

Bernhard, J. K., & Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2005) When family priorities differ from program priorities. *Interaction Journal*.

In the last few years, the field of early childhood care and education has received a great deal of attention. A fast-growing body of evidence points to how crucial it is for children to form not only a positive sense of *individual* identity, but also to feel a sense of *belonging* with others in order to develop a *positive group identity* (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Cummins, 2001; Dixon-Kraus, 1996, Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000). Positive identity formation stimulates the desire to learn and provides a solid foundation for lifelong learning. We argue here that positive identity formation may be jeopardized when children are placed in group care and education settings where practices are contradictory to the practices of the family and home environment

In a complex, cultural environment such as Canada, where diversity abounds and bicultural or bilingual families are fast becoming the norm, identity issues multiply (e.g., Bernhard, Landolt & Goldring, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Bernhard, & Freire, 2002). According to recent projections by Statistics Canada, one out of every five people in Canada could be a member of a visible minority by the year 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2005). With the wide range of cultures in Canadian centers, come a wide range of cultural approaches to childrearing, of which providers must be mindful.

No one can expect early childhood professionals to develop expertise in all the cultures of the world or even all the cultures represented among the children and families in a particular population centre. One way to support the positive cultural identity of children is to learn about differences by developing relationships with family members

and honing communication skills in what can be thought of as an interpersonal space of collaboration (Bernhard, Freire & Mulligan, 2004; Cummins, 2004; Moll, 1992). When interactions between parents and educators are non-hierarchical and differences are honoured, children can claim their family and cultural history and feel affirmed as equal and important members of society (Ada & Campoy, 2003, Bernhard, Winsler, Bleiker, Ginieniewicz & Madigan, 2005). Yet establishing a meaningful dialogue with families whose backgrounds are different from their own is a major challenge for many early childhood educators (Becher, 1985; Diaz Soto, 1997; Delgado Gaitan, 1990; Lareau, 1989; Lee & Seiderman, 1998; Willis, 1995).

To start such a dialogue, teachers, providers, and caregivers have to be sincere in their desire to understand when there is disagreement about what's best for children. One common area of disagreement centers around the focus on independence and individuality that is prominent in the principles and practices of the profession in North America. We want to examine here the perspective of families where the top priority is interdependence rather than independence.

### **When Interdependence is the Priority**

Families and caregivers are faced with the twin tasks of helping children grow up to be both independent individuals and group members capable of establishing connections with others. Independence and interdependence are not to be seen as opposites but as partners. Although they are not mutually exclusive, families usually focus on one more than the other. The choice often reflects cultural context (Kityama, Markus & Matsumoto, 1995). The families who embrace independence as an important priority usually find early childhood programs compatible with what they want for their

child – at least in that particular area. Families focused on interdependence and helping behaviour may find themselves at risk of being misunderstood.

A family that is emphasizing interdependence at home can experience culture shock when their child enters a childcare setting and finds that the teacher or caregiver emphasizes self-help skills and praises the child for independence. Some families may not be able to articulate where the dissonance lies, analyze what makes them uncomfortable, or talk about their discomfort, especially when they find out the behaviours aren't just a quirk of a particular staff member but are actual program policies.

The field of early childhood education, influenced by the mainstream culture, is built on the idea that the individual is the important unit of analysis and that, though relationships are important, the early years are preparation for later independence (see Bernhard, 2003; Bernhard, Gonzalez-Mena, Chang, O'Loughlin, Eggers-Pierola, Roberts Fiati, & Corson, 1998; Bernhard, Pollard, Chud, & Vukelich 2000). Because this particular set of priorities is more than likely familiar to readers of this article we will not delve deeply into the individualistic perspective here. Rather we will put our effort into explaining the point of view of a more group-oriented family that highlights *interdependence* as a priority in child rearing and a long-term goal.

Take a particular family, for example:<sup>1</sup> The teacher notices that the child's mother and grandmother do everything for the child, even though the child may be able to do things for himself. Instead of assuming that the family would need parent education so they can step back and let the child do things on his own, we urge caregivers to try to understand this behaviour in the context of the family's beliefs and traditions. It may be

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<sup>1</sup> A composite of families both authors have known personally.

hard for the teacher to see that helping and being helped are an important pattern in this family's child rearing practices and relate to their long-term goals. This example is a perfect time to work on developing the kinds of communication that will create an interpersonal space of collaboration.

Some families won't have a clearly explicit idea about how they want to raise their children, but let's say this one does. They are rearing their children to fit into their family and to feel a sense of belonging with their people. This family prizes interdependence among its members. Independence is not a primary goal. They are in no hurry for their babies to grow up. Spoon feeding carries on into the preschool years. They believe that children are born with an independent streak and that that streak must be weakened. Their child-rearing practices are designed to create closeness (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000). They worry that their children will become too independent and they wish them to maintain close relationships with the family over the entire life span. Family closeness and connections are priorities. Self-sufficiency is not emphasized since they believe it comes naturally later on, without need for training.

Although parents who stress independence might look down on the idea of "babying" children, to the parent focused on interdependence, there's nothing negative about practices so labeled. A video called "Diversity: Contrasting Perspectives" (Gonzalez-Mena, Herzog, & Herzog, 1995) shows a Japanese mother in San Francisco spoon-feeding her four-year-old. Both mother and daughter are comfortable with the arrangement. Yet in our experience, early childhood students and professionals watching this video sometimes become quite uncomfortable during this scene because they think

the daughter is too dependent on her mother. They don't understand that the mother is modeling interdependence and teaching her daughter about the importance of helping one another.

