4 Steps to Maintaining Cultural Connection

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The 12 year-old girl I advocate for, whom we’ll call Anna, came into the dependency system traumatized 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 anymore. 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 shift 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 “a-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.

(Continued on page 22)
Green Cards Go Unclaimed by Many Youth in Foster Care

Some undocumented children who are abused, neglected or dependent are eligible for legal status, but many do not understand the law. An article in the Los Angeles Times discusses what is being done to help. You can access the article by registering for free at latimes.com and searching for “green cards unclaimed.”

National Black Child Development Institute Conference Coming in October

The National Black Child Development Institute will present its 37th annual conference, “The Journey Continues: Giving Our Children a Chance,” in Chicago from October 20 to 23. Nearly 3,000 educators, administrators, human service providers, policymakers, parents and researchers will meet to share best practices and models for improving the lives of African-American children and families. Over 150 workshops and seminars will be conducted by leaders in the field. For more information, search for “2007 conference” at nbcdi.org.

GET CONNECTED!
The National CASA Association hosts several websites of interest to anyone who values promoting and supporting quality volunteer advocacy to help assure each child a safe, permanent, nurturing home. Visit the following sites to learn more.

NationalCASA.org
The National CASA website is one of the strongest resources for recruiting new volunteers and supporters for state and local CASA/GAL programs. The website contains volunteer stories along with information on recruitment, public relations activities, news and donating to National CASA.

CASAnet.org
CASAnet is designed to meet the needs of CASA program staff and volunteers, including the advocate’s library, program tools, updated information on national initiatives and other material for download.

ShopCASA.org
A broad assortment of support materials and CASA/GAL promotional items is available through the ShopCASA site.

As I had expected, the calculations behind the rhythm of the dance steps and the beat of the music amounted 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.

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