foods, flags, festivals, holidays, heroes and customs, there are often factors beneath ones ‘visible culture’ that have an impact on individuals’ identities. To be culturally competent in our practice, we need to look deeper into what culture means for children, young people, young adults and families, as defined by themselves, and what our families may be experiencing that isn’t easily visible (invisible culture).

The importance of thinking about both ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ culture will enable practitioners to provide a robust analysis surrounding individuals own lived experiences from a cultural perspective, and how these have shaped their lives now. By taking an active interest in children and families own cultures, practitioners will demonstrate developed knowledge and increased learning about families from backgrounds different than ours.

Culturally competence practice is underpinned by legislative framework, such as the Children Act 1989, United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child 1998, the Equality Act 2010 and Working Together 2018. This legislation ensures that when working with children, young people and families, we consider the background and identity of children and families and working in a way that is not oppressive, whilst ensuring that actions is taken where safeguarding concerns may exist.

Local and national research and reports have identified that as practitioners we do not always consider the individual cultural and identity needs of each child and family we are working with. This means that their assessments, plans, direct work and interventions are not adapted to consider their background, culture and identity.

In the case of Daniel Pelka, a Serious Case Review published in 2013 identified that the Social Worker did not explore the use of alcohol by his Mother. It is believed that one of the factors influencing this was that in 2008-9 there had been a recent influx of Polish families into Coventry, the area in which Daniel and his family resided. Professionals were unfamiliar with working with the Polish community and failed to explore the family’s culture and had formed assumptions about the use of alcohol within the community as normal, without considering any concerns to Daniel’s exposure/safety. This is often referred to as cultural relativism and is the idea that a person's beliefs and practices should be understood based on that person's own culture refers and not judging a family’s culture to our own standards of what is right or wrong, strange or normal.

In the cases of Victoria Climbié (2003) and Daniel Pelka (2013), interpreters should have been used to engage with them in a meaningful way to understand their lived experience. Without this, in both cases, conclusions regarding their situations were not fully informed by an understanding of the children’s views in the context of each family’s practices, belief systems and culture. Had this been the case, a deeper understanding of both the family’s culture and what life was like for them would have been developed and the need for a safeguarding response is more likely to have been identified.

In some circumstances, practitioners are often worried about saying the wrong thing to children and families, for fear of causing offence. This may lead to them making assumptions about children and families and hold stereotypes and bias around how a specific individuals lifestyle choice impacts them. An independent inquiry (Jay Report) into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997 - 2013) identified that, ‘fear of accusations of racism was one aspect of a culture which let abuse go unchallenged…the scale and seriousness of CSE was underplayed by senior managers in social care, while the police regarded many child victims with contempt and failed to act on their abuse as a crime’.

Our Practice Framework and Model helps us to adjust practice to ensure that assessments, decision making, and plans are informed by the culture, identity and traditions of each unique family. Using the Practice Framework and Model helps practitioners to consider interventions using the right support at the right time, which will improve practitioner’s confidence in developing cultural competence approach where families backgrounds are different to our own.

**How does the Practice Framework and Model enable us to work in a culturally competent way?**

Culturally competent practice sits at our Heart of Practice in our Practice Framework and Model. It is part of our doing and thinking models, which emphasise that throughout our work with children, young people and families, the quality of assessments, plans, updating plans and reviews need to be informed by a good awareness of the family’s culture and identity, traditions and community.

Using our Practice Framework and Model helps us to work in a strengths-based manner, and encourages practitioners to become more attuned and sensitive to people from different backgrounds, which allows us to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships with people from backgrounds different to our own. By recognising that the families that we work with are unique, whilst exploring our own values, self-awareness and perceptions will strengthen our ability to work with families in a culturally competent way.

Using Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS supports us to recognise the importance of using a practice approach which recognises the different aspects of the identities of the families that we work with, their network, and informs our discussions with families One of the ways our Practice Framework and Model helps is by using the Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS (John Burnham, 2013) within your discussions with families. This acronym relates to Gender, Gender Identity, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality and Sexual Orientation (Burnham 2013).