### **Differing Views about “Apron Strings”**

The idea behind interdependence is to connect children to their families forever (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch & Greenfield, 2000). The cliché, “tied to mother’s apron strings,” may come to mind. As Edward Hall noted, this is a culturally relevant judgment: “The world is divided into those cultures who cut the apron strings and those who do not...In many cultures, the bonds with the parents, grandparents and even ancestors are not severed but are maintained and reinforced” (Hall, 1977, page 226). The way children are raised relates to the strength of those ties.

Of course, cultures continually change and it often happens that what was once true no longer holds. Also, everyone of the same cultural background is not exactly alike. However, these statements about the strength and permanence of parental-child ties apply to people known today by both of the authors. None of them uses the expression “apron strings.” That expression comes from people who “cut the apron strings,” many of whom are of the dominant culture.

Those who do cut the apron strings often see their job as promoting their children's ever-increasing autonomy. The goal is to help each child stand on his or her own feet and be self reliant. Given the push for independence, excessive dependence is to be avoided because it is seen as dysfunctional. That is the opposite view of parents who see independence as dysfunctional and, therefore, as something to be avoided or

restrained. If the aim is to keep the family and all its members together for a lifetime, independence must be downplayed.

Both goals--independence and interdependence--make sense, but usually one is emphasized over the other and, in many centres, the interdependence goal is not often considered. Some who teach about child rearing assume that every family values independence as much as they do. They don't understand interdependence as a value, so they may have an urge to teach the family about what they consider the "right way" to rear children.

### **Differing Views of the "Self"**

Differing concepts of the "self" may lie behind the independence-interdependence issue. In North American mainstream culture, the self is the core of a separate, autonomous individual whose job it is to grow and develop into the best he or she can be (e.g., Cohen, 1971; Harkness & Super, 1996; Ogbu, 1985; Schweder & Sullivan, 1993). The major tasks to be achieved are to be a unique individual, to learn to express the self, to realize one's goals and to become self-actualized and self-fulfilled.

An alternate view is that of the self as inherently connected to other individuals, not as a separate being, but as a being defined in terms of relationships with others. Obligations to others are more important than personal fulfillment or achievement. In this case, the major tasks to be achieved are to learn to adjust to the demands of important relationships, and to promote the goals of others (Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995).

There is, of course, also a Western tradition stressing the interconnectedness of all humankind as in the famous poem by John Donne: "No man is an island, entire unto

itself...” Most religious and spiritual traditions around the world also stress the interconnectedness among human beings.

Even when child rearing differs, most children, no matter how they were raised, do grow up to become both independent individuals *and* people who create and maintain relationships with others. Children, when they become adults, accomplish both of these major tasks even if their parents focused mainly on one. That doesn't mean they all turn out alike, though families who raise their children with interdependence as a priority are more likely to find their children remain close to them in adulthood. Families who stress independence and individuality may experience greater distance of family members once their children grow up. Both ways work. They are just different from one another.

### **Working Effectively with Differences**

What can professionals do to lessen the shock of families when a family's values or beliefs don't fit with their program's philosophy? Talk with them. Create a dialogue. The talking should start immediately with the intake interview as professional and family member(s) share information with each other. It should continue as professionals and families exchange information on a daily basis. Program staff needs to know what a family wants for its children, how they do things, and why they do things the way they do. On-going interactions can help establish a sense of trust on both sides so that if or when issues become apparent it is possible to engage in dialogue in order to explore differences.

The purpose of all this communication isn't just to find out information, but also to build a close relationship with the family so that communication is enhanced and trust established. Discovering and exploring commonalities are part of the relationship-

building process (Barrera & Corso, 2003). When professionals and families find they share some visions and/or goals, it is easier to move on and discuss differences and what can be done about them.

The answer of whether to modify the program lies in the dialogue between family and program. Only when the issues are thoroughly explored and when there are no longer “sides” can the problem of what to do be solved. In the business world taking sides is called positional bargaining. Moving away from positional bargaining has been called “third space” by Barrera and Corso (2003). To get to third space (or out of positional bargaining) all concerned must be willing and able to move from their established positions to a neutral place so they can figure out what to do without anyone having to give in. Although sometimes compromise is necessary, the goal of third space negotiations is to find win-win solutions. Whatever is decided, it isn’t a solution unless all parties agree to it without having to give up what they believe in.

Every family in a program deserves to have their differences honoured no matter who they are or what their background. Of course, if the family has consciously chosen the program on the basis of its philosophy, this is a slightly different story than for the family who has no choice of program. For parents who end up in a program that may not be completely in tune with their beliefs and preferences, it isn’t enough to just explain, “That’s the way we do it here.” All families’ beliefs and practices need to be drawn out, respected, and considered. Adaptations beneficial for the individual child may also be beneficial for other children in the group.

The concepts in this article have been used to illustrate our message, but we caution readers not to over generalize or stereotype. The point is to develop interpersonal spaces that recognize the fact that parents have something to offer as sources of knowledge and as bearers of cultural capital. If we do not pay attention to these contextual variables and to families' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992), children's identities, self-esteem and confidence--all of which are necessary for effective emotional and cognitive development to occur—can be severely compromised.

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