“We outlawed time-out in our center a long time ago,” said a child care teacher in a workshop I was leading about discipline in early childhood programs. She spoke with great emotion.

“Outlawed time-out? Why? Time-out is a gift for children who need to get away from the group to control themselves,” challenged another teacher.

“It’s not a gift—it’s a punishment. And a harsh one at that,” argued a third participant. “Besides, the misbehaving child needs the group to help him change his behavior. Isolation is the last thing he needs.”

The argument grew more emotional as the group polarized with one side yelling at the other.

What was going on here? The workshop participants represented several different cultures, and as such had different perceptions of the relationship between individuals and groups. Alan Pence, Canadian educator, in a 2004 *Interaction* article, wrote about how there are “quite different cultural orientations regarding the relationship of the individual to the broader community. While Western practice recommends separating children who are misbehaving (giving them a ‘time-out’), a number of Aboriginal people feel this is counterproductive and that additional engagement with the group (‘time-in’) makes more sense” (p. 32).

Those are two very different perspectives on discipline – a hot subject for many people including early childhood teachers and the parents in their programs. Often notions of discipline are based on personal childhood experiences and what the person is used to, so it’s hard for them to understand a different perspective. Talking about discipline taps into sensitive areas of personal histories as well as cultural differences.

In an early childhood program setting the discussion might end by someone pointing out the program’s policy and thereby silencing diverse voices. It could instead switch to problem solving if someone insisted that diverse voices be heard. Sometimes that happens, but mostly it doesn’t.

**Examples of disagreements over discipline practices abound!**

What is aggressive and what is assertive can lead to arguments. In cultures where physical closeness is valued, children may sit and stand very close, touch a lot, and bump up against each other. This behavior may feel aggressive to children who aren’t used to so much closeness and may require some guidance from the teacher. In fact, what feels aggressive varies greatly by culture. It takes real sensitivity on the part of teachers and providers to decide how to handle behavior that is acceptable to one child within his family but considered aggressive by other children or by a teacher. Aggressive behavior can be both physical and verbal. Further, what is taught to children about being assertive in one culture can feel aggressive to a child in a different culture. Behavior that is perfectly acceptable at home, or even encouraged, may be unacceptable in the classroom or family child care home.

The goals of discipline can vary by culture – even the labels – discipline versus guidance. One group may believe that the ultimate outcome of early training is to develop inner controls, while another group puts the locus of control outside the individual. For example, Lonnie Snowden (1984) says,
The Black community invests effective responsibility for control of children’s behavior in an extensive network of adults...Because of this extended parenting, children’s behavior receives proper monitoring and more immediate sanctions than is the norm in American society. Children may be expected to develop more active exploratory tendencies and assertive styles, since respected external agencies can be counted on to reliably check excess. (page 173)

Children can be very confused when they expect direction from adults but those adults instead stress individual choice and living with the consequences. Ballenger (1992) writes about the contrast between the consequences approach commonly used by some early care and educational professionals and the approach Haitian teachers used in the program where she worked. The Haitian teachers were clear that behavior can be defined as good and bad; children need to be good so they don’t bring shame on the family. Children have a responsibility to the group. Reprimands are a sign that the children are cared about, and they strengthen the relationship between adults and children. That is a contrast to an approach that avoids reprimands and offers choices instead—choices that have consequences. Instead of stressing correct behavior, adults let children learn what happens if they make certain choices. The responsibility is on the individual child more than on the adult or the group.

Some of these examples relate to different ideas about authority, about how authority figures should behave and how children should relate to authority (Phillips 1995). When authority figures behave in ways that aren’t familiar to children, the children can feel confused. Some children are used to firm, strict, and sometimes physical guidance and without it they keep testing the limits. They may even come to the conclusion that the teacher doesn’t care what they do. These children can end up labeled as problem children (Hale-Benson 1986; Gonzalez-Mena 2005). Ideas about discipline and guidance get extremely complex when they intersect with culture and oppression. Some groups of people who are targets of racism have to protect their children from the oppressive practices of racist individuals and institutions. Their methods of guidance and discipline may be different from those of groups for whom oppression is just a word. Ideas about what’s best for children can vary greatly and be influenced by history and experience more than by culture alone.

**Working though differences together**

If the arguing parties in the first scene all work in the same program, someone might end the argument by pointing out the program’s policy and explaining that it has to be enforced. In that case, diverse voices would be silenced. If someone insisted that diverse voices must be heard, the chances are the group would eventually decide it was time to start figuring out what to do about their differences; the focus would switch to problem-solving. When two groups or two people have different ways of guiding children’s behavior, instead of judging right or wrong, both sides must first try to understand those differences and where they come from. Are they cultural, familial, individual, or do they come from something else?

