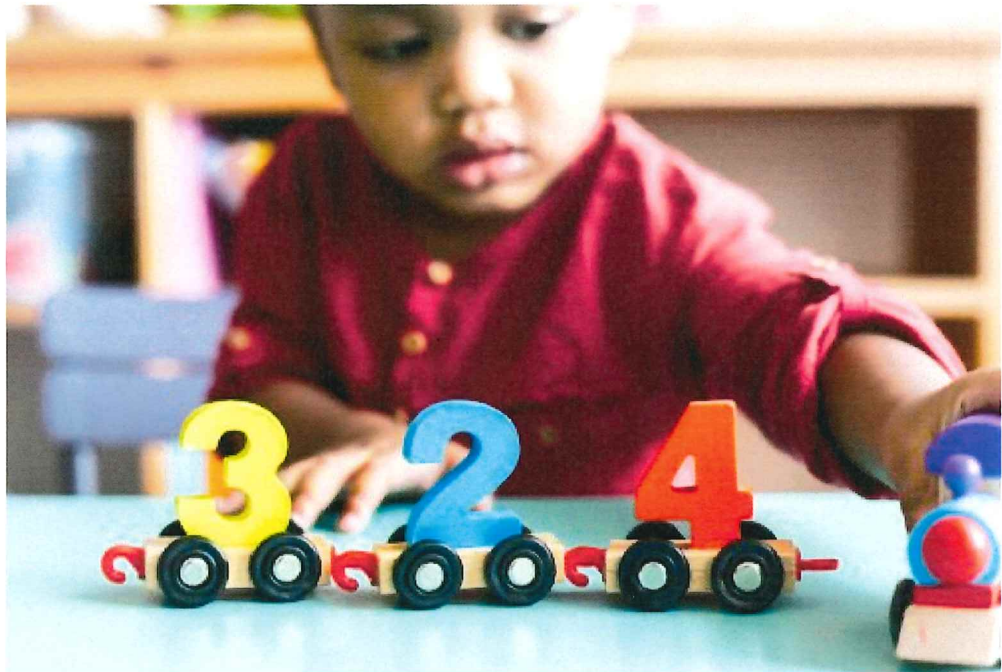


Cultural Influences on Child Development

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Cultural background gives children a sense of who they are. The unique cultural influences children respond to from birth, including customs and beliefs around food, artistic expression, language, and religion, affect the way they develop emotionally, socially, physically, and linguistically.

When a child's self-identity is at odds with the social environment due to cultural differences, it can hinder learning. Fortunately, culturally competent educators help children of all cultural backgrounds learn by showing an understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and how they make each child uniquely valuable.



Because culture is such a powerful indicator of a child's future well-being, those who work with children, including social workers, counselors, and specialists, need to understand the cultural influences on child development and how they impact the way people grow and learn. A degree such as Maryville University's [online Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies](#) can prepare future professionals for success in these roles, providing them with the background and experience they need to support children and families with their services.

The Importance of Childhood Development

Early childhood is a key period of mental and emotional growth, and what children perceive and experience can shape their future: Our childhood environments and how we respond to them can predict the course for our health and well-being as adults. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports, “Although the brain continues to develop and change into adulthood, the first eight years can build a foundation for future learning, health, and life success. ... How the brain grows is strongly affected by the child’s experiences with other people and the world.”

To understand the environment’s impact on a developing child, let’s look at the three main ways children process the information around them as they grow.

- **Classical conditioning.** Drawing associations between a stimulus and response. For example, children in religious families might associate bedtime with prayers.
- **Operant conditioning.** Drawing associations between a reward and an action. For example, children might receive dessert after eating their vegetables.
- **Observational learning.** Absorbing and copying what they see from others in real life or in the media. For example, a child might say, “Time to clean up” because a teacher says it in school.

Children learn, therefore, by observing and making associations about their surroundings. Exposure to positive influences can favorably impact a child’s development, while exposure to toxic or stressful influences can negatively impact development.

