

4 Steps to Maintaining Cultural Connection

Nirja Kapoor
Volunteer, CASA of Los Angeles and
2002 National CASA G.F. Bettineski Advocate of the Year

The 12-year-old girl I advocate for, whom we'll call Anna, came into the dependency system emaciated and with third-degree burns. She had been brought to the US when she was 6 years old to be with her mother and siblings. But her life had transformed from one of poverty and the pain of family separation into a miserable existence of starvation, verbal abuse and torture—the perpetrators being her own mother and some of her siblings.

In foster care, Anna learned to express her sadness, anger and joy through Spanish music and dance. All she talked about were the latest songs and Latin stars. So I was taken aback when she recently told me, "I don't want to listen to Latino 96.3 FM no more. I am an American. I want to hear 102.7 KISS FM." I asked her why, and she said, "If you are American, you don't listen to Latin music. You listen to English music."

Anna is caught between the culture of her origin and the mainstream culture. While dealing with issues of abandonment and abuse, she has chosen to abandon a part of herself—her individuality and what makes her happy—so that she can be accepted by others. She is not alone. Her struggle is shared by other foster children who are of a non-mainstream race, sexual orientation or socio-economic background. I have advocated for 40 children from diverse backgrounds over the years and would like to share what I've learned from some of them.

1. Cultural Background as Check Point

Keep an open mind and acknowledge the culture and belief systems of the child. When you take a case, one of your

check points should be the cultural background of the child. Look beyond his race, appearance and the ethnicity his name signifies. Be aware that behaviors may be a cultural expression.

For example, my 15-year-old CASA child's teacher was fed up with him for throwing away his class work. She thought him shifty and distrustful because he never looked her in the eye, and though he had a Hispanic name, he didn't respond to her in Spanish. Later, it came to light that his behavior was not inappropriate given his cultural background. He was a Mayan Indian, and because of his inability to read or write at his class level, he felt it a dishonor to submit his poor-quality work. Moreover, it was because his culture considered it rude to look directly in the eye of an elder that he did not make eye contact with the teacher. And above all—despite his Spanish name—he spoke a rural Mayan dialect rather than Spanish.

2. Community as a Cultural Connection

Separation from family is traumatic. Though not an easy task for the volunteer, it is worthwhile to locate a person within the community for the child to relate to, visit or call. Grief and anxiety can be reduced if the child is able to connect with someone with a similar background—a distant relative, a former neighbor or a trusted foster family member. Explore activities that take place in the child's community, and help her participate in events such as a religious service or a community celebration where she can experience and connect with her culture. Discussing current events and providing information on revered cultural icons or successful personalities also makes youth feel connected, informed and more in control.



3. Experience of the Mainstream and Other Cultures

While respecting their individual culture, make children aware of the mainstream society around them as well as other diverse cultures. Many children in foster care have not been to places other than home, school, the mall and maybe a movie theater or a fast-food restaurant. If your CASA program allows you to take youth on outings, expose them to new places and cultures other than their own. Libraries are the best place to begin. Walk through the stacks looking at or checking out popular books, movies or music CDs. Check local high schools and community colleges for free or cheap theater and dance events. Depending again on local rules, you might take a youth to a Thai restaurant, a cultural festival or Chinatown.

This gift of experience has what I call an *ah-ha* effect. It chips away the fear that comes from the unknown and gives youth a comforting sense of "I know them. They're just like me." It also boosts their confidence. Another child I've advocated for, "Monica," hated going out because she disliked people of other races. Her speech was littered with derogatory names for people different than her. But she loved mathematics. So after a lot of convincing, I took her to a free classical Indian dance performance. Throughout the performance and for some time afterward, she did not utter one racial comment.

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As I had expected, the calculations behind the rhythm of the dance steps and the beat of the music enamored her. These days, she is trying to fulfill her goal of visiting people in each state of the US.

4. **Critical Thinking Towards Independence**

Help youth build their critical thinking skills when they are around you. For example, if you take the child to a movie—or even watch it separately—ask questions like “Why do you *think* it ended as it did?” or “How do you *think* it could have been made better?” This will help youth form and voice their opinions while respecting those of others. I’ve found that this exercise invariably makes children rebel initially. “Why do you keep asking me ‘Why?’” But over time, they become empowered and tell me their opinions voluntarily.

To end where we started, Anna, who barely spoke English two years ago, just received a certificate of appreciation for her service on the student council at school. Moreover, because of her insistence on participating at her court hearings, the judge now considers her availability before scheduling a hearing date. Anna’s ability to think critically is key to her growing independence. 🗣️