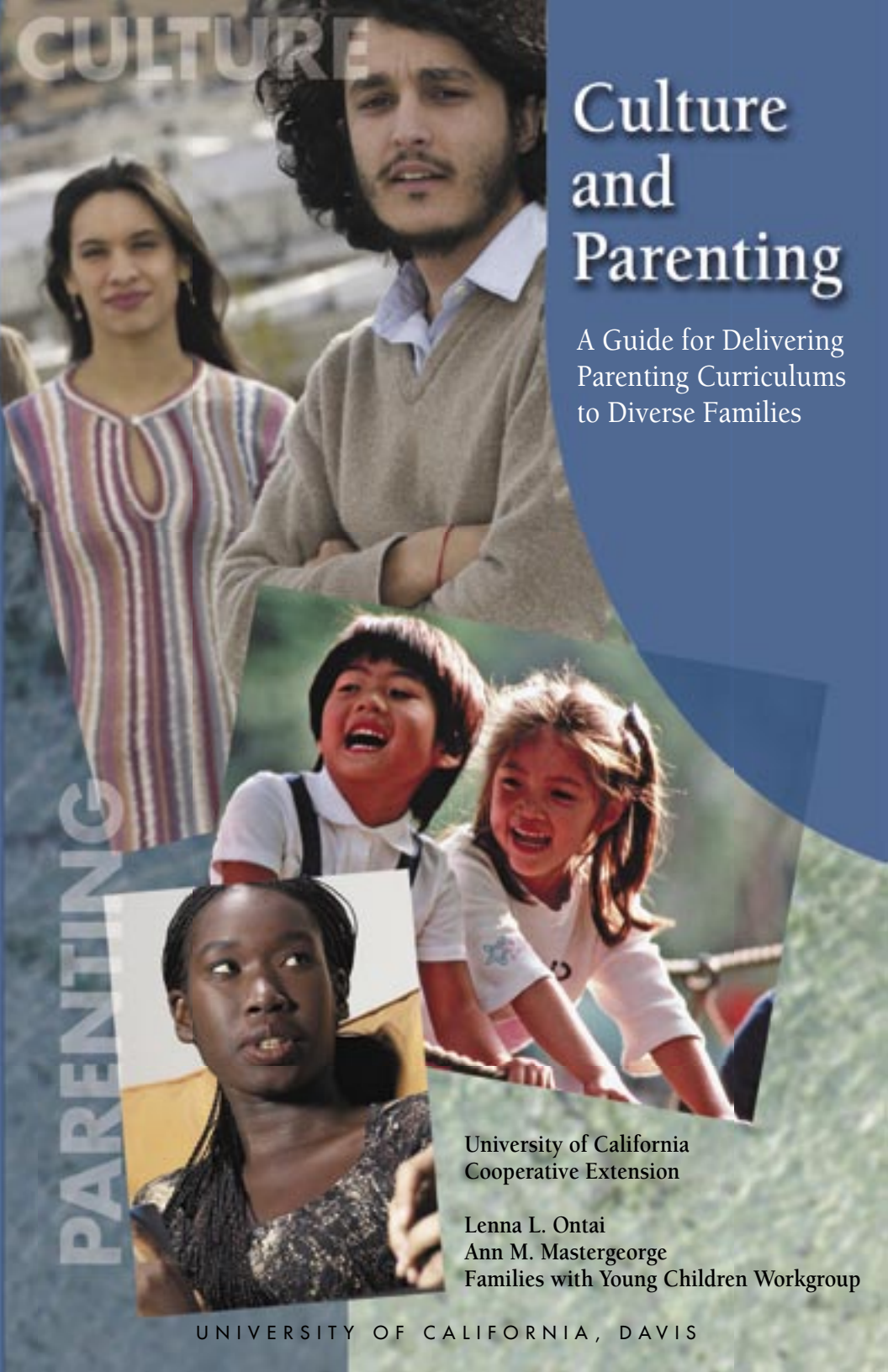CULTURE

Culture and Parenting

A Guide for Delivering Parenting Curriculums to Diverse Families

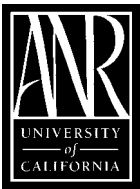PARENTING

University of California
Cooperative Extension

Lenna L. Ontai
Ann M. Mastergeorge
Families with Young Children Workgroup

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

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Lenna L. Ontai
Ann Mastergeorge
Families with Young Children Workgroup

University of California, Davis

Purpose

This booklet is designed to be a guide for practitioners to evaluate the cultural sensitivity of programs and services they offer to families, and to provide guidance on how to make your parenting program more culturally sensitive.

