

Culturally Diverse Childrearing Practices: Abusive or Just Different?

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Abstract: This document describes childrearing practices that are sometimes found among certain cultural/religious groups. It does not offer judgement on those practices, only information. Teachers are urged to protect the health, welfare, and safety of their students.

North America's public schools are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. This means that teachers will often instruct students from cultures other than their own. Indeed, at the turn of the century, 95% of the teaching force will be of European-American background (Henry, 1990), while one-third (Grossman, 1990) to one-half (Wilson, 1988) of the school-age population will be from a non-Caucasian minority group. Already, America's 25 largest school systems have a minority majority (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Handicaps, 1988) and non-urban areas are also experiencing cultural shifts (Alston, 1991).

We educators, like nearly all individuals, tend to be "ethnocentric". We truly understand only our own personal culture or background. Because of our unfamiliarity with other groups, we are likely to view the culturally based behavior of other groups as being inferior to our own. This outlook also applies in situations where teachers observe the childrearing practices of culturally diverse families.

Upon finding what appears to be evidence of physical or emotional harm to their students, educators face difficult decisions about what constitutes correct action (McIntyre, 1990). These decisions are made even more complex when one considers cultural differences in child treatment. While abuse and neglect of children has been documented in most cultures since the dawn of civilization (Haase & Kempe, 1990), caretaking practices which are accepted and appropriate in one ethnic group are often viewed by those from other groups as being "wrong" or abusive.

For culturally different families in America, disciplinary practices which are accepted within their original homeland or ethnic group, may appear to individuals from the majority culture to be odd, backward or cruel. These misunderstandings occur because while parents the world over are expected to provide sustenance, supervision, discipline and mental stimulation, they vary in the ways they meet their obligations. Differences in social, cultural, religious and moral values result in variations in what is viewed to be "proper" childrearing.

Cultural Differences in Discipline

The lack of knowledge that most educators possess regarding both child abuse (McIntyre, 1987) and culturally different childrearing (Garcia, 1978; McIntyre, 1992) creates fertile ground for misjudging the appropriateness of parental practices. Teachers who adhere to the disciplinary practices of the majority culture may find themselves viewing culturally different practices as being abusive. This would mean that use of culturally diverse childrearing practices places parents at greater risk for being reported to agencies in charge of handling abuse and neglect reports. A few of these practices and the reporting dilemmas they cause for concerned educators are addressed below.

-A novice teacher in a poor urban school district is distressed when upon seeking advice from colleagues regarding discipline, is told by them to use physical punishment. This coincides with the advice of the students in his class who tell him to "Hit `em upside the head". In fact, physical punishment is more accepted in the low socio-economic classes (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990; Horton & Hunt, 1968; Persky, 1974; Spinetta & Rigler, 1972; Hanna, 1988), and educators who teach these students are more likely to approve of corporal punishment (McDowell & Friedman, 1979; Bauer, Dubanoski, Yamauchi & Honbo, 1990), perhaps believing that one must "use what they know".

-A teacher phones a student's parents to inquire as to how that pupil came to have welts on his body. She is given a religious defense based on the biblical book of proverbs that promotes the use "the rod". Indeed, Fundamentalists, Evangelists, and Baptists respond more punitively in disciplinary situations than people who are affiliated with other major religious orientations (Hyman, 1988).

-A teacher is concerned when told by his student that she is made to kneel on uncooked rice when she misbehaves. Upon bringing this to the attention of the administration, he is told that this is a common disciplinary procedure among low-income Hispanic families from the Caribbean islands.

-A Vietnamese-American pupil asks her teacher if he knows why a newly arrived Vietnamese student has a pierced ear. The teacher responds that he is not aware of the reason and would like to know more. According to the pupil, it is not uncommon for traditional Vietnamese families to tie a misbehaving child's ear to a doorknob as punishment.

-In the faculty lounge, a teacher hears that a student of her's has been locked out of his house. An Asian-American colleague mentions that this is a common disciplinary practice among Southeast Asian families. It is meant to shame "Americanized" children who have not met traditional familial expectations and obligations (Bempechat & Omori, 1990).

