

Assessing Community Culture and Norms: Factors for Consideration

Any time a program is developed for broad scale implementation, consideration should be given to the specific context within which they are working in order enhance the process for both the facilitator(s) and the participants of the program. Every community and school has a unique culture and a related set of norms. Culture and norms can be a source of great strength to communities and families that reside within them. Culture can be a strong source of pride and resilience. Norms serve as a way to regulate behavior and to create a sense of belonging and membership. With this in mind, it is important to consider ways that these strengths can be enhanced through the program, rather than ignored or invalidated. Culture and related norms may not be cause to alter the curriculum itself. However, the factors presented below are suggested to be taken into consideration and can result in greater engagement.

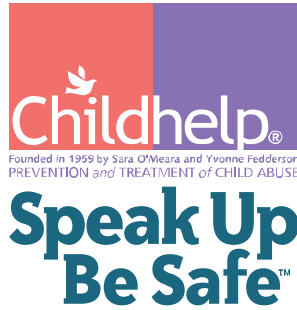
The Speak Up Be Safe program has been developed with a community-wide approach that places primary responsibility for preventing child abuse on adults. At the same time, some of the curriculum offers children resistance strategies and other actions that can be taken that create a shared responsibility where age appropriate.

Anticipating how a specific community may respond or react to aspects of the program can help a facilitator take extra time to explain the reasoning behind those specific aspects, or to work in partnership with the school to find community-specific ways to honor the existing culture and norms.

Additionally, understanding the culture and norms of the children can assist a facilitator in several ways. First, such an understanding may be useful in establishing rapport with the students. Young people who perceive that they are understood may be more open to listening and engaging. Second, the facilitator can appropriately respond to the facilitator notes in the curriculum that create space for individualization. For example, what is the most popular sport in the community? What is the ethnic make-up of the community? Finally, a facilitator can better gauge the responses of the students in order to evaluate any needed adjustments in style or approach, such as an awareness of colloquialisms.

It is suggested that facilitators take time to consider their own cultures and norms, including how they might differ from the children with whom they are conducting the program. Understanding one's own values in relation to community culture and norms is an important first step in being able to put them to the side and not impose them on others unintentionally. For example, facilitators may want to consider their own attitudes and values

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS



toward homeless families, families with domestic violence, immigrant families, and families with same sex parents.

Factors for Consideration:

- ❖ What aspects of the community influence the ability of families to manage or cope with stress? For example, communities that have very few resources or that are geographically spread out may have a difficult time engaging with a school or building strong support networks. Children may perceive that they only have access to family members as potential safe adults in very rural areas because of the distance between school and home.
- ❖ What level of poverty exists in the community? With poverty comes a great deal of stigma. Parents and children living in poverty are rarely oblivious to the disparities that exist between their families and others. This may create a heightened anxiety of unwanted attention being brought to their situation through participation in a program such as Speak Up Be Safe.
- ❖ What cultural norms exist around the role of children? Are children expected to respect their elders at all times? This cultural norm may limit options for children as they consider how to resist abuse or unwanted attention from an adult. For example, it may be unrealistic to ask a child from a community with this cultural norm to tell an adult, “No.”, “Stop.”, or “I don’t like that.” Many cultures place children at the center of all family decisions. This norm can serve as a strength in engaging parents and families in keeping children safe for a healthy future.
- ❖ What cultural norms exist around how affection is shown or displayed? Some cultural norms include physical displays of affection, such as kissing or hugging at every greeting. Expecting a child to resist such displays may be a lesson that will not be reinforced at home.
- ❖ What parenting norms or values exist? Parenting philosophies are often influenced by cultural norms. One parenting norm that varies across communities and cultures is related to the use of corporal punishment. Understanding the context within which the

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS



program is being facilitated can help the facilitator anticipate a need for clarification, in this case perhaps between abuse and spanking. Another example is the need to control the environment within which children are living and growing versus allowing them to freely explore. Depending upon the lens through which these parenting norms are viewed, the tendency toward control could be perceived as limiting the child or as a safety measure.

- ❖ What cultural norms exist around discussing personal or family matters outside of the family? Many cultures and communities do not share personal matters outside of the family context, while others have more open boundaries. These norms should be understood and acknowledged, particularly as they relate to the safety rule of telling someone, and the selection of safety adults.
- ❖ What is the community's history with racism or other forms of discrimination? Children from such communities may be taught not to trust community helpers (such as police officers and social workers). The program has been developed with sensitivity to these issues, and room for children to make their own choices. Facilitators should understand and mirror this sensitivity in examples that are used and interactions with the children.
- ❖ What cultural norms exist around the role of the family? The role of family and its centrality to defining one's own role varies across cultures and communities. In some cultures, decisions about one's own behavior are made depending on how they will impact the family. In others, individualism is encouraged and rewarded. Even how family is defined and who is included varies greatly from only those related by blood, immediate vs. extended family relationships, and kinship or non-blood related family members.
- ❖ What is the perception of educators and the education system? Is there a norm of giving the utmost deference and respect to the point of not feeling able to question an educator, or is there a sense of alienation based on negative experiences with schooling?
- ❖ What are the existing prevention efforts in the community and the school around child abuse and bullying? Are these efforts visible? Is there a great deal of community support that could be built upon? Or have previous prevention efforts been met with skepticism or criticism? Understanding a community's response to existing or previous prevention efforts can assist in preparing to respond to concerns or questions about how this effort is different.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS



- ❖ How is “community” defined? In one community, there may be multiple sub-communities that have a history of being divided by such things as race or class. In these instances, the expectation that adults have a responsibility to take care of ALL children as their own may not be viewed as feasible or desirable. In such communities, there may be divisions that are carried into the classroom setting by the children. These should be taken into consideration as the children are expected to engage in such activities as the personal boundaries exercise in the 5th grade curriculum. In addition, bullying behavior is often identity-based. Children may be targeted based on personal identity components such as faith tradition, nationality, ethnicity, or perceived sexual orientation. How the existing differences within a community and the student body are perceived, and managed, may impact the way in which discussions about bullying and treatment of others are received.
- ❖ How large is the community and what is the perceived level of connectedness between its members? In many small communities, large extended networks of families may make up a significant proportion of the population, or families that have lived many generations in the same area may be recognized as belonging to that family. These close networks may create added barriers to children’s ability to tell when abuse is or has happened, or when they feel unsafe.
- ❖ What is the community’s history, if any, with the impact of bullying on its children? Communities that have experienced a traumatic bullycide (suicide that was the result of bullying), or have had a violent event related to bullying may be particularly sensitive to the issue and its impact. In addition, depending upon how the incident was handled, children and school personnel may have unresolved grief or fear related to the incident.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS