Culture Shock

By Julie Dotsch

Culture shock is a reaction to the many changes involved in exposure to a new culture. Children exhibit culture shock in various ways, from physical and emotional signs to cognitive and social indicators. For details, see the resource sheet "Culture Shock: Signs and Support Strategies". Children born in Canada may still experience culture shock because they first encounter a different culture when they enter the childcare program. If they also experience a new language for the first time, the shock is often greater. A common misconception is that children adapt easily to a new language and culture. In fact, children usually have a more difficult time than adults because

- they do not have strong coping mechanisms for stress;
- their feelings of security come from their family who are behaving differently because of their own culture shock;
- they experience things physically and so huge physical changes have a stronger effect on them (e.g., heavier clothing for winter, different foods, strange bed).

The Connection between Separation Anxiety and Culture Shock

One of the signs of culture shock is extreme separation anxiety. The impact of not having a gradual separation from the parent is therefore stronger (e.g., the child more frequently builds mistrust, the bonding with the parent is more readily weakened and the likelihood of having difficulty forming relationships is heightened). To reduce culture shock, the first step must be to have a gradual separation from the parent with a consistent caregiver.

Signs of Culture Shock

Physically a child experiencing culture shock may be frequently ill, may appear listless or may be extremely active. They may not be able to control their emotions. Many children are also unable to be involved in play, or their play patterns and social interest may be quite limited. Children's self esteem may be weak and their home language skills may regress or disappear. The child may have difficulty focusing and listening even in their home language. Not all children suffer from culture shock, however, and the intensity of the symptoms will vary greatly.

Factors Influencing Cultural Adaptation and Strategies

Cultural Adaptation of Family Members

If a parent is depressed, anxious, feeling isolated or is also experiencing culture shock, the child may feel they have lost their anchor. The parent may be distant or tearful. Their language may change to English or become more directing. By gradually building trusting relationships, you can help parents become more connected to their children. You can also introduce families to each other to help build their social support networks.

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Child's Identity

Newcomer children can lose their sense of identity when the family switches the language used at home; when signs of their culture are less evident; or when dress, rituals and exposure to others from their culture is reduced. If the parent becomes less playful because of culture shock, the child may again become confused. Educators can support children's identity by using the child's correct name in songs and conversations and learning key words or phrases in the child's first language. The family is an excellent resource for sharing songs, stories, rituals and materials from their culture. Including various cultural or family practices in your program also shows respect and builds in familiarity for the child.

Child's Functioning

Children often experience difficulties eating and sleeping during separation, as well as during the early stages of culture shock. Unknowingly, families may initiate changes like weaning from the breast, bottle or soother; potty training; or requiring children to sleep on their own. It is advisable to ask parents to hold off on making those changes while the child is settling. To make children more comfortable, educators can get suggestions from families on favourite foods, how the child is accustomed to falling asleep, etc.

Stages of Culture Shock

Children arrive in the childcare program in various stages of culture shock. Their previous experience in group care, their knowledge of English, the family's ability to support them and the gentleness and understanding of the caregivers will all make a difference when it comes to the impact of culture shock. In some cases, the symptoms may last years while in others it may be only months.

In the early stages of intense culture shock the child might be unable to tolerate eye contact, may be terrified of strangers and could have extreme separation anxiety reactions (e.g., vomiting, flailing). Some children may be rigid and uninterested in their surroundings, appearing almost catatonic. With appropriate supports, children may be able to tolerate separation yet still be unable to play. They may observe, daydream or lack focus for long periods of time. Many children have a lot of anger during this time and may unexpectedly lash out at other children or objects. Some children may reject everything unknown or will be able to gradually tolerate a situation only to regress when something is changed (e.g., their educator is absent or another family member brings them to the program).

As children's shock decreases they are better able to listen and process information. They begin to become curious again and try to understand some words in the new language. The symptoms of culture shock may seem to fully disappear until an unknown trigger sets everything backwards. This is usually temporary and happens most frequently when the child is ill or lacking sleep. Older children have different symptoms such as rejection of the new or home culture and language and extreme anger about being uprooted.

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