Culture in Parenting Curriculums

The growing diversity in the U.S. has increased awareness of variation in parenting behaviors. Parents of all cultures want to do the best for their children. But when their behaviors are different from our familiar framework, they can seem strange or even dangerous. Recognizing how our own backgrounds shapes our beliefs about "best practices" is important to understand behavior that is different from our own. Sometimes it is helpful for practitioners and other professionals to step back and evaluate the cultural framework of their curriculums. This can help practitioners uncover unintentional cultural biases in their practices.

For all families, the cultural framework plays a critical role in the goals parents set for their children. Understanding a family's cultural framework can help practitioners to better serve them. When offering parenting advice, it is important that practitioners remember that optimal child development can follow many paths.

"Parental behaviors outside one's own cultural framework can seem strange or even dangerous."
— *Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998*

What is "Culture"?

Culture is not just ethnicity or race. Culture is reflected in any group that shares a history and belief system that influences how they function. It is important to distinguish "societal culture" and "home culture". Societal culture is made up of the institutions in a society that express the group's value system (educational systems, medical systems, political systems, religious systems, the media, etc.). As practitioners, you work in the cultural institutions of your society which may make it difficult to understand see that views different from your own are okay.

"Home culture" is made of the values of the immediate family. Sometimes, "home culture" can conflict with the "societal culture". For example, the cultural practice of arranged marriage. It can be hard for families to maintain their home culture with their children (e.g., values, behaviors, ceremonies), while also integrating them into the society around them (e.g., schools, doctors, clubs). The process of integrating and balancing the two cultures can be challenging for families who are always interacting with new institutions and value systems.

Cultural values can commonly be divided into "independence" or "interdependence". The U.S. culture commonly stresses values of "independence" while non-Western cultures focus more on "interdependence". The most important goal of raising independent children is for them to be self-sufficient and act on their own personal choices. On the other hand, the primary goal of raising interdependent children is for them to be part of a larger system of relationships — to "depend" on others for well-being. A range of both independence and interdependence can be seen in any family or culture. Parents are usually adjusting each value according to the particular goal they are trying to achieve for their children.

Being unaware of one's own cultural framework creates the "potential for both personal conflict and interpersonal misunderstanding in multicultural environments"
— Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998

How to Use This Booklet

With the growing diversity in our society and so much diversity among families, it is impossible for practicioners to know about each family's value system. People are not usually aware of their own value systems, so we cannot simply ask. Instead, we must depend on general guidelines about cultures to help guide our efforts to support families.

This tipbook covers topics found in parenting education curriculums for which there are significant variations among cultures, such as sleeping, discipline and communication. For each topic we present key research findings, tips for the field and a checklist to assess the cultural sensitivity of your program. Use this information to help develop strategies to make your program more culturally appropriate for the many families that make up today's U.S. culture.

"Often, immigrant youth and their families mix and match the approaches of their country of origin and their new country, contributing to changing adaptations across generations."
    —Rogoff, pg 210.

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Communication

Research finds that…:

- Communication is important for teaching children about essential cultural and social information.

- Cultures that focus on developing independence in children tend to communicate about the physical world, such as using objects, and other topics that prepare children for school.

- Independent cultures emphasize outward expression using words or gestures – like pointing to an object and saying the name to teach infants new words or learning games by listening to or reading the instructions.

- Cultures that focus on developing interdependence in children use communication to develop children's social knowledge, such as how objects relate to one another.

- Interdependent cultures use more non-verbal and subtle expression – such as learning games through observation or using touch, gaze, posture, and facial expressions to express meaning.