-A newly certified teacher accepts a position at a school near an Indian reservation. She is appalled by the apparent lack of guidance provided by a number of

the parents of her Native American students. Like many teachers from the mainstream culture (Swisher, 1990), she believes that the parents are neglectful and letting their children "run wild". She is unaware that among many tribes, non-interference, except in times of danger, is the guardians' policy (Devore & Schlesinger, 1987; National Geographic Television: The New Indians, 1990). Additionally, many clans and tribes assign a great deal of the childraising responsibility to relatives, especially the grandparents (Devore & Schlesinger, 1987).

-A teacher wrestles with the issue of whether to report a poor student's parents who are, in her mind, neglectful. She is aware that in low income areas, early independence with limited guidance or training is the norm (Horton & Hunt, 1968; Miller, 1959), as is the use of inconsistent and harsh physical punishment whereby children are taught to obey rather than reason (Farrington, 1986; Hanna 1988; Stack, 1974). However, these practices violate her beliefs regarding proper childrearing.

-A teacher is told by the parents of a poor, urban black youth to "whup" (paddle) him if he misbehaves in class. The use of controlling and punitive child treatment is more likely to occur in the low income black culture (Hanna, 1988; Stack, 1974) and may even be viewed by the child as a sign of caring and affection (Rosenfeld, 1971; Silverstein & Krate, 1975). The middle-class oriented behavior management techniques that avoid the expected swift physical punishment may actually cause anxiety for the youth (Hanna, 1988; Harrison-Ross & Wyden, 1973).

-A student's parents promise to improve the school attendance of their adolescent child. The next day he arrives at school beaten about the head and upper torso. Cuts, bruises and swelling are evident. The parents become angry when confronted by the instructor. In their minds, they accomplished the task asked of them. The teacher was unaware that due to the physicalness of low income disciplinary practices, parents might possibly abuse their children in response to requests for their assistance in dealing with non-compliant school behavior (Hanna, 1988).

Almost all cultures promote appropriate child behavior via the use of negative reinforcement (i.e. the threat of punishment for misbehavior). The American middle-class culture is one of the few that uses positive reinforcement procedures while limiting punishment (Grossman, 1984). When deemed necessary, a mild spanking may be administered, although a more frequent practice is to isolate the misbehaving child, withdrawing love and affection for a period of time (Grossman, 1984; Miller, 1959). These majority culture parents perceive their methods as being more humane than those that incorporate physical punishment. However, other cultural/ethnic groups often view the dominant culture style as being more cruel. While some culturally diverse guardians may use quickly administered physical punishment, they would never hint at an emotional separation from their progeny that might create feelings of rejection in the child.

Folk Medicine Practices

The ways in which various cultures treat family members who have fallen ill can also bring about reports of abuse. Time honored folk medicine practices, viewed as irrational, ineffective, and insupportable by western medical standards, are strongly believed by many members of culturally different groups. For example:

-A teacher calls a Hispanic student to her side upon seeing his reddened and crusty eyemargins. Upon inquiry, the student tells how his mother places petroleum jelly on her children's eye areas when they have difficulty sleeping. This practice is believed to promote slumber. The teacher, explaining and criticizing this practice to colleagues in the school lounge, is informed by a Latino peer that this is a common home remedy in some Hispanic cultures.

-A teacher is concerned about a ring-shaped burn on the body of one of his students. In response to his report of suspected abuse, the caseworker in charge calls back to inform the instructor that this resulted from a folk medicine healing practice known as "cupping". This practice is common in some East Asian (Wei, 1983) and Eastern European countries. Cupping involves lowering a ceramic cup, turned upside down with a candle underneath, down to the skin of the afflicted area of the body. A suctioning effect results which is believed to draw out aggravating substances. A variation of this practice involves igniting alcohol-soaked cotton which surrounds a piece of broken glass in a cup. The cup is then turned over onto the skin, perhaps leaving a burn and/or a puncture wound.

-An Asian-American teacher, aware of the limited knowledge base among her non-Asian colleagues regarding Oriental folk medicine treatments, presents a short informational session at a staff meeting. She describes how pinching, scraping, or "coining" (i.e. rubbing a coin into an afflicted area) can leave marks and skin abrasions that might be mistaken for evidence of abuse.

-A student reports to her teacher that her brother is extremely ill, being nauseous with wrenching pain and extreme tenderness in the lower right abdomen. She also says that her Christian Scientist parents are praying for a cure rather than taking him to the hospital, even though they suspect an appendicitis. Although they are aware that they are required by state law to report this practice when they engage in it, they are failing to make this disclosure.