Faith, cultural norms and even ethnic background may not be immediately obvious, and by using tools such as the social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS makes these more visible. Practitioners, as well as children, young people and families have a culture and identity, whereby they often juggle multiple identities and belong to several cultures at the same time. Using our Practice Framework and Model helps us to think about any adjustments to practice to ensure we meaningfully engage with children, young people and their families. Where English is not the preferred language of a child and family, using an interpreter will ensure practitioners obtain an accurate account of the child and family’s culture and identity needs, whilst ensuring they are able to understand the concerns, risks and safety measures.

Our Practice Framework and Model reminds us that the child and their family are the expert of their experiences and adopting a position of ‘not knowing’ and being ready to learn will assist practitioners to get to know the family functioning, history, traditions, own childhood experiences and how these may impact on their parenting. Using Cultural genograms as part of our work with children and families, from different backgrounds is another part of our Practice Framework and Model that improves our cultural competence and our relationships with families. We need to ensure that when we build our relationship with the family and undertake our work with them, that our understanding and analysis of the family’s culture and identity is integral to the assessment, planning and intervention with them (See Practice Note on Cultural Genograms).

Using the Relationship Based Practice Building Blocks will support practitioners to consider the stage of their relationship with children, young people and families, and their ability to form, maintain and sustain trusting relationships with them. Thinking about how we build and maintain relationships with our children and families is an essential part of how we develop our cultural competence. Being open and transparent with families will lead to them developing trust in practitioners, strengthened communication, whilst sharing how their own cultures and identities influence their own parenting and lifestyle choices.

For example, for some families in certain communities, sharing information about their difficulties is difficult due to no feeling able to share their trouble with professionals due to issues such as shame and community pressures when it comes to domestic violence, sexual abuse etc. In these circumstances, we may need to spend more time with the family to build our relationships to develop their understanding of the reasons for our involvement. This is more likely to address the root causes and presenting concerns whilst taking into account the cultural differences that may exist.

Impact chronologies and life work as part of our trauma informed approach could be used as a means of obtaining a family’s views on, for example, their values, perceptions and attitudes toward their lived experiences. This helps us to understand what impact this has on family functioning, dynamics and relationships, with not only themselves but the wider world (See Practice Note on Impact Chronologies). Applying the Practice Framework and Model encourages practitioners to ask children and families about their own journeys and lived experiences.

Viewed through a cultural lens, a child's or family's subjective perceptions of their trauma experiences can sometimes be quite different from practitioners. Using a Trauma Informed approach that provides assessment and intervention that acknowledges, respects, and integrates children, young people and their family’s cultural values, beliefs, and practices, is an integral part of our Practice Framework and Model.

In some cultures, serious illnesses and other traumatic events may be interpreted as punishment, a test or rite of passage, or a special message, some children and young people have witnessed and fled from war etc. For example, we should consider things such as exposure to war, fleeing violence, abuse, Female Genital Mutilation, ‘Honor based’ violence as cultural differences can also exist in belief systems and in some religions, which might influence the degree to which families seek help and utilise support outside their community.

Understanding the family’s approach to how they manage these situations will help us think about the type of help and support we provide to them. By applying our Practice Framework and Model we will strengthen how we apply culturally competent approaches through our work with children and families, which will lead to our families receiving support and interventions that have considered their individual needs. As practitioners we should continuously intervene with children, young people and families by adjusting our practice to ensure that assessments, decision making, and plans are informed by the culture, identity and traditions of each unique family.

Our Practice Framework and Model emphasises that respectful and reflective practice provides the means for direct working relationships with families to be strengthened, by adjusting practice to ensure that assessments, decision making, and plans are informed by the culture, identity and traditions of each unique family.

**How can culturally competence approaches be evidenced within Assessments?**

In addition to the family culture and identity section within an assessment, practitioners should explore with children, young people and their families, information relevant to culture influences on health, education, parenting capacity, family traditions, inter-generational etc.

**How I grow and develop:**

* ‘**Being healthy’** - cultural views on health, seeking medical intervention/treatment can vary.
* ‘**Learning and Achieving**’ - family and cultural views about education and educational attainment.
* ‘**Confidence in who I am’** - sense of identity, which has an appreciation of ethnic and cultural background, and their perception of their gender, sexuality, religious beliefs etc.
* ‘**Being able to communicate’** – what is the child/young personal preferred language or method of communication, consideration to whether an interpreter or advocate may be required.
* ‘**Becoming independent, looking after myself’** – what skills have they acquired to move from dependence to independence, be mindful about using ‘age appropriate’, also include culturally appropriate. Also think about social presentation, culturally mediated - types and choice of clothing.
* ‘**Enjoying family and friends’** - not just who these are but how those relationships are constructed and how they play out, different roles of siblings. For example, I have one sister but don’t play with her because she's with my mum doing other things. Cultural practices such as funeral practices, birth practices, transitions to adulthood.

