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## Communicating Across Cultures

Many adults assume that everyone is "just like me" unless they look different. To make the assumption that we are all alike would be the same as to assume that all cars are alike or all mothers-in-law act the same way. Needless to say, these are not true or fair statements.

Assumptions about cultural background influence how people interact with each other. Culture refers to the many diverse ways in which human practices and beliefs differ among groups. Culture includes religious, social, political, and family customs. It is not uncommon for different cultures to have different values related to allocation of time, family conversations, or views of education. Many of these practices and beliefs may be different than your own.



Frequently, many people find cultural conversations very uncomfortable. For someone to be more comfortable, they must first know what their beliefs are and be accepting of their own actions and ideas. There are several steps to make conversations across cultural lines easier.

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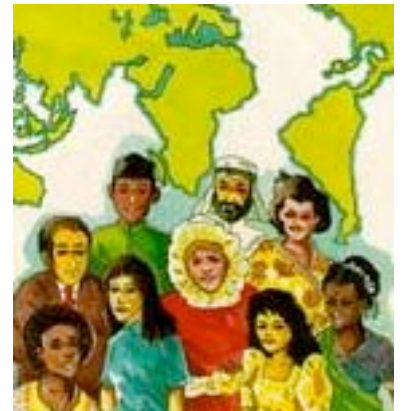
### Build mutual understanding.

To build a mutual understanding, it is necessary to respect differences and listen for more than words. Listen to ideas, viewpoints, and experiences. Have true respect for other individuals. Do not judge or question, but listen to life experiences and values and try to understand what is happening. Remember, you cannot judge because you have not "walked in their shoes."

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### Listen with an open mind.

When learning about a culture, put your feelings aside and listen. It is a teachable moment for both parties to engage in telling their stories. Sometimes we offend people and do not even realize that it has happened. Simple statements like "those people" or "they are all alike except you of course" can be very offensive. Many times these statements create misunderstanding between individuals. The more culturally diverse situations you are in and the more you know about other cultures and their people, the better you become at bridging differences. You may find that there are agreements on some issues. The best way to undo misunderstanding is to talk about the issues. Avoid mean spirited remarks and narrow viewpoints.



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## Do something.

After learning more about cultures and people from different backgrounds it is important to help others understand the differences. Each person needs to realize that having a different background or culture is just different. You can help improve communications across cultures by taking action. The simplest support of other cultures is to correct false statements that people make about them and interrupt jokes or stories with the truth. You can also involve people from diverse cultures in your groups or ask them to present their cultural knowledge to others. Usually people are more fearful of the things they do not understand so help to inform them.

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## Focus on relationships.

Move beyond the words and into the quality of communications. Everyone has heard it said that to have a friend you must be a friend. Relationships involving different cultures take time, work, patience, and understanding. In relationship building, find other people who are interested in different cultures and value diversity. It will be easier to understand when several people talk about what they are experiencing.

Overall, to become more proactive on building bridges between cultures, bring other people into your conversations. It may be easier to express a viewpoint when several people understand the culture. The more you learn about other cultures the more comfortable you will be in diverse situations

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