- A preschool teacher in a low income black community notices that one of her pupils is ill and has a severe rash. Upon inquiry, she discovers that the student's family has already attempted to treat him with folk remedies often found in these homes (Stack, 1974). Lye or detergent was added to the youth's bath water to treat his rash. For his stomach pains, he drank "persnickety", a pungent brew made from tobacco and added to the child's milk.

-A novice teacher, newly assigned to a school in a low income Hispanic area, is perplexed by the odd smell emanating from a lethargic student. He is told by his team

leader to read a book on Santeria. Santeria, a blend of Catholicism, African spirit worship and folk medicine practices, is common in these communities (Canino, Velez & Stoltberg, 1987; Gonzalez-Wippler, 1989). Depending on the individual's country of origin, it might also be known as Lucumi, Macumba, Candomble or Shango. For ill children, animal sacrifices, or the wearing of certain colors, beads or potions may be prescribed by a priest known as a "Centro" or "Santero" (Canino, Velez & Stoltberg, 1989; Gonzalez-Wippler, 1989).

Taking Appropriate Action

The discovery of non-standard disciplinary or folk medicine practices places the educator in a difficult position. With the present-day emphasis on cultural tolerance, educators should respect practices and values different from their own. **However, the teacher's sense of personal and professional responsibility in protecting one's charges from abuse must remain intact.** Considering that **all fifty states require educators to report even suspected abuse or neglect**, the teacher may feel obligated to file a report for fear of losing one's teaching license should he or she fail to notify the proper authorities.

Determining whether a culturally diverse childrearing practice is maladaptive is not an easy task for those outside of that particular culture. The proper plan of action is often unclear. How then should a concerned, empathetic instructor respond? A number of suggestions are offered below.

All teachers of culturally diverse students should undertake study to gain information about child abuse, and increase their knowledge of the cultural practices and traits commonly found in their pupils' homes. This allows us to make more accurate assessments of the available evidence, and prevents misunderstandings. A number of informational sources are available. In addition to texts and articles on these topics, colleagues or community leaders from the various cultural groups can be contacted for more information. Enrollment in college courses is another option, although one must be cautious and selective. Teacher training programs, in general, have failed to include information on child abuse (McIntyre, 1987) or cultural differences (Garcia, 1978; McIntyre, 1992).

If concerned about one's observations, but unsure of whether the evidence is indicative of abuse, the educator (or school social worker) should undertake an investigation. This involves speaking with the pupil and/or parents about disciplinary/folk medicine practices, and ascertaining whether the guardians understand appropriate childrearing in accordance with their culture's expectations. The degree to which physical and emotional nurturance, clothing, shelter, safety, security, and health care are provided, even if it is in a manner different from what is accepted by one's own culture, should also be assessed. Having a colleague or community leader from the parent's culture present can be of valuable assistance in making judgements. If disciplinary or folk medicine practices appear to be overly punitive or hurtful, the educational professional should respectfully explain the law regarding abuse to the

parents and inform them of the courses of action available to and expected of educators in these situations.

With regard to discipline, teachers should remember that a certain practice that would cause emotional scars to children of their own culture, might not be viewed by children from another culture as being excessive, demeaning or traumatic. If the disciplinary practice is common in their ethnic group and is viewed by parent and child as reflective of concern and caring, than it may not be abusive. The teacher should therefore attempt to determine whether the pupil has a healthy self concept and feels valued by his family.

If the decision is made to not file a report of abuse, observations and perceptions should still be documented in a personal notebook. If suspicious happenings continue, but evidence is still not convincing enough to support the filing a report, they should also be documented. However, **if concerns appear to have ANY validity, the educator should submit a report of abuse.** Remembering that **educators must report even suspected abuse**, "better safe than sorry" is sage advice in these situations.

Conclusions

Due to the changing demographics in our schools, educators are likely to be instructing students raised in ways different from their own upbringing. When teaching culturally diverse students, instructors should undertake the task of acquiring a cultural knowledge base. They should also keep an open mind and engage in a self-examination of their own beliefs regarding discipline, childrearing practices, and abuse. All this helps one to fulfill one's professional responsibilities in a culturally sensitive manner.

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