

# Honoring Cultural Diversity

Developing cultural competency is an ongoing process of self growth and not an accumulation of knowledge. These five steps may provide a useful framework to begin the process.

## 1. Consider the levels of culture

- Surface. This most superficial level of culture refers to what we can see or information we learn, (i.e. ethnic food, a different language, music or architecture of a certain culture). Mistaken assumptions about these things are not taken very seriously.
- Unspoken rules. We learn these through our experiences, (i.e. rules of courtesy; use of time and punctuality, rules of conduct for restaurants and social occasions, shopping, etc.) by trial and error. When we break these rules, others are offended and respond negatively.
- Unconscious rules. These invisible rules are learned through imitation, especially early childhood, (i.e. use of nonverbal communication, touching, “comfort zone” spacing, eye contact, body language, tone of voice). Lack of awareness of these rules across cultures or breaking them can result in strong negative feelings, discomfort and possible hostility.

**2. Enhance self awareness.** This includes identifying our own characteristics, race, religion, family values, biases or prejudices etc. By learning more about ourselves, we see how our views influence our thoughts about others. Learning to articulate our own family story also serves to enlighten us further.

**3. Learn about other cultures.** Within our communities, there are vast numbers of racial and ethnic groups – representing many geographic areas, religions, languages, beliefs and customs. No one can know it all so aim to become generally familiar with general traditions, customs, and values. Remember, though, that overgeneralization leads to stereotyping. Remember each family’s culture is unique and is defined by factors such as events, history, traditions and viewpoints that are as complex and varied as our own family story.

**4. Learn how different cultures view the concept of disabilities.** A family’s view of disability influences their expectations, achievement, medical interventions they choose (or do not choose), etc. For instance, one family may view disability as a blessing. Others may view disability as a curse or as retribution for previous sins and therefore an embarrassment to the family.

**5. Respect and partner with the family.** Families will be able to determine when there is a sincere interest in understanding and supporting them. Don’t assume anything. For example, a family nodding their heads “yes” might only be indicating that they heard the information; it may not indicate their agreement or understanding. Pay attention and watch for cues from families. Don’t be afraid to ask questions.