- Some interdependent cultures do not speak directly to infants and toddler but rather speak around them. Children raised in these environments tend to speak later than other children but catch up quickly.

"This is a pot, pot, pot. I am putting food into a pot, pot, pot. You say it: 'pot, pot, pot'." (Hognib, 1943 pg 303).

"With a quick movement of his eyes together with a sideways nod, he prompted Ramu to put the ring inside the jar again." (Mistry, 1993 pg 111-112).

Tips for the field:
- Parents vary on how much they use verbal and non-verbal communication with their children. They may be more comfortable using different kinds of communication strategies in different situations.

- Parents who are able to effectively use a combination of communication strategies may prepare their children for diverse environments.

- Encouraging parents to use more outward expressions with their children can help children to be prepared for school settings where verbal communication is valued.

- Some parents may overlook talking directly to pre-verbal infants and toddler. Encouraging parents to speak directly to infants and toddlers will help to avoid language delays.

- The use of more internal forms of expression such as facial expressions can help children learn to pay attention to others' feelings and emotions. This will help prepare them for social interactions.

Communication Checklist

Do you...

- ❏ understand how culture influences communication between parents and children?

- ❏ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in has shaped your views on appropriate parent-child communication patterns?

- ❏ understand how independent and interdependent values shape communication patterns?

- ❏ consider alternative communication behaviors that families may use?

- ❏ consider the underlying cultural goals that motivate various communication patterns?

- ❏ support parents who use alternative communication patterns (that are safe for the child) and help parents incorporate new communication behaviors into their existing cultural framework?

- ❏ teach your class from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of multiple parent-child communication patterns?

Notes

Discipline

Research finds that…:

- Cultures that focus on developing independence in children value parenting strategies that provide structure while being available, involved, warm, and sensitive. Examples are using time outs or explaining why hitting is wrong. Children are encouraged to think about their behavior and learn about limits.

- Cultures that focus on developing interdependence in children use strategies such as shaming to exert control over children's behavior rather than giving choices and time to think. These strategies encourage respect for elders and authority figures.

- Parenting strategies can be different in different situations. Time-out and explanations are most effective in middle-class environments where misbehavior is not life-threatening and time and resources are available. In high-risk environments, misbehavior can result in more serious consequences (dense traffic, unsafe environments outside the home). In these contexts, more controlled discipline strategies tend to be more effective and valued.

- Discipline strategies can be tightly linked to cultural values and traditions. In cultures where respect for elders is important, shaming is seen as an effective way to promote this important value.

"Physical punishment also seems to have different meanings for the children of different communities. [It can be] associated with high parental warmth" (Rogoff, pg 209-210).

"…there are situations in which reprimands can be confirming, can strengthen relationships." (Ballenger, 1992, pg 206).

Tips for the field:
- It can be difficult to accept or value behaviors other than our own and understanding other discipline practices can be hard to do.

- Understanding parents' goals for their children's behavior is important. Time-out strategies can help children develop thinking skills. Taking more control over children's behaviors and choices can help children learn to respect authority figures and rules.

- Families from inter-dependent cultures may use other relatives or networks to discipline their children. It is important to be aware of the existence of these types of important familial and social ties when working with parents.

- Helping parents to understand their own goals for their discipline behaviors can help them to try other strategies that may be more effective.

- Parents may not like certain types of discipline strategies that go against their value systems.

- Children's safety and well-being must always be considered. While some strategies may be tied to cultural values, it is important to watch for cases of emotional and physical abuse.

Discipline Checklist

Do you...

- ❏ understand how culture influences discipline practices?

- ❏ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in has shaped your views on appropriate parent-child communication patterns?

- ❏ understand how independent and interdependent values shape communication patterns?

- ❏ consider alternative communication behaviors that families may use?

- ❏ consider the underlying cultural goals that motivate various discipline behaviors?

- ❏ support parents in alternative discipline behaviors (that are safe for the child) and help parents incorporate new discipline behaviors into their existing cultural framework?

- ❏ teach your classes from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of multiple discipline strategies?

