

7 Minute Briefing: Cultural Competency Continuum- an ongoing journey!

What Do We Mean by Culture?

Culture shapes how people understand the world, communicate, and make decisions. It includes **beliefs, values, customs, language, identity, family structures, religion, diet, worldviews, and lived experiences**. Crucially, **culture is not the same as ethnicity** - people who share an ethnicity may have very different cultural identities shaped by age, gender, religion, environment, and personal history.

Understanding culture in its broadest sense helps us avoid assumptions and recognise the unique identity of every child and family we work with.

What is the Cultural Competency Continuum?

Cultural competency is **not a fixed endpoint** but an **ongoing developmental process** for individuals, teams, and whole organisations. It includes:

- **Self-awareness** – recognising our own cultural lens, values, beliefs, and biases.
- **Knowledge** – understanding different cultural perspectives and experiences (while accepting we will never know everything).
- **Skills** – adapting communication, practice, and decision-making to respond respectfully and effectively to each unique family.
- **Humility** – acknowledging we are not experts in another person's culture and being open to learning from children, families, and communities.

This aligns with the **ISCP Priorities and Staff College continuum**, which positions cultural competence as a **continuous journey** of self-reflection, learning, and improving practice.

Why Cultural Competency Matters in Safeguarding

Culturally competent practice **builds trust**, strengthens relationships, and leads to **more accurate assessments and better outcomes** for children and families. When we fail to explore cultural meanings, we risk:

- **Ethnocentrism** – unintentionally applying our own cultural standards to judge another family.
- **Stereotyping** – making assumptions rather than understanding individual lived experience.
- **Missed risks or needs** – if behaviour or decisions are misinterpreted without context.

High-quality safeguarding relies on **seeing the whole child**, recognising their cultural identity as a central part of their lived experience.

Key Messages to Take Away

- **Cultural competency is not a tick-box exercise - it is a lifelong professional journey.**
- Culture is **individual**, multi-layered, and central to identity.
- **Professional curiosity is essential** to uncover cultural meaning and avoid assumptions.
- **Reflective practice and organisational commitment** are required to move along the competency continuum.
- Culturally competent safeguarding leads to **better relationships, clearer assessments, and safer outcomes** for children and families.

Implications for Practice Across All Agencies

Everyone and each organisation should:

- **Reflect on their place on the continuum** and identify areas for development.
- **Adapt practice** to each individual child and family—not rely on generic cultural knowledge.
- **Use interpreters appropriately** and ensure communication barriers (including e.g. illiteracy) do not compromise safety or understanding.
- **Challenge stereotypes or oversimplified narratives** within teams or systems.
- **Engage with communities** to build trust and increase understanding of diverse experiences.
- **Promote cultural humility** as a core professional behaviour.

Consistent multi-agency practice ensures that **cultural understanding is embedded at every stage of the safeguarding process**, from early help to statutory intervention.

The Role of Professional Curiosity

Professional curiosity means looking beyond the surface and being willing to ask open, respectful questions such as:

- *"What does this mean for you and your family?"*
- *"How does your cultural background influence decisions or routines at home?"*
- *"Is there anything important to your identity that we should understand to support you better?"*

Cultural competence and professional curiosity go hand in hand; without curiosity, we cannot develop genuine understanding of a family's cultural needs or viewpoint. Curiosity also helps challenge bias's and prevent assumptions from influencing safeguarding decision. Remember your Social Graces (see next page)!



The Cultural Competency Continuum (Staff College Principles)

While frameworks vary, the Staff College continuum typically moves through stages such as:

1. **Cultural Destructiveness** – practices that harm or diminish other cultures.
2. **Cultural Incapacity** – unintentional biases, stereotypes, or structural barriers.
3. **Cultural Blindness** – treating everyone “the same” and overlooking identity.
4. **Cultural Pre-Competence** – recognising gaps and beginning to address them.
5. **Cultural Competence** – actively embedding culturally informed practice.
6. **Cultural Proficiency** – championing equity, challenging structural inequality, and modelling best practice.

Our partnership's adoption of this continuum reinforces the expectation that **all agencies continually reflect on their position** and take purposeful steps to progress along it.