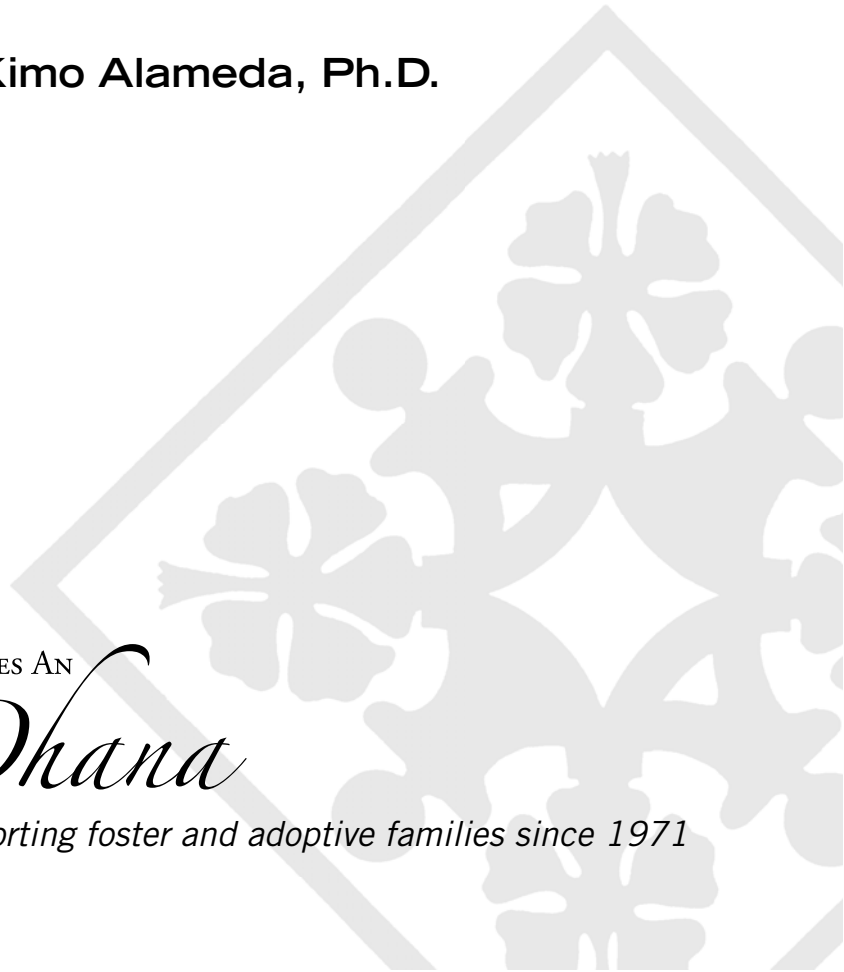


# In the Rainbow: Cultural Best Practices in Foster Care

C. Kimo Alameda, Ph.D.

IT TAKES AN  
*‘Ohana*

*Supporting foster and adoptive families since 1971*





**Aloha.** Children in foster care are going through the most difficult time in their young lives. They need strong, caring people like yourselves to guide them through this period, and inspire them to build on their strengths. Taking on the role of a caregiver is not easy. You are being called on to help put things back in order.

Recognizing the differences in culture between you and your foster child is one of the keys to success in fostering. By accepting cultural diversity in our minds and hearts, we can effectively reach across boundaries. Only then will we have the confidence to welcome any child into our home, embracing them in a way that transcends common notions of family. Only then can we live up to the deeply embedded local value we refer to as “Ohana”.

We hope this booklet by Cultural Psychologist C. Kimo Alameda, Ph.D. will help you examine the awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to bring out the best in children of diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Thanks for all you do to help Hawai'i's youth.

**Judith Wilhoite**  
Executive Director, It Takes An 'Ohana

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Learning Cultural Competency

If you're reading this booklet, the chances are you have decided to become — or already are — a foster parent. It is an incredible undertaking; there is no greater gift you can give than to open your home to a child in need. And while fostering may be the most rewarding thing you ever do, it will likely be one of the most challenging. In the best of situations, you will be called upon to show compassion, understanding, and endless patience.

In Hawai'i, your challenge may be even greater. Our multi-cultural society means it is likely the child you foster will be of a different culture than your own. In fact, Hawai'i is the country's most diverse state — and one of the most multi-ethnic societies in the world — with significant populations of Native Hawaiians, Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, Caucasians and Pacific Islanders, among others. We have the largest percentage of intergenerational families living together and the most people of mixed race in the nation.

Hawai'i's foster care system is challenged by the disproportional representation of certain ethnic groups in foster care. Of the 2,600 children in foster care during the first half of 2008, 43% were Native Hawaiian, followed by Caucasian (12%), Filipino (6%), Samoan (5%), Hispanic (4%), and other Pacific Islanders (3%). And while the Department of Human Services always tries to place youth with family members, this is not always possible. Over 40% of foster care placements are in non-relative homes, homes that may not share the same culture.

When placed in a home with a very different culture, a child has yet another hurdle to overcome. After suffering the trauma of being abused or neglected and of being removed from the home, he or she is placed with a family whose practices are foreign. It can be a source of great anxiety and confusion.