Notes

Parent-Child Emotional Bonding

Research finds that…:

- Parents and children of all cultures share a deep, emotional connection called attachment. This bond is expressed through behaviors that may vary across cultures.

- Interdependent cultures tend to use more behaviors to bond with their children. Independent cultures tend to use verbal exchanges such as "I love you" along with touch.

- Attachment to parents help children feel safe in the world and in their later relationships with others as adults.

- In many cultures like the U.S., building a strong, emotional connection to infants begins at the time of conception with behaviors like talking to the womb, "family" delivery rooms, and encouraging breast feeding as a bonding activity.

- In cultures with high infant mortality rates, bonding between parents and children is commonly delayed until that child's survival is more certain.

- In cultures with large extended families or close communities, parents may encourage children to bond with multiple people.

"Children have "many laps" to sit in, and many models of adult behavior" (Rogoff, 129).

"You knew everybody. You knew the lady that ran the grocery store… the man that owned the meatmarket. They knew you personally, you know" (Newman, 1998, pg 267).

Parent-Child Emotional Bonding Checklist

Do you...

❑ understand how culture influences bonding behaviors?

❑ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in shapes your views on appropriate bonding behaviors?

❑ understand how independent and interdependent values shape bonding behaviors?

❑ consider alternative bonding strategies families may use?

❑ consider cultural goals that motivate various bonding behaviors?

❑ support parents in alternative bonding behaviors (that are safe for the child) and help families incorporate new bonding strategies into their existing cultural framework?

❑ teach your classes from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of various bonding strategies?

Notes

Family Structure and Roles

Research finds that…:

- Different cultures define "family" in different ways. Some include "extended" family members (i.e. aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, etc.) or close family friends in the decision making and day-to-day functioning of the family.

- In cultures that focus on developing interdependence, all members are responsible for all children in the community, not just their own. This helps to build connections between individuals.

- Having an extended family system can help to increase the chances of survival for children in environments where survival rates are low.

- Having an extended network that feels jointly responsible for all the children in the community can decrease children's misbehavior.

- Children in interdependent cultures are seen as part of a larger family system rather than as an individual. The family system is the highest authority.

- In independent cultures the core family unit is usually the authority when it comes to decisions about parenting and child rearing.

"…in [non-western culture] only unborn babies are regarded as belonging to their parents; from birth on, infants belong to their extended kin group".
(Nsamenang, 1992).

"Once babies could walk, mothers released them into the care of 3-to 4-year old siblings, who played nearby, checking periodically on the young ones."
(Martini & Kirkpatrick 1992 pg 211).

Tips for the field:

- The term "family" can have different meanings to different people depending on their background. It is important to acknowledge and support important roles played by extended family members or close family friends.

- There are increasing numbers of "non-traditional" family units (e.g. single parents, same-sex partners, grandparents as parents). Extended family members can be important sources of support for children and parents living in non-traditional family units.

- Some roles played by family members may not be typical for U.S. culture. For some families, it may be expected that the oldest sibling give up extracurricular activities to take primary care of the younger children. It is important to understand the goal of parents and the family when addressing these roles.

- Playing an important role in the family such as caregiver or provider can increase adolescents' sense of self-esteem – even though they may be giving up other activities.

- Involving extended family can help parents to feel more supported and gives children multiple sources of support in their development.

Family Structure and Roles Checklist

Do you...

❑ understand how culture influences family roles?

❑ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in shapes your views on family roles?

❑ understand how independent and interdependent values shape family roles?

❑ consider alternative structures and roles families may have?

❑ consider underlying cultural goals that motivate family roles?

❑ support parents in alternative family roles (that are safe for the child) and help parents incorporate new family roles into their existing cultural framework?

❑ teach your classes from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of multiple family roles?

Notes

Gender Role Development

Research finds that…:

- Children receive messages about their gender from the time of birth and begin to form a "gender identity" by the age of 2.

- Parents often treat boys and girls differently. For example, girls may be held more tightly than boys and boys may be given more freedom than girls.

- Cultural expectations for girls and boys drive gender socialization behaviors. For example, in the U.S. girls tend to be encouraged to express emotion while boys are encouraged to be less emotionally expressive.

