

Your Cultural Identity Changes As Your Child Grows

As you strategize how to best teach your infant and young child birth to 5 years your languages and cultures, have you thought about the affect raising children has on your cultural identity? In the counseling profession we say most people have a sound sense of their adult identity by the mid twenties. When you are a bi cultural couple, there are some extras to integrate in your identity as a couple but you can maintain pretty separate cultural identities until the birth of your first child.

The birth of your first child brings challenges out into the open; which language(s) dominate the home, which cultural practices take precedence, and how will you and your spouse form a multicultural family that embraces diversity? Many of us would like to believe that we can live the cultural metaphor of the “salad bowl” where each language group and culture maintain their separate identities while living together. The reality is isolation is impossible; the dressing in the salad bowl –your mixed cultural household-will flavor all the fruits and vegetables changing their color and texture. No distinct culture and language will stay pure when living side by side in a family. In the US, the prevalence of “Spanglish” with its many varieties is a good example of cultural linguistic blending.

The earlier in your child’s life you recognize that it is in everyone’s best interest to invite yourself to some blending identity as Japanese-American, Spanish-American, American-South African, the more likely you are to form a lasting positive cultural bond with your child. A positive bi-cultural bond will give your child permission to experiment freely with his/her emerging American-Spanish, Chinese-Italian-American Identity. Regardless of your cultural heritage and desire to influence your child, the dominant culture of the country in which you now live will become your child’s dominant cultural identity influence and there is no way to prevent it. Just as you speak the language of your cultural heritage at home so must you learn to be fluent in the language and customs of the dominant culture in which you raise your bicultural child. You may find this philosophically challenging but well worth the effort.

Does preparing for changes in your cultural identity sound premature when your child is a baby? Not if you recognize as a parent the feeling you impart to your child about language and culture is far stronger than what you actually say. Young Children live in the land of intuition because they lack the vocabulary to be articulate. “Mom and Dad didn’t grow up here but they think it is good to be from here so I’m good.” When you stay non judgmental-and mean it-about the positive things in the dominant culture, you allow your child to be proud of his/her blend of culture by modeling it.

It is true as you raise your son or daughter, you will revisit cultural memories from your childhood. The pull of cultural loyalty to repeat with your child the cultural experiences which were important to you is strong and to be expected. It is how who became who you are. Some things you can do with your children and some things you will have to grieve as lost possibilities. As you sort through who you are now, there are some questions which can be helpful. What places do you wish you could show your child in these first years of his/her life? Who do you miss seeing; aunts uncles, parents and school friends who now have children your child’s age in a far away place? Are you feeling left out of shared cultural experiences that would embrace your child in your native land? Make a strategy with your spouse to find a way to fold some of your

REALLY important memories and experiences into your child's' early life and be consistent just as you are with language training.

It is normal to have times when you may feel angry or depressed about the strength of the dominant culture's influence on your child. If you find yourself consistently stressed consider getting some counseling for support. Talk to your spouse about what each of you needs to have a balanced, honest approach to opening your heart to bi-cultural practices and bi cultural identity. Find some other parents to talk with as you come to understand the ways you are changing how you think of yourself as Chinese or Austrian or Turkish. The first 5 years of your child's' life are a gentle nudge into how your cultural identity will have to shift to bridge the gap between your language and cultural world inside the home and in the dominant country cultural world outside the home. How you approach your cultural identity is pivotal in helping your child develop a healthy bi cultural identity. Give yourself plenty of credit for being the new pioneers. You are on the cutting edge of the wave of multicultural families in this world of global mobility and multicultural appreciation.

Harriet Cannon, M.C., LMFT,
150 Nickerson Street, Suite 203
Seattle Washington 98109

www.harrietcannon.com harriet@harrietcannon.com