That doesn’t mean that there are no rights or wrongs. Further, just because there is cultural acceptance of a practice it doesn’t necessarily mean it is good for children.
Certainly doing harm to children is wrong. But to judge what is truly harmful and not in a child, family, or community’s best interests requires a deep understanding of the perspective of the person or group you disagree with and the meanings behind their behaviors.

It seems like it would work just to ask another person to explain why they do something, but most people can’t explain why they do what they do. Asking can create a defensive response and that’s the opposite of what is needed if we are to truly understand one another.

**Getting to a deeper understanding**

How to get to a deeper understanding in the face of diversity is a subject Isaura Barrera and Rob Corso (2003) explore in their book *Skilled Dialog*. They use the term *third space*, which they describe as “creatively reframing contradictions into paradoxes” and inviting “practitioners to make a fundamental shift from dualistic, exclusive perceptions of reality and adopt a mindset that integrates the complementary aspects of diverse values, behaviors, and beliefs into a new whole” (p. 75–76).

When people disagree they should not attempt a resolution until they understand all the perspectives that aren’t theirs. Then the situation can become an opportunity to gain a broader view and learn something new. Changing the goal from outcome to process changes everything.

Arguing parties tend to go straight to problem-solving, which short-circuits real understanding. In that case the person or group who has the most power often decides what the solution will be. Even if a compromise is the end result, usually nobody feels satisfied.

**Setting aside judgments**

When two groups or two people have different ways of guiding children’s behavior, instead of judging right or wrong, early childhood educators must first try to understand those differences and where they come from. Are they cultural, familial, individual, or do they come from something else?

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Pence describes something that sounds like third space when he talks about what happened when educators and First Nations people met to create an early childhood curriculum. The two groups each came with different sets of knowledge and experience. He says, “In the space between these two sets of knowledge was the opportunity to envision and generate something new, something that had not been articulated before” (Pence, 2004, 32). Pence and his colleagues have created an early education approach called the “generative curriculum,” which they first introduced in Canada (Ball and Pence 1999; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999). Training is now being offered in 10 Sub-Saharan countries through an online course offered by the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (based at the University of Victoria in Canada). One of the exciting parts of the Generative Curriculum is that those who use it are able to make a positive use of the tensions that arise when differing perspectives collide.

The next time you are in a situation in which differing perspectives are headed toward an argument, try using those tensions in a creative manner. Think about how you reacted reading this article. Perhaps you can play what Jones and Cooper (2005) call “the believing game.” They suggest that trying to imagine another person’s perspective requires suspending reality – playing pretend. They point out that when we encounter “people who don’t believe what we believe. We can sneer at them, or fight them, or pretend they’re invisible . . . Or we can accept the challenge to ‘embrace contraries.’” (p. 23)

Challenging yourselves
This article is an invitation to set aside judgments and open up. This quote from quote from Rumi says how to do that. “Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing there lies a field…I’ll meet you there.”

References
What is Third Space and How Do we Get There?
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Third space involves moving from dualistic thinking to holistic thinking in the face of what seems to be a contradiction or a paradox. If I disagree with the way you feed your baby or put her to sleep, it’s possible that I have a blind spot. My blind spot leads me to consider our differing views a problem. What do I do?

First, I should suspend judgment and seek to understand your perspective on what you’re doing. I have to put aside ideas about determining which is the one right way. That doesn’t mean that all ways are fine, but it does mean that I need to open up my mind, and remind myself that there is always more to learn (Rogoff, 2003).

Phillips and Cooper (1992) write about how caregiving practices (feeding, toilet training, or putting babies to sleep) have patterns of meaning that are shared by and embodied in the lifestyles of a larger group. I need to begin to see the patterns that are involved in my way as well as patterns behind your practice.

It will help if I move from the idea that you and I have a problem, to stating the situation “you and I have different views. Barrera and Corso, (2003) give me some insight into how to use something they call third space in this situation. “A third space perspective does not ‘solve the problem.’ Rather it changes the arena within which that problem is addressed by increasing the probability of respectful, responsive, and reciprocal interactions. In so doing, an optimal response to the situation becomes more likely” (page 81).

To get to third space I have to do three things: 1. believe that it exists. 2. accept that there are multiple realities. 3. dialogue with you instead of arguing. I can use Rumi’s advice on how to move from an argument to dialogue. He said, “Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing there lies a field. I’ll meet you there.”

If you and I go out to the field and talk about our views of how to take care of babies, we may be able to see a reality that is bigger than both of us. We may even be able to move from my way and your way to our way as we figure out what to do about our differences in this situation with this baby, in this center. If we do all that, we’ve reached third space.

