



Transcript for the [Audio Podcast:](#)
Patty Ramsey Interview
Culture

Open: The Center for Early Childhood Education at Eastern Connecticut State University presents: Early Childhood Insights, an audio podcast series, featuring interviews with experts on topics of interest to Early Childhood professionals.

Host: Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Insights. I'm Julia DeLapp, Program Coordinator for the Center for Early Childhood Education. Today we will be talking with Dr. Patricia Ramsey about cultural influences in children's play. Dr. Ramsey is a Professor of Psychology and Education at Mount Holyoke College. One of her areas of expertise is how children develop early attitudes about gender, race, and social class and how teaching from a multicultural perspective affects children's early awareness and attitudes about groups of people that are unfamiliar to them. She is the author of a number of books on this topic, including *Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World: Multicultural Educational for Young Children*. Welcome Dr. Ramsey. Let's get started.

Host: What do early childhood professionals need to know about the cultures of the children in their classrooms?

Dr. Patricia Ramsey: One of the most important things is that you understand the values of the culture and the priorities of the parents and the child-rearing goals of the parents in the community, because with that information, you will understand what the parents are trying to do. For example, in middle-class American families, they often value individualism and individual achievement, and therefore encourage their children to compete and be self-sufficient and to learn to grow away from the family, to be able to live on their own. Whereas cultures where collectivism and family relationships is the real value, children are encouraged to collaborate, cooperate and to stay with their families as opposed to stay home. That will affect how children play. Some children from a more individualistic culture may prefer to spend

time alone. They may prefer to spend time doing competitive activities. They may be more caught up in individual achievement and smaller groups, maybe more exclusionary activities, whereas children raised in a more collective, collaborative culture may emphasize inclusion and play in larger groups and be less concerned with a competitive aspect. It's also important to understand that cultures are constantly evolving and so what's happening in that culture today may not be what's happening tomorrow and to not see it as static, that all people from this particular country may act this way because first of all, there are many individual differences within cultures. You can't assume that each child is going to be a certain way because she's Chinese-American or comes from France, that there are enormous individual variations within cultures, and cultures are always changing as they come into contact with one another. So, you many often see, typically children in cultures that are quite traditional cultures but they may be enacting television characters, like Power Rangers and that kind of thing with a slightly different twist to it because they are being exposed to these other cultures as well as their own culture, so their culture is constantly evolving as that happens.

Host: How can early childhood professionals begin to understand cultural differences?

Dr. Patricia Ramsey: First, I think you should be sure to understand the cultures and not just the surfaces, not just the artifacts, not just the cooking, not just the clothing. But really try to understand the values of the culture because that underlies a lot of the things you might be doing in the classroom. Really immersing yourself in the culture, going to community events, spending time with parents, asking parents about what they want for their children, reading the local newspapers, or whatever you can do to really get a feel for what the culture is about, then that would be a much better grounding, than simply following what you've seen the parents doing.

Host: How does culture influence children's play?

Dr. Patricia Ramsey: Well, children tend to imitate the roles that they see adults play. So if your child is being raised in a rural area, he may be enacting farming roles, taking care of animals and driving tractors. In a city, children may be driving taxis and buses and enacting those kinds of roles. Very often in suburban areas you see lots of children being soccer moms, maybe they'll be driving cars and playing on their cell phones at the same time. So, the actual roles they play are in fact something that may vary across cultures. Many times the roles have the same themes underlying—family themes, fear, death, being lost—those kind of dramatic themes that children are expressing or that many children are expressing in their lives. But the way that they

are acted may be somewhat different, but often the underlying emotion and general interest is the same.

Another way that cultures differ is the level of expressiveness that is allowed, that's encouraged. For some cultures the restraint is very important and learning to mask your feelings is a priority. Other cultures it's to be very expressive, so teachers need to understand what may appear very rambunctious or aggressive in one classroom may not be in that classroom; however, that may be somewhat frightening or off-putting to children who are used to much more restraint in their culture.

Host: What can teachers do to create a classroom environment that reflects the cultural diversity within our society?

Dr. Patricia Ramsey: Probably it's best to talk about cultures that are represented in the classroom rather than bringing in cultures that children have no basis or first-hand knowledge. Now in some cases where the classroom is extremely homogenous, you want the children to stretch past their knowledge of the community they are growing in. There is some reason to do that, but then try to do it in a way that really connects with what they understand. So, for instance, you may bring in information about families, so they can tie that in with their own families. They can see pictures and read books about how other families live, but always try to make sure that they understand the similarities between the groups. It's also very important to involve the families into the activities that it's much more meaningful if you have families bring in special objects that mean a lot and can explain a lot about the culture, then for you to simply bring in something that may not know very much about. Often teachers may have parents, families bring in posters about their lives with photographs and objects that will explain their culture in way that is personal, very meaningful, and the children really understand that because they can see their friends and some sort of abstract cultural information.

You can also bring in cultural differences with books and puzzles and songs, and learning words in different languages. But, it's very important that you don't do it in a superficial, touristy way, that you connect whatever you've bringing in with real lives and real people, and also you want to explain the underlying values, or otherwise you're giving superficial drops of information that children will be learning that may in fact reinforce stereotypes or something that will only give them superficial idea about the culture.

So for instance, if you have a book that represents another culture, don't just read the story and drop it. You build around it with doing stuff in the pretend area, you can do art projects along with it, and you can do songs with it. And try as much as you can to bring in people who can speak to that culture, so it's not just an abstract of culture but it can be something that they really understand.

Another caution that is important that I have to say I learned painfully, is when you're bringing in cultural information and you're not as familiar with it, be sure that you don't do something that is going to insult or hurt people. Often what we see as cultural artifacts and rituals, we may not understand that many of them are very sacred and very important and that really it's an insult to some groups to be doing things that for instance, in our preschool, we did sand paintings based on a Navajo tradition and then later found out that, that really was sacrilegious. That we should not, as non-Navajo, and a children, should not have been doing that. That was a painful lesson, but one that was important, and therefore it is important to try to be sure that you really understand what you are doing so that you don't make these kinds of errors.

Host: Thank you Dr. Ramsey for talking with us today (and thanks to all of you for listening.) You can watch a video that includes a portion of this discussion and footage from early childhood classrooms on iTunes U or by visiting our website.

Close: This has been a presentation of the Center for Early Childhood Education at Eastern Connecticut State University. For more information about the Center for Early Childhood Education, please visit our website at www.easternct.edu/cece.

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