All else being equal, a child’s cultural influences at birth are neutral. All too often, however, some elements of cultural background may not be accepted or understood by the society in which a child grows up — potentially harming a child’s self-image and development.

In other words, the social cues a young child takes in from others about cultural background can help or hamper development because developing children readily internalize what they see and hear. When a young child’s cultural background differs from the prevailing culture — for example, the child’s family might speak a different language at home, eat different foods, or observe different holidays — it can affect self-image. This is especially the case if peers or even teachers treat the child in a way that reveals bias or casts the child in the role of an outsider.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), childhood exposure to dominant social biases — such as favoring people who are white, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin, wealthy, fluent in English, natives rather than immigrants — can trigger developing children to judge themselves unfavorably by the same limiting standards. When children do that, their development suffers.

Recognizing Cultural Influences on Child Development

Culture influences development from the moment we're born, making an impact on us as we grow. For instance, culture can affect how children build values, language, belief systems, and an understanding of themselves as individuals and as members of society.

Children can receive these cultural influences in different ways, such as through their parents, their environment, and the media. How society shows an understanding of diverse cultures can impact a child's development in many ways, such as how confident in themselves or how comfortable interacting with others they become as adults.

Parental Influences on Child Development

Parents' culture can influence their children's development. A 2019 study, for example, found that cultural values often influence the way parents raise their children, including how they discipline and set boundaries. It makes sense that parents raise their children based on cultural influences because they're preparing them to develop behaviors necessary to operate and thrive in that culture. However, when the social environment and home culture clash, developmental issues can arise.

Collectivist vs. Individualistic Cultures and Parental Discipline

Parents' cultural influences can impact how they discipline a child's behavior. This, in turn, can affect a child's development, particularly if those methods of discipline differ from the dominant cultural tradition.

Before delving into the methods of discipline and culture, what do the terms "collectivist" and "individualistic" mean exactly? Essentially, a collectivist culture values and rewards the prioritization of community needs over individual needs, as well as generous, kind, collaborative behavior. Collectivism is the norm in Asian, Central American, South American, and African cultures.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, an individualistic culture values and rewards assertiveness and independent action, stressing the importance of the individual over the group. Individualism dominates in North American and Western European cultures.

The 2019 study cited earlier found that parents from individualistic cultures discipline differently from parents from collectivist cultures. The former group of parents might discipline their children by taking something away that matters to them personally. On the other hand, parents from collectivist cultures might tell their children to think about how their behavior affects others.

The study found that children raised in individualistic cultures often described themselves based on their unique attributes, such as “I am good at math.” Meanwhile, children raised in collectivist cultures were more likely to describe themselves based on their relationships with others, such as “I am my mother’s daughter.”

Child development can be influenced if parents or teachers discipline children according to the dominant culture — the U.S. has an individualistic culture — rather than the culture of their family of origin. For example, children whose parents have disciplined them to value cooperation over competition might become confused or upset when a teacher urges them to be competitive.

Parental Influences on Children’s Social Behavior Varies by Culture

Children learn how to act by interacting with their parents. For this reason, the parents’ cultural background often influences a child’s behavior.

Communication style is a case in point. Children tend to communicate in a style that resembles their parents’ way of communicating, and diverse cultures converse and explain things in different ways.

Children who communicate based on an individualistic cultural model will often tell long, self-focused stories with themes of autonomy and personal preference. Conversely, children who communicate based on a collectivist cultural model will often tell brief, other-oriented stories with themes of authority and interrelationships.

These cultural influences on children’s language development can help or hinder them on the playground, and later in the workplace. If children’s culture is respected at school, including the way the children interact verbally with others, then they’ll be more likely to experience the acceptance and respect they need to grow and develop. They’re more likely to become adults with a healthy self-image who feel understood and capable of confident, fruitful interactions. If not, however, they may become adults who hesitate to raise their voices and be heard for fear of being ridiculed or misunderstood.

Environmental Influences on Child Development

Environmental influences on child development can include influences from community and culture as well as from environmental health hazards. Pollution from a nearby power plant, contaminated water, or lead in the home, for example, can cause lasting impacts on children’s health. As the CDC reports, environmental contaminants can cause greater harm to children than to adults because children’s bodies are still developing.