Bredekamp and Copple (1997) explained third space without calling it that in the second edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs. They said, “Some critical reactions to NAEYC’s (1987) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice reflect a recurring tendency in the American discourse on education: the polarizing into either/or choices of many questions that are more fruitfully seen as both/and” (page 23).
They are writing about what I call dualistic thinking where contrasting ideas are looked at as dichotomous. If it’s right, it can’t be wrong; if it’s bad, it can’t be good. If it’s blue, it can’t be yellow. When you move into holistic thinking from dualistic thinking, you don’t separate things like that into opposites. Also, you can see that when blue and yellow come together – they make green! Blue keeps its blueness and yellow keeps its yellowness and together they make something new altogether. Green is an example of third space.

Stephan Covey writes about what he calls synergy in the foreword to a book called *Crucial Conversations*, (Patterson et al, 2002) which has excellent strategies for getting to third space. According to Covey, synergy makes for a better decision, better relationship, better decision-making process and increased commitment to implement decisions made. He talks about how synergy transforms people and relationships and creates an entirely new level of bonding producing what Buddhism calls the “middle way” – not a compromise. Not meeting half way between two opposites but a higher middle way like the apex of a triangle. When you produce something with another person that is truly creative, it’s one of the most powerful forms of bonding there is.

References


How can anyone possibly know everything about every different culture that might show up in children’s services? We’re educators, teachers, providers, and caregivers, not anthropologists! Even if we were anthropologists, how many cultures could we study, anyway?

What has helped me to understand more about cultural sensitivity is some research by Patricia Greenfield, which looks at diverse meanings of common behaviors that can cause dissention between families and teachers. Greenfield’s research contrasts two perspectives - that of the individualist and that of the collectivist.

What’s an individualist and what’s a collectivist? Most of us trained in early childhood education can easily see the perspective of an individualist; they are the ones who stress self-help skills by giving babies finger food and spoon feeding them only until they manage it themselves. They say to preschoolers who managed to zip their jacket, “You did it without any help!” They are individualists because they perceive their job as treating each infant and toddler as a unique and special individual who is on the way to gaining independence.

A collectivist, on the other hand, sees the child first and foremost as a member of the group, not apart and separate. Collectivists perceive their job as firmly attaching the child to the group. To do that they deemphasize individuality and independence. They downplay specialness. They are likely to spoon-feed babies much longer than an individualist. They may keep on spoon feeding into the preschool years and even beyond. They are aiming for interdependence. They not only feed babies, but put coats on preschoolers – and zip them. They see such acts as solidifying connections.

Individualists start encouraging children to do things on their own at a very young age. They are the ones who wait a bit for little babies to learn to calm themselves before they jump in and soothe them. They teach three year olds problem-solving skills and help them develop “inner controls” so that they don’t have to depend on adults so much for guidance.

Collectivists’ top priority is strengthening relationships and moving children away from their independent urges. Instead they give the message to children that it’s okay to
depend on adults. Those children who want to do everything themselves get an even stronger message about the importance of graciously accepting help. When children are old enough to help others, collectivists encourage them to do so. Helping oneself is not considered important enough to teach because it seen as a natural inclination that needs to be discouraged rather than the opposite.

Individualists recognize achievement and expect even the youngest child to feel good about accomplishments. “Look what a great job you did” says the adult, “And you did it all by yourself!” When the child responds with a show of pride, the adult sees evidence that self-esteem is rising. It’s even better when children point out to the adult how strong, smart, or capable they are. “Look at me!” is encouraged.

Collectivists on the other hand value modesty and humbleness; they downplay expressions of pride in personal achievements. Self-praise is considered bragging and is discouraged. It’s not individual achievement that is valued but rather group achievement.

So imagine what happens when a collectivist’s child ends up in an individualistic program. Most children experience confusion at the very least. To minimize difficulties, adults need to become conscious of how their actions are culturally-based. Awareness of differing perspectives helps adults begin to figure out what to do about them so that children who are grounded in one system and end up in another one do not experience conflicts that interfere with their growth and development. It’s important that professionals honor differences in the families they serve and work together with those families to figure out what is best for the child.

References


TO NEGOTIATE CULTURAL BUMPS

• Recognize that multiple realities exist

• Understand that context affects truth

• Know that opposing perspectives can all be valid

• See beyond perspectives to a larger unifying picture

• Have faith that it is possible to come together across differences

• Recognize defensiveness

• Develop dialoguing skills

• Learn to tolerate discomfort

• Work on relationships

• Have patience