- Values placed on gender roles vary greatly across cultures and across individual families. In the U.S. gender equality is valued by many. In other cultures, gender differences are highly valued.

- Immigrant families may experience conflict when their gender expectations conflict with U.S. culture and their children begin to challenge traditional gender roles. This conflict can affect children's developing sense of self and ethnic identity.

"The 'Betty Crocker' ideal – housewives devoted solely to care of house and children – is uncommon worldwide." (Rogoff, 184).

Tips for the field:

- Understanding the historical cultural background of gender expectations is important to help families both maintain their cultural heritage and traditions, while helping to integrate the expectations of U.S. culture in their goals for their children.

- It can be hard to understand valuing various views on gender roles. It is important to realize that appropriate behaviors can be strongly connected to traditional gender roles in other cultures.

- First and second generation children from immigrant families often challenge traditional gender roles held by their parents. This can be the cause of tension and stress for parents.

- Supporting parents in their efforts to maintain their cultural traditions while helping them identify with their children's experiences in the U.S. culture is important. How to resolve the inconsistency between traditional gender roles and those valued by the U.S. may not be obvious to some parents.

- Helping parents with strategies that allow children to explore new gender roles that don't entirely conflict with traditional roles can be helpful (e.g. activities with groups of friends instead of dating, considering non-contact sports such as gymnastics or dancing for girls).

Gender Role Development Checklist

Do you...

❑ understand how culture influences gender socialization behaviors?

❑ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in shapes your views on appropriate gender socialization behaviors?

❑ understand how independent and interdependent values shape gender socialization behaviors?

❑ consider alternative gender socialization strategies families may use?

❑ consider the underlying cultural goals that motivate various gender socialization behaviors?

❑ support parents in alternative gender socialization behaviors (that are safe for the child) and help parents incorporate new gender socialization behaviors into their existing cultural framework?

❑ teach my classes from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of multiple gender socialization strategies?

Notes

Play

Research finds that…:

- Children use play to learn about and explore new skills, roles and values important in their culture.

- Cultures that focus on developing independence in children encourage on-to-one (dyadic) play that is child-focused – such as stacking blocks and babbling with infants.

- Cultures that focus on developing interdependence in children encourage large group play where many different people are involved and tend to use more observation and mimicking of normal routines.

- Games in independent cultures tend to have "winners" and "losers" more than in interdependent cultures that have games that rely on cooperation.

"Jack giggles with delight as his mother hides behind a blanket… he screams with delight as she reappears" (Landy, 2002, pg 213).

"The mothers supervised… but seldom entered into a playmate role themselves". (Harkness & Super, 1992) – on Mayan mother-child interaction.

Tips for the field:

- Routine activities such as folding clothes or sweeping can be play for children. These types of play activities help to build motor control while also letting children explore normal routines in their environment.

- Some parents may feel uncomfortable with some play activities – like competitive sports or "face-to-face" play. These activities are not consistent with some cultural values such as "children should learn to work together with many different people".

- Play may be valued differently by families with different cultural values. It is important to understand parents' underlying goals for their children.

- Consideration of parents' underlying goals in raising their children should be kept in mind when suggesting new activities for children. For example, in families where academic performance is highly valued children may benefit from activities that incorporate counting, reading or problem solving skills.

Play Checklist

Do you...

❑ understand how culture influences play behavior?

❑ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in shapes your views on appropriate play behavior?

❑ understand how independent and interdependent values shape play behaviors?

❑ consider alternative play behaviors families may use?

❑ consider the underlying cultural goals that motivate other play behaviors?

❑ support parents in alternative play behaviors (that are safe for the child) and to help parents incorporate new play behaviors into their existing cultural framework?

❑ teach my classes from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of multiple play behaviors?

Notes

Sleeping Arrangements

Research finds that…:

- Sleeping arrangements for infants vary widely from family to family and across cultures.

- Interdependent cultures and families regularly use co-sleeping (where one or two parents sleep with the infant). As many as two-thirds of cultures in the world sleep together as a family (i.e. the "family bed").

