

# Practitioner Briefing 'Heritage' = race, language, religion, and culture

Welcome, to this briefing which aims to help practitioners and their managers understand Heritage and its importance/impact for children and their families. The messages in this briefing are just as important for those practitioners working with adults who are parents.

Learning from national and local case reviews tells us that practitioners need to understand the daily lived experience of every child, no matter what their background or culture is, and especially if different from our own. This involves being professionally curious, which is another recurring theme from case reviews. Culture can explain the context in which an abusive incident took place, but not the behaviour or action of a parent. For example, a parent who injures a child with a belt might say that this is "cultural". The cultural context might explain the parent's anger over the expectation they have of the child, but not the parent's action, which is abusive. Cultural factors neither explain nor condone acts of omission or commission, which place the child at risk of Significant Harm.

**Professional Curiosity** described by Lord Laming (2003) in the Victoria Climbié inquiry as "respectful uncertainty" - is the capacity to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value," applying critical evaluation to any information received and maintaining an open mind. By acquiring an open minded, inquiring, and curious mindset, professionals can avoid linear and absolute explanations by exploring alternative, multiple perspectives on a situation.

'Heritage' is used for the family's race, language, religion, and culture. Heritage is a complex concept. It can refer to material inheritance or endowment, family traditions, culture, and conventions. Using the term heritage respects and celebrates individual diversity and does not support racist or prejudicial behaviour, beliefs, or concepts. It encourages anti-racist and anti-discriminatory approaches, as it encourages staff to identify and challenge oppression, and to focus on the specific characteristics of the individual/family.

The following aspects are all crucial to an assessment of a child's heritage:

**Religion** - The rights of children and their families to practice a particular religion, or no religion, is to be respected and upheld. Practitioners need to ensure that they are familiar with information about service user's religions and cultural practices. Visits planned on religious days or during period of mourning may cause anger and embarrassment. Where a religion prohibits certain forms of medical examination or espouses disfiguring or disabling operative treatment, a delicate balance will need to be reached between the parents' legal rights and responsibilities towards the child and what is in the best interests of the child.

**Ethnic Origin** - All children should be able to feel pride and a feeling of self-affirmation/self-worth in their ethnic origin. All practitioners should be sensitive to their feelings and make efforts to affirm their value and worth. Black and other minority ethnic children/families' self-esteem, aspirations and expectations will often have been further damaged and depressed by their experiences of racism. They may also feel justifiably suspicious or fearful of white organisations. It is essential that all practitioners can counteract rather than confirm their fears and feelings by providing services that are sensitive to and understanding of their needs and which provide positive affirmation of their racial origins.

**Linguistic background** - Language and the ability to communicate effectively form an important part of a child's identity and their self-esteem. Good practice will recognise and accommodate that English may not be the first language of a considerable number of children and their families and some will speak no English at all. It is essential where important information and expectations are being conveyed, that this is done in their first language. This could be done by a member of staff who speaks their language fluently or through an approved interpreter. Using the latter especially in cases where there are concerns about the welfare of a child(ren) is essential. Interpreters must be used to interview children away from their family/community members when there are safeguarding concerns to facilitate free expression of their experiences, wishes and feelings. **Children must never be used as interpreters.** Some children and their families may speak English but are not literate in English. So, where there are important documents/signed agreements, these must be translated into the language in which they are literate. There are many languages of people of African-Caribbean origin, and these dialects have their base in English, the words, idioms, gestures, and body language are different. The family may be forced to 'standardise' their English, and this may inhibit their ability to freely express their feelings. These differences may be sufficient to suggest that an interpreter should be considered to assist the flow of information to and from the child/family. Wherever practicable the same interpreter should be used throughout the course of any involvement with a child/family, to ensure continuity and encourage/establish an effective working relationship. Interpreting should as far as possible be a neutral communication channel. When requesting an interpreter, consideration should always be given to gender identity. When using an interpreter, staff should ensure that they speak directly to the client when asking questions. Children and families should have the right to communicate with each other and practitioners in the language in which they feel most confident and comfortable.

**Culture/social background** describes the moral values, behavioural norms, lifestyle, and social and artistic pursuits espoused by a family and taught to their children. A shared religious belief, ethnic background, language, history, or economic background will often lead to similar cultural norms and expectations. Culture usually has many positive aspects. It gives a pattern and predictability to life, which makes children feel settled and secure. It teaches children ways to behave and a code of discipline, which means they will be accepted in the wider community. It gives children a sense of history and of their "roots" and is important in forming a positive identity.

We should promote and preserve children's cultural background by: **Not assuming, often inaccurate, cultural stereotypes but finding out from the child and their family what their cultural norms and expectations are** - Recognising that some children will mistakenly see their cultural background as responsible for the treatment they have received because of negative experiences in their own family, and reject their background - Such children are likely to need counselling and reassurance that staff, carers, and peers from the same background as themselves will be able to offer them positive experiences and role models.

**Assessments** - Practitioners undertaking an assessment of a family from a different racial or cultural background to their own need to remember that: **Child abuse is not condoned by any racial group** - Recognition of the values/norms that operate in the family's culture is crucial for understanding and assessing acceptable family functioning, including approaches to care and discipline - **Language is significant and any assessment of risk should be undertaken in the child's first language and that of their family whenever possible** - An understanding of the significance of wider family networks is essential to good assessments - **Assumptions should not be made about the role of the extended family, neither should it be ignored** - Certain English words which are emotionally loaded when used in relation to child abuse may have a completely different meaning in other cultures - **An understanding of the heritage of the family is important in terms of assisting any assessment and intervention.**

Please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Child Protection Procedures](#) and register for updates. Find out more about how to develop culturally conscious and reflective practice in our [Becoming Culturally Competent - Effective Safeguarding of Children from Minority Ethnic, Cultural and Faith Communities, Groups and Families guidance](#).