**What I need from people who look after me:**

* ‘**Everyday care and help’** - Some common practices but how is this done within a specific culture?
* ‘**Keeping me safe’** - Includes safety at extended family members’ homes, church, mosque etc if applicable.
* ‘**Being there for me’** - expressed differently. Hugs, kisses, nose rubbing, feeding practices.
* ‘**Play, encouragement and fun’**- Not always with material things- e.g. few or no toys does not automatically constitute poor stimulation. Bible study, storytelling, visits to family members may all be important.
* ‘**Guidance, supporting me to make the right choices’** - How are these discussed? You may find that patriarchal processes exist where the boundaries are different according to the gender of the children.
* ‘**Knowing what is going to happen and when’**- Can be difficult where service users move often for various reasons
* ‘**Understanding my families background and beliefs’** – family and cultural history, issues of spirituality and faith. Do the child or young person, significant carers understand their own and the child’s background? Is their racial, ethnic and cultural heritage given prominence? Do those around the child respect and value diversity?

**My Wider World:**

* ‘**Local resources’** - Are they appropriate and available? (for example, a community centre with no age appropriate resources for particular ages or genders.
* ‘**Enough money’** - Could be connected to employment. Also consider expenditure as some migrant families also provide for family outside the UK.
* ‘**Work opportunities for my family’** - Type, location, role, under-employment? Is it a need? Cultural and family expectations of work/employment.
* ‘**Comfortable and safe housing’** - Size, type, location rent/social housing, mortgage
* ‘**Support from family, friends and other people’** - Location, roles, impact, size etc
* ‘**Belonging’** - being accepted in the community, what are the opportunities for taking part in activities which support social contact and inclusion – youth clubs, faith groups etc.

**How we can strengthen our cultural competence using reflective spaces such as supervision and practice learning**

Using our Practice Framework and Model to develop cultural competence, by focussing on the ability to engage our children, young people and families from different communities is at the heart of social work practice. By providing reflective spaces and supervision, practitioners will understand that developing cultural competence is a journey, not a destination and should be seen as a continuous process throughout our work with children and their families and accessing Practice Learning opportunities to strengthen this. Thinking about what we bring to the relationship as practitioners, which can enrich the relationship whilst also thinking about possible biases that may impact on the way we work with children and their families can be safely explored through reflective spaces and good quality supervision. This enables us to grow, learn and develop our cultural competence.

**Good Practice Points:**

* Spend time getting to know the family, their culture and increase your knowledge and skills.
* Consult with the family about how they define themselves and involve them in planning intervention as they are the expert on their identity/need and this helps practitioners to understand it from the family’s perspective.
* An impact chronology and cultural genogram would be used by practitioners to understand a child’s journey and family networks/relationships including family’s values and culture
* Recognise that although children and families of the same background, may have lived in the same cities and areas and belong to the same/religious groups/communities/class as other people, our approaches should be individualised.
* Always consider how structural inequalities such as institutional racism, discrimination and diversity may impact on the family due to their background.

**How can I evidence this work on the child/young person/young adults file?**

* Ensure that if a child were to read their file in the future, that they would know at each stage in their life what their culture and identity meant to them.
* Use cultural genograms as a direct work tool with the child, young person, young adults, parents and carers to which can then be uploaded onto documents with a linked case note providing an analysis of the session.
* Link information obtained from the cultural genogram to your assessments, analysis and planning.

**Further information and reading**

* Practice notes relating to the Practice Framework and model, Relationship Based Practice and Trauma Informed Practice are available on Tri-X.
* Read the Practice Framework and Model Booklet and Sandwell Practice Standards.
* Access Practice Learning Workshops on the Practice Framework and Model, Cultural Competence, Cultural Genograms and Impact Chronologies.
* Dr Prospera Tedam Training: Culturally Sensitive Social Work Assessments & Intervention (March 2021)
* Research in Practice Briefing: Confident Practice with Cultural Diversity 2017

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