

# Family Assets ... Building Blocks for Life



## Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet  
Family and Consumer Sciences

# Helping Children Develop Cultural Competence

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The Search Institute in Minnesota has been conducting research that strives to better understand what kids need to succeed. They have identified 40 concrete, positive experiences and qualities that they call “developmental assets” that seem to have a tremendous influence on young people’s lives. The power of these assets is evident across all cultural and socioeconomic groups. It seems that assets protect young people from many different problems, such as alcohol use, illicit drug use, sexual activity, and violence. In addition, assets promote positive attitudes and behaviors, such as success in school, valuing diversity, maintaining good health, and delaying gratification. The research indicates that the more developmental assets a child has, the more likely he or she is to succeed in life.

## What is Cultural Competence?

The Search Institute has divided the 40 developmental assets into external and internal assets. One of the asset categories for internal assets is labeled social competencies. In this category, the Search Institute has identified cultural competence as a developmental asset. Their view of cultural competence is a young person who has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As important as this asset is in our ever-changing cultural society, the research suggests that only 35% of young people possess the cultural competence asset.

The power of the developmental asset approach is the idea that it is never too late to help children and adults gain these assets. The other exciting aspect of the asset approach is the idea that anyone—parents, teachers, neighbors, coaches, community leaders—can assist in the development of assets.

## Developing Cultural Competence

So, how can someone help build cultural competence? One of the easiest ways to help build cultural competence is our willingness to talk openly and honestly about differences. Adults must learn how to comfortably talk to our children about a topic that is usually difficult to discuss. Often times, we are not prepared to talk with our children about cultural differences and therefore, we ignore the topic. Adults often assume that by not talking about cultural differences, we are protecting our children from developing prejudice.

However, research suggests that not talking to children about cultural differences may actually fuel the development of prejudice and stereotypes. Most adults are surprised to hear that between the ages of 2 and 5, children become aware of cultural and ethnic differences. Not only do children at this age become aware of differences, they also begin to recognize which differences are valued and which are not. At this developmental stage, the misconceptions, discomfort, fear, and rejection of difference is

called pre-prejudice. However, if adults do not intervene with children at this time, pre-prejudice can develop into real prejudice.

## Be Honest

While talking to children and young adults about prejudice, it is important to be open and honest. Conversations about cultural differences should honor and respect the differences, as well as remind our young people about the similarities we all have in common. For example, it is not unusual for a child to ask why someone has a different skin color than they do. If your child asks you why her friend has dark skin, see this as a teachable moment. Even if you may be more comfortable not answering the question, ignoring this moment will send the message that he or she should not talk about differences. Instead, acknowledge the friend's darker skin. Depending on the child's age you may simply say, "Yes, Ashanti does have darker skin than you do. Just like you got your lighter skin color from your parents, Ashanti got his darker skin color from his parents." This response acknowledges the difference in skin color, while at the same time making skin color a common aspect we all share. If the child is older, an adult can also explain how the presence of melanin affects skin color in all of us.

## A Continuing Journey

The development of cultural competence never ends. It is a continual journey, not a destination, which we all need

to be aware of and comfortable with. We must recognize that we live in a society that has pervasive cultural biases and prejudices. Adults must take an active role in fostering children's cultural competence. If we fail to answer children's questions or fail to counteract the negative messages about our cultural differences, then we silently reinforce the biases and prejudices. Our silence will not help children develop cultural competence. Indeed it is our willingness to talk about cultural differences and take an active role in challenging the prejudices in our society that will help our children become knowledgeable about and comfortable with differences.

## References

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