In fact, children take in more air, water, and food per pound of body weight, making them more vulnerable to health issues from environmental hazards. The health issues might not show up

until later in life, causing difficulty in school, work, and socialization. A child exposed to polluted air, for example, might develop asthma as a teenager.

Children of low-income communities are most likely to be at risk of exposure to environmental hazards. As the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) reports, low-income communities may have poor infrastructure, making them more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters, such as contaminated water and damaged drainage systems. They may also be located closer to factories and highways, both of which contribute to high levels of pollution in the air, soil, and water.

Media Influences on Child Development

Media influences on childhood development include movies, TV shows, video games, and other online content. Research that the American Psychological Association (APA) has shared shows that children's exposure to violent media can result in aggressive behavior; exposure to advertising for non-nutritious foods can increase rates of childhood obesity; and too much screen time can be linked to lower brain development in preschoolers.

A study from the Cognitive Impacts of Digital Media Workgroup found that children begin to learn from TV programs at around 2.5 years old. Educational programs, such as "Sesame Street," can positively influence their knowledge and social skills, preparing them for school. However, after they turn 6 years old, children begin to watch more entertainment programming, which can, in turn, influence their behavior negatively. In addition, while video games can help children develop visual processing skills, they can also yield aggressive behavior. The effects on cognitive skills and behaviors are often specific to the games played.

As a result of these findings, the study suggests that clinicians and early childhood service providers should work with parents to limit TV exposure before children turn 2 years old. As children begin to learn how to read, clinicians and service providers should advise parents to regulate children's media consumption — with a focus on providing educational media content — and encourage reading habits.

The connection with cultural background is clear: Diverse cultures have different attitudes toward TV and other entertainment media, as well as different abilities to afford access to such media. A child from a collectivist culture, for example, may be encouraged to help infant or elderly family members in lieu of watching educational TV after school. Indirectly, culture influences these children's ability to benefit from such experiences.

In addition, to take the example further, children whose culture discourages educational TV and other media may be ridiculed by school peers for missing out on popular pastimes other children engage in.

Another way that media in popular culture can influence child development is by depicting and perpetuating cultural stereotypes. For example, a movie might show women or minorities in a negative light, or not at all. A sitcom might feature only white characters, never those of diverse races or ethnicities.

Clearly, the absence of role models in entertainment media, or the presence of negative stereotypes, can affect children's self-esteem. This can cause media to become a negative cultural influence on a child's development.

A Crucial Understanding of Childhood Development

Educators, parents, caregivers, and social workers need to understand how children's cultural influences affect their development. With this knowledge, adults can better guide students of different cultures and backgrounds through their growth processes and ensure that they're being exposed to healthy influences. They can also provide them with the tools they need to cope with negative influences, such as cultural biases and prejudices against diverse cultures, in schools and in society at large.

According to the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP), for example, early childhood programs can foster children's development — physically, mentally, and socially. Consider the Head Start program, which provides children from low-income families with services to promote their educational and emotional growth. Children who participated in programs such as Head Start grew up healthier and engaged in less harmful activities, such as drinking and smoking, than those who didn't.

Educators and social workers need to be aware of their own implicit biases about cultural differences. As the NAEYC reported, teachers can exhibit biases in their treatment of children according to the child's race, ability, socioeconomic status, and behaviors. The biases can inhibit teachers from effectively helping these students and, therefore, prevent students from developing at the pace that's best for them. By understanding the cultural influences on child development, including their own cultural biases, professionals in these roles can better make an impact on children's lives and deliver the care they need.

Careers That Incorporate Cultural Influences on Child Development

An understanding of cultural influences on child development is important for professionals in a range of roles.

Child Life Specialist

A child life specialist is clinically trained to help families work through the developmental impact of serious injury or illness. For example, a child life specialist might work with families to help children cope with illness or stress in a hospital setting. This work includes identifying stressors, encouraging self-expression, and ensuring that children can make their voices heard in often overwhelming situations.

