



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

June 2010

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Iowa Task Force for Young Women

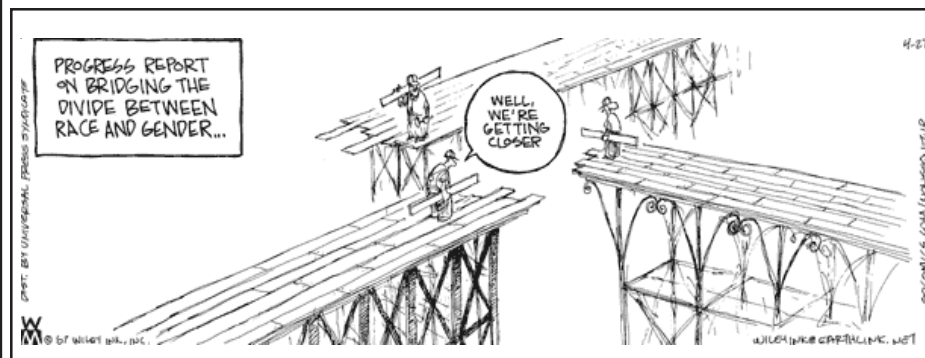
Cultural Competency

Think about the demographics of the population you serve: does it leave you with a sense of urgency about the necessity of culturally competent services?

An essential component of any quality service is to assure the needs of all participants will be taken into consideration, not just the needs of the majority. This does not mean that each and every staff member has to be fully immersed in and knowledgeable about every possible culture. It does, however, begin with openness and respect for all cultural differences.

If you are working with young women involved in or at risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system, you will be working with girls of color, for example. In Iowa, as with many states, minority females have disproportionate contact with authorities. In 2008, minority females had nearly three times the rate of arrest of their caucasian counterparts and were two and a half times as likely to be referred to juvenile court.¹ Just as we who advocate for female responsive services do not want young women to be forced to “fit” into programs designed for boys, we should also ensure that female responsive programs aren’t forcing young women of color to “fit” in a program that ignores their cultural needs.

All too often, as communities and as professionals within the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, we inadvertently expect young women to ascribe to a narrowly defined identity. We may have even assumed



we knew what that identity was the first time we met them or read their intake information. We may also have assumed things based merely on the appearance of the young woman who was standing in front of us. Instead, understanding a young woman’s culture should involve patience, respectful curiosity, and a willingness to recognize

that she does, in fact, have a unique identity that we can’t possibly fully understand without her cooperation.

Race and ethnicity are obviously important cultural differences that all our young women possess and they are important to individual young women to varying degrees. I encourage you to also consider an expansion of your concept of culture to include other possibilities. Culture is defined as the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular group. Clearly, socio-economic status, religious practice, sexual orientation, disability, and other groups to which she feels an affinity can play a strong role in a young woman’s cultural identity.

Programmatically, your facility should reflect inclusive attitudes about cultural differences. Everything from adult behavior to policies to the books on the shelves sets a tone. What message does your environment convey about culture? Do staff demonstrate respect for the culture of the young women, their coworkers and others? Modeling this behavior for young women is a powerful tool. Do policies account for holidays celebrated by other cultures - not just the dominant culture? If young women have particular cultural practices, they should be accommodated as much as appropriately possible for the setting.

Cultural competence does not have to be complex or difficult. A sincere desire to be respectful of each individual’s cultural differences is the only absolute requirement.

“Programs must be culturally appropriate”

Component #2

“To be culturally competent, one must be capable of functioning effectively in the context of cultural differences. This means that program planners and service providers must acknowledge and approach the cultural differences of program participants in ways that support each individual’s cultural identity. Too often, program staff and administrators provide services in a culturally neutral way, particularly when issues of race are involved. This approach, however, denies that girls of color and those of non-majority cultural backgrounds have different experiences with the dominant institutions in the society. In order to optimize effectiveness, programs must not ignore cultural differences, but create and provide appropriate services rooted in specific cultures. This means, rather than solely focus on the individual girl, programs must tap girls’ personal and cultural strengths. Clearly, programs must be shaped by the unique developmental issues facing minority girls, and then build in the particular cultural resources accessible in minority communities.”²

¹Status of Females in the Juvenile Justice System - Iowa 2009

²Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources

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