

# *Flourishing Families*

## EXPLORING CULTURAL DIVERSITY:

*Benefits for Your Child and Your Whole Family*

**FAMILIES GROW IN MANY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. NO MATTER WHAT THAT JOURNEY MAY ENTAIL, OR WHERE THE LANDING POST WILL BE, IT ALL BEGINS WITH OUR FAMILY TREE, AND THE PARENTS WHO BROUGHT US INTO THE WORLD.**

**OUR FLOURISHING FAMILIES FEATURE ALLOWS US TO THINK A LITTLE DEEPER INTO OUR PAST AND HOW TO IMPROVE OUR FUTURE.**

BY DEANNA NOVAK

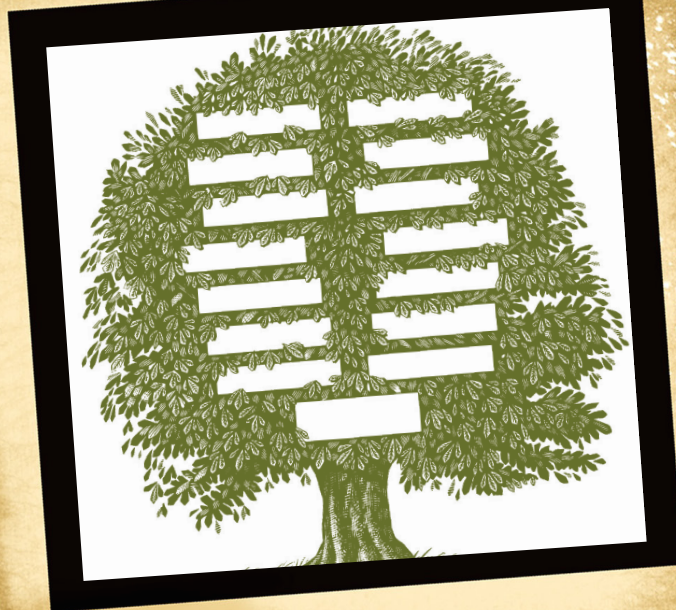
**D**id you ever stop to think how boring life might be if everyone looked alike, sounded alike, had the exact same interests, and ate the same food? What would we learn from each other? How would we grow? Luckily for us, that's not the case. Our world is colorful, vibrant, interesting, beautiful, and diverse.

Cultural diversity surrounds us all, including our children. In their daily lives, they probably see other children who look different, speak a different language, or eat another kind of lunch at school. Children are also naturally curious and are open to, and hungry for, information; the perfect time to introduce them to cultural diversity. From its inception, this country has been a place people come to from countries all over the world. This gives us, as parents, a unique opportunity to help our children understand and accept cultural diversity. We generally don't have to go outside of our own town or city, let alone the country, to find diversity, even if it means simply going out for pizza or to a Thai restaurant.

As our children's first teachers, we help set the stage for their exposure to, and acceptance of, other cultures. If we, as parents, are open to new experiences, we can provide the example our children need to learn to embrace other cultures as well. This can help them understand that while we may all look or sound differently, these differences are a part of what makes each person special. This type of thinking will help foster a respect for our differences and help prevent children from forming judgments or biases based on how someone else looks or sounds.

In addition to teaching our children respect, exposing them to cultural diversity also helps prepare them for their future. With the internet and amazing new technology being introduced every day, our world is becoming smaller and smaller by the minute. We should provide our children with the tools they are going to need to participate and exceed in our global community. We can do this by helping them understand cultural diversity now.





There are many ways to expose a child to cultural diversity, and studies show that this exposure and understanding should start at a very young age. By the time children reach preschool, they have already started forming ideas about who they are and how they fit in with their family and friends.\*

A great starting point for delving into culture is teaching them to be proud of their own families and heritages. While some may fear that promoting one's own culture will encourage separation, this is simply not the case.\* Encouraging children to understand and be proud of their own heritage helps them form strong roots, thereby increasing their own self-confidence. Confident children will be much more likely to accept those around them. So, climb that family tree with your child and see how far you can reach!

Another way to learn about and explore other countries is to open a book. In fact, many libraries have entire sections devoted to the world's countries and cultures. In your child's eyes, a visit to the library can mean an exciting trip around the world. If technology interests you more, the internet is filled with many reliable sources of great information on countries, cultures, holidays, and activities you and your child can do together.

Restaurants are also an incredible source of cultural information and sensory experiences. Eat the traditional food of a country, listen to its music, see its traditional décor and, oftentimes, traditional dress. There may even be an opportunity to meet a server or the owner, who may originally be from that country. Attending different cultural festivals is another wonderful experience for the whole family to get immersed in a culture---all without stepping foot on an airplane.

Schools have also been incorporating cultural diversity topics into the curriculum for some time, such as preparing family trees and heritage reports or organizing cultural festivals. All of these activities are meant to broaden horizons and encourage discussion and acceptance. As parents, we can help support these efforts.

Throughout whatever cultural exploration you choose to embark on with your children, the most important thing to remember is to engage them, really listen to their questions, and answer the best you can. "[D]iversity is a complex concept, and there is not one single set of right answers for any one person or family."\* Children are eager to learn and, as always, are looking to us for guidance. In your discussions, be sure to adapt the tone and answers to their age level. A four-year-old will have different questions and a different capacity to understand what you are saying than a seven-year-old.

Other than the benefits your children will receive in understanding and accepting cultural diversity, your entire family will also reap the rewards. These activities and discussions will encourage acceptance and respect, and help the family grow together by learning together. Children find it fascinating when we, as parents, learn something with them. To encourage further interaction and generate a greater response, be sure to point it out to them when you are learning something new. Simple phrases such as "I didn't know that! That's so cool!" will likely get them excited to learn even more.

Spending time together as a family is always precious and valuable. Spending that time exploring your own family's roots, learning about other cultures, paving roads across those cultures, and preparing your children to be respectful members of our global community will only further strengthen those family bonds.

*Resources: \*Teaching "Diversity:" A Place to Begin, Janet Gonzalez-Mena & Dora Pulido-Tobiassen, <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/teaching-quotdiversityquot-place-begin> (Scholastic Early Childhood Today). \*Culture in the Classroom, Alison Levy, (Earlychildhood NEWS).*

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