Understanding how the healthcare system approaches cultural diversity helps child life specialists assist families from various cultural backgrounds. Further, a child life specialist understands that the trauma of illness or injury looms large in child development and thus seeks to mitigate the impact, while taking into account each child's cultural background.

Mental Health Counselor

Mental health counselors treat people for issues such as behavioral disorders, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and stress. They might work in a range of settings, including individual and family services, community care centers, and government facilities. Mental health counselors can train to work specifically with children and families, helping them work through mental health issues, access necessary resources, and navigate treatment plans.

By understanding cultural influences on child development, mental health counselors can more effectively help children and families get to the root of their issues and work through them.

Community Health Worker

Community health workers help individuals and groups access healthcare information, resources, and services. For example, if a community is exposed to an environmental hazard, community health workers might connect people with screenings for lung cancer or asthma. Another example is if an impoverished community has difficulty accessing food, community health workers might connect the community to local services, such as food banks. These professionals also advocate on behalf of vulnerable communities, providing local government representatives, healthcare providers, and health educators with data about people's health status and needs.

Community health workers learn about the factors that influence child development to help families access the healthcare resources they need. They also understand the influence of culture on how families and communities seek aid and respond to stress in crises.

Child Care Center Director

Child care center directors build and manage programs for before- and after-school care, including educational programs, and social activities. Directors also hire and train staff to run these programs and work with children. With an understanding of cultural influences on child

development, child care center directors can be prepared to support children outside their home, resolve issues when they arise, and provide working families with the extra help they need in supervising their children.

Social Worker

Social workers assist individuals and families on a case-by-case basis, helping them navigate stressful situations, such as unemployment, illness, and substance abuse. On top of providing these services, clinical social workers are licensed to diagnose clients with mental health issues and intervene in emergencies, such as child abuse. Social workers understand how cultural influences can impact behavior and development.

Social workers can also train in specialty areas, including the following:

- Child and family social work
 - Example: Guiding children through the adoption process or the foster system, or locating community child care services
- School social work
 - Example: Helping students with behavioral issues find a therapist
- Mental health social work
 - Example: Connecting children who have anxiety or depression with a psychiatrist or support group
- Healthcare social work
 - Example: Supporting children through a diagnosis and hospital visits

All social workers are trained to be aware of the factors that influence people's behavior, including their childhood development and how their culture may be influencing it. If a child is acting out at school, for example, a social worker considers how cultural influences at home might affect the child's acceptance by peers at school or how the child responds to challenging school demands, such as competition or collaboration.

Make an Impact in Childhood Development

Maryville's online Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies program offers students the knowledge and skills they need to work with families and children in different stages of their lives. Through the program's comprehensive curriculum, students explore the human experience and how individuals develop in their societies and interpersonal relationships. They also gain real-world experience through fieldwork, research projects, and service-learning opportunities in a range of settings where they can begin making an impact in their roles.

If you're interested in learning more about cultural influences on child development — including parental, environmental, and media influences on child development — exploring Maryville's [online Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies](#) can help you pursue your professional goals.

Recommended Reading

[Early Childhood Education vs. Childhood Development](#)

[Nature vs. Nurture Child Development: Exploring Key Differences](#)

[How to Become a Child Life Specialist](#)

Sources

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[The Conversation, "How Culture Influences Children's Development"](#)

[The Urban Child Institute, What Do We Know About Social and Emotional Development in Early Childhood?](#)

[The Washington Post, "How Different Cultures Shape Children's Personalities in Different Ways"](#)

[Verywell Mind, "Experience and Development"](#)

[Verywell Mind, "Individualistic Cultures and Behavior"](#)

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[U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Health Educators and Community Health Workers](#)

[U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Preschool and Childcare Center Directors](#)

[U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Social Workers](#)

[U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors](#)

[U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Child Life Specialist"](#)

[Wiley Online Library, "Environmental Influences on Health and Development: Nutrition, Substance Exposure, and Adverse Childhood Experiences"](#)

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