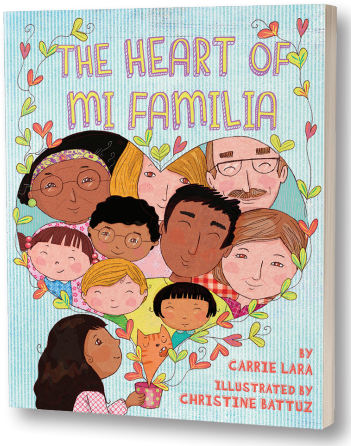
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Helping Your Child Embrace Their Cultural Identity by Carrie Lara, PsyD



Children with two different cultural backgrounds can sometimes feel as if they live in "two different worlds." When they visit one side of the family, they may feel like they do not quite fit in, and then have the same feeling when visiting the other side of the family. Sometimes people feel like they have to reject one culture to belong to the other, which is then rejecting a part of themselves, suggesting something is wrong.

This adapted excerpt from the Reader's Note in *The Heart of Mi Familia*, by Carrie Lara, PsyD, provides insight into the bicultural experience and strategies for parents and caregivers to help children appreciate and celebrate their cultures, the cultures of others, and the beautiful diversity of life experiences.

You can purchase the full book with 20% off and free domestic shipping here. Enter code MPKIDS20 at checkout.

Research on cultural identity and immigrant populations has found that people end up in either a state of acculturation, assimilation, or marginalization. In the attempt to join and find belonging, there can be marginalization and rejection of the dominant culture, or assimilation which leads to a loss of the home culture.

Acculturation is the balance of both, being able to adapt within the dominant culture for "survival," but also maintain a connection to the home culture. This is the healthy balance that we would want people to have.

However, children who have been able to develop this healthy balance can still have a feeling and experience of not quite belonging to one culture or another. For example, when visiting family where another language is spoken, relatives might note a child speaks the language with a different accent, but when they go home and speak the local language there, people may remark on an accent as well, making the child feel like an outsider in both places.

Here are some ways to help your child celebrate and appreciate their cultures and feel at home in their experience.

Acknowledge differences

For children, as little social scientists, making observations of their surroundings and experiences every day is part of their learning and development process. When your child observes similarities and differences, acknowledge their observation and help them to learn and understand. Accept that there are differences, and not only note the differences exist, but discuss why. Is it because of religion? Is it because of regional food? This, in effect, discourages any developing thoughts or feelings that a difference in culture is wrong. It gives meaning.

Support exploration

Children start to identify with their own cultural/racial identity around the age of 3-4. This identification comes from the interactions they have with their family members, teachers, and community. By age 7-9, children are more aware of the group dynamics around culture and race. This includes the histories of their own culture and how their culture is similar, different, or a combination of other cultures.

This is even more important for children of multiple cultural histories. A child may, at certain times in their life, feel more identified with one or the other culture in their background. This is part of their cultural experience and identity development. Be supportive and accepting of their exploration. By celebrating a child's unique individual culture and highlighting the beauty both cultures can bring into their lives, you are celebrating the beauty of your child.

Talk about cultural identity

Cultural identity is made up of the multiple pieces that influence an individual's personal identity. These include the social construct of race, but also the person's language, food, music, family role, town, hobbies, profession, and so on. Have conversations with your child about culture and cultural identity. Relate these pieces to yourself and your child.

A fun and easy way to help visually depict cultural identity is to create a list of what makes up your own cultural identity. For example, mother, daughter, wife, Euro-American descendant, English and Spanish speaker, author, piano player, aspiring gardener, etc. Make a list for yourself and help your child make their own. Note that through life, this list may grow or shorten. Other ways to proactively talk about cultural identity include learning new recipes, language, or music and dance. There are lots of opportunities to highlight the beauty of culture all around us, from our own cultures to those of others.

Deal with discrimination

Unfortunately, our children will likely experience, in one way or another, conflict around racial tensions. Sometimes it can be overt, in the manner of comments, posted signs, or aggressive action. Or it can be covert, such as being excluded in a game on the playground or dropped from a social group. Fostering positive conversations and development around cultural identity with your child builds a strong foundation of the cultural self and helps protect against these unfortunate experiences.

When your child has a conflict:

- Provide empathy and compassion, listen to and hold their emotions surrounding the situation.
- Let them express their emotions.
- Answer questions they may have with appropriate age level responses.
- Do what you can to protect them. This will differ by situation. It could be speaking with the school staff if something occurred at school, or with a parent if appropriate.
- Reassure your child that it was not their fault, and they are not responsible for the actions of others.
- Remind them of their strength and beauty, and to celebrate who they are, in and out.

As parents and caregivers, we are the best resource for helping our children respect and celebrate their own identities and those of others. We are our child's mirror, and what we reflect back to them contributes a significant part to their perception of themselves and their identities. We can help our children learn to value their own unique identities, and to find beauty and joy in the differences around them.

About This Article's Author

Carrie Lara, PsyD, has been working with children in various community mental health settings since 2005. She received her doctorate in clinical psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology through Alliant International University of San Francisco in 2009. Her specializations are working with children and families, child and human development, foster and adoptive youth, learning disabilities and special education, attachment-based play therapy, and trauma. Dr. Lara has had the opportunity to work in different socioeconomic and diverse communities professionally, and personally has a bi-cultural family. Both of these factors have deepened her understanding of the development of cultural identity and its importance. It is her hope that this book supports families having conversations about cultural identity during this very early stage in a child's development of a sense of self.