## INTRODUCTION

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The cure is for foster families to learn and practice “cultural competency,” the ability to recognize and adjust for different cultural expectations.

To be culturally competent means to welcome diversity and work well with children from cultures different from your own. It means learning how to handle feelings of surprise and discomfort that often come with new ways of thinking and behaving. It means challenging the way you view other children, other people, and the system.

But where do you start and how do you know if you’re on the right track? What is required of you in terms of learning skills and gaining knowledge? Given these challenges, is foster care the right thing for you?

By asking yourself these questions, you are already off to a great start. The following is a series of the twelve best practices for effectively incorporating cultural competency into your parenting. The aim of this guide is to help you say and do the right things around cultural issues. Although we’ve listed

**ALL IN THE ‘OHANA** *The Native Hawaiian concept of ‘ohana is part of our island culture. It encompasses far more than the Western concept of the nuclear family (biological father, mother, and kids). As Mary Kawena Puku’i states in Nana i Ke Kumu, ‘ohana “...is a sense of unity, shared involvement and shared responsibility. It is mutual inter-dependence and mutual help. It is emotional support, given and received. It is solidarity and cohesiveness.”*

*What makes a family work is not limited to biological or legal ties, but rather its capacity to value others’ needs and welfare as much as one’s own. A healthy family solves problems together, never losing sight of their basic commitment to each other. Children often enter foster care having lost sight of what it means to be part of an ‘ohana. You can help restore that sense of security by paying attention to the universal values that bind us together.*

*The animated Lilo-n-Stich sums it up the best. “‘Ohana simply means that nobody gets left behind.”*

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these practices in what is essentially a natural sequence, feel free to skip around — each practice stands alone as a unique parenting technique.

## 1: Know the Culture of Foster Care

Fostering children requires dedication, good organizational skills, and familiarity with the foster care system. Not only will you need to perform the usual tasks of parenting, but you will need to stay on top of a full calendar of visits with the social worker, teachers, coaches, and so forth. You may have to seek medical advice, or might be expected to deal with requirements of the courts. Get to know how the various systems work together. Knowing how the system works — including court expectations and timelines — can help prevent surprises down the road.

If you haven't yet, you'll probably go through foster parent training, as required by every state. There you'll learn everything from parenting strategies to First Aid and CPR. Whether in your foster parent training or from additional sources, you will also learn about the special issues that confront foster children and parents. The more you know about the culture of foster care, the better prepared you'll be to advocate for your foster child, and the better you will understand the limits of what you can and cannot do to promote their cultural identities.

***DID YOU KNOW?*** *The first two weeks of a placement is sometimes called the “honeymoon period.” You and your foster child are getting to know each other. The child is getting a feel for how you handle situations, how you talk to the other children in the home, and what sets you off. The best thing to do during this time is to be consistent. Show that everyone gets treated the same way.*

## 2: Be Warm, Welcoming, and Respectful

To connect with your foster child, you must first engage them on a universal level — the level that children across all cultures respond to, that stands on the premise that all children are alike in certain respects. Simple things like tucking them in at night or saying, “Thanks for coming into our home,” can go a long way. Your child’s basic needs for feeling safe and cared for can be fulfilled by exercising common courtesies such as good listening, smiling and using praise, being respectful, being a good role model, and remaining optimistic. Demonstrating these universal qualities set the stage for cultural inclusiveness within your home and is the first step in getting to know your foster child at a deeper, interpersonal level.

The success of foster parents seems to depend more on their personalities rather than on their credentials. Foster parents who are warm, understanding, committed, and strongly motivated to help are much more effective with their foster children. And the success of foster families absolutely requires your entire family to be on board with your decision to become a foster parent.





### 3: Look Inside

Our interpersonal relationships are profoundly influenced by our values. Families, communities, cultural and religious beliefs, educational experiences, and financial status all influence how we think about others. Avoid thinking, “I don’t have a bias and I treat all children the same.” When values and biases are thought to be “under control” or “not an issue,” they are least likely to be controlled and more likely to be an issue. Don’t be embarrassed by your bias... everyone is prone to prejudice of one sort or another. Researchers believe it is a survival strategy that our brain uses to help simplify the environment. Only through new experiences and knowledge can we get beyond ingrained assumptions and biases.

#### **ASSUMPTIONS**

Consider the assumptions you hold of how things “should” be. For example, you may think parents should be of the same ethnicity or religion in order to raise healthy children; that biological parents are better than chosen parents; that two opposite-gender parents are required for effective childrearing; that the primary caregiver should be the mother; that children of certain races are born smarter or more hard working; that children must know their genealogy for a happy life.

#### **BIAS**

Question the biases you hold that were learned from your own parents or caregivers. Think for a minute of how your parents would have responded if you dated someone from another religion or race. How would they have responded if you told them you were gay? More to the point, how did your parents express their feelings about other ethnic groups or about diversity, whether in open discussion or in racial slurs and ethnic jokes? Pondering these questions will help you trace the origins of your own bias, establish how ingrained these beliefs really are, and set about changing them if you decide to.