- Co-sleeping arrangements help the parent-child bond, have lower SIDS cases, tend to breastfeed longer and have extended mother/child sleep cycles.

- Parents rolling over onto a child and suffocating from bedding structures are concerns with co-sleeping.

- Independent cultures believe that separate sleeping arrangements help children develop independence, and maintain parental privacy. Families who sleep separately in the U.S. tend to have fewer reported marital difficulties than those who co-sleep.

- There is some concern over abuse issues in co-sleeping families. There is no research evidence that there are higher abuse rates in co-sleeping families.

"Mayan parents reported… there was generally no need for a bedtime routine to ease separation because the babies went to sleep with their family, in the same place, whenever they got sleepy."
(Rogoff pg 197).

"[A mother slept apart from her baby] because ' it was time to give him his own room… his own territory. That's the American way'
(Morelli et al, p 604).

Tips for the field:
- Sleeping arrangements can impact a family dramatically. Parents may feel guilty with their child in a separate room or experience marital problems when the child shares their bed. Understanding parents' goals for their children and supporting the behaviors toward those goals are important.

- Co-sleeping arrangements may be tied to interdependent cultural values such as dependence and reliance on elders. Self-reliance and ability to self-soothe are less important in these cultures.

- Families who co-sleep should be encouraged to make their bed safe for their child. Appropriate information on steps they can take are available from doctors and hospitals.

- Sleeping arrangements can impact children's expectations of their world. For instance, a child who co-sleeps may become distraught when put down alone for a nap at a daycare.

- The decision to sleep separately can be demanding for parents since they must get up several times during the night. It is important for parents to understand the limitations on their children's ability to self-soothe based on their age and individual characteristics. Some children are not able to soothe themselves until after 12 months of age.

Sleeping Arrangements Checklist

Do you...

- ❏ understand how culture influences sleeping arrangements?

- ❏ see how the culture, society and family structure that you live in shapes your views on appropriate sleeping arrangements?

- ❏ understand how independent and interdependent values shape sleeping arrangements?

- ❏ consider various sleeping arrangements families may use?

- ❏ consider the underlying cultural goals that motivate other sleeping arrangements?

- ❏ support parents in alternative sleeping arrangements (that are safe for the child) and help parents incorporate new sleeping arrangements into their existing cultural framework?

- ❏ teach your classes from a perspective that is accepting and appreciative of multiple sleeping arrangements?

Notes

General Summary

There are many patterns of parenting behaviors. We all have our own opinions about what is "good" parenting– and these opinions are okay. For practitioners working with families, it is important to consider how your background influences your views.

Practitioners do not have to agree with all the behaviors that are being expressed by families they work with. However, it is important to take the time to understand what motivates these behaviors. Parents have various goals for their children and these goals influence the decisions they make in their parenting. Understanding the role culture assumes in shaping these goals will allow you to relate to families from their perspective.

Ultimately parents respond to people who understand and respect their goals for their children and their parenting. In the end, we all want the best for children.

> *"…they openly laughed at me for speaking of "teaching" children to walk. A child walks of its own accord, they said. I would be saying next that trees had to be instructed in how to bear fruit."*
> — *Hogbin 1943, pg 302*

Suggested Readings

Goodnow, J. J., Miller, P. J., & Kessel, F. (1995). *Cultural practices as contexts for development*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
   Provides a comprehensive overview of research in cross-cultural development.

Hrdy, S. B. (1999). *Mother nature: Maternal instincts and how they shape the human species.* NY: Ballantine Publishing Group.
   Provides an historical, evolutionary, and cultural perspective of human development.

MacDonald, K. (1993). *Parent-child play: Descriptions and implications.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
   Discusses the purpose of play with section dedicated to cross-cultural differences in play behavior.

Nsamenang, A. B. (1992). *Human development in cultural context: A third world perspective.* London, England: Sage Publication.
   An ethnographic study of African cultures across various issues and domains.

Rogoff, B. *The cultural nature of human development.* NY: Oxford University Press.
   Discusses the influence of culture on human development.