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### **PREJUDICE FROM WITHIN**

Keep in mind that prejudice can be inter-cultural as well, coming from within the culture or family. Take for example the Native Hawaiian man who comments, “Eh, that boy works hard for a Hawaiian,” in reference to a younger Hawaiian on his job site. Or the Portuguese community leader who congratulates his niece, “Good job at getting your diploma. You smart for one Portuguese.” Sometimes prejudice is hidden behind a backhanded compliment, like the co-worker who comments on a colleague’s bi-racial child, “Ohh, light eyes and fair skin — cute this one.” Even within the culture, expressing these stereotypes can cause considerable hurt.

## **4: Find Yourself, then Move Forward**

As you gain new cultural experiences and become more open to learning, you will increase your cultural competence. Just remember that cultural competency is a process and that people fall somewhere on the following continuum. The idea is to find where you currently stand and then motivate yourself to move forward.

**1) Denial:** Your worldview is the only one that should exist. You deny and are disinterested in diversity issues. You might tell yourself, “Foster children in my care should simply adapt to how we do things. If they don’t get better, that’s their fault.”

**2) Defense:** You experience your worldview as better than the others, and use stereotyping to defend your view. You may not even be aware of your own stereotypes or the subtle messages that make foster children feel uncomfortable (e.g., racial slurs, or negative comments about the child’s biological parents, culture, or religion in front of the child).

**3) Minimization:** You know that differences exist but you minimize them, believing that human similarities outweigh the differences. You might tell yourself, “All children are the same and

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sooner or later this child will come to accept our belief system since it's the best way to live.”

**4) Acceptance:** You recognize and value cultural differences and are curious about different cultures and beliefs. You begin to educate yourself about the differences in cultures by reading, watching a video, asking a friend of that ethnicity, attending workshops, and so on.

**5) Adaptation:** You value cultural differences and change your behavior to communicate more effectively with children of different backgrounds. Now you are willing to make adaptations in foster care. You are non-defensive when given suggestions on how to strengthen your foster child's cultural identity, and you check in with the child about concerns in the home.



**6) Integration:** You value a variety of cultures and move easily in and out of varying communication styles. Here, you are open to discussing different ways to include culturally relevant experiences for the child in your care. You are not threatened by the possibility that the child may want to learn a culture or belief system that is different from your own, allowing the child to discover his or her own culture. You have learned to match the communication style of your foster child.

## 5: Rewrite Your Script

Our brains work in funny ways to support our beliefs. Once we learn a stereotype, we are more likely to attend to and recall events that are consistent with these beliefs, rather than events that would disconfirm them. We dismiss events that don't fit our worldview.

Suppose you have a stereotype that Caucasian children are talkative and you meet a Caucasian child who is quiet. You might "notice" that the child is not feeling very well. You have dismissed or distorted the experience; otherwise you would have to rewrite your script of what Caucasian children are like. The same is true for stereotypes that suggest Native Hawaiian children are lazy or Portuguese children are stupid.

The only way to change the stereotypes you have about groups of people is to rewrite your script every time you see evidence that disconfirms your prejudice. It takes a good deal of mental effort, but is well worth it. It's like cleaning the screen of your TV: the program is the same, but you see everything more clearly. Only then can you experience the joy of seeing children as they truly are.

***DID YOU KNOW?*** *In personality development, the self-fulfilling prophecy is very real. In a well documented study, elementary school teachers were told on the first day of school that certain students were "intellectual bloomers." By the end of the year, these randomly assigned students had gained an average of 10 IQ points more than the students who were arbitrarily labeled as "intellectually challenged."*



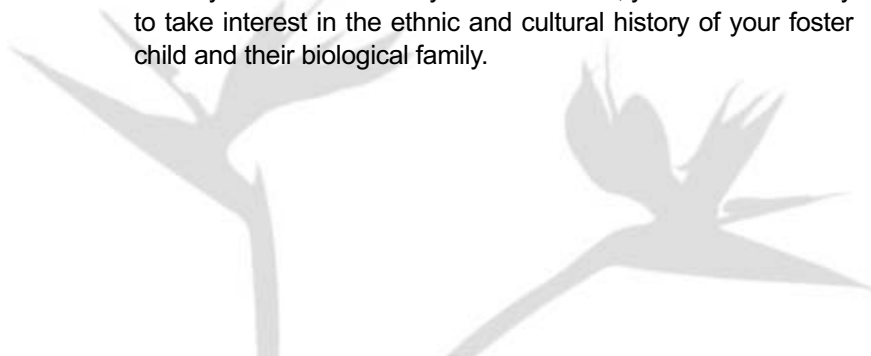
## 6: Got Culture?

It is difficult to be truly understanding and sensitive to someone else's culture until you have gained some knowledge and appreciation for your own. When asked about your own cultural

***DID YOU KNOW?** There are over 190 countries on the planet, with 2,000 languages, 7000 dialects, 500 ethnicities, and 900 unique cultural traditions. You don't need to look far to find your cultural self.*

or ethnic background, it is not enough to say, "I'm just local," or "I'm just an American." Make the effort to do some research into your own heritage, to unravel the history of your ancestors. Find out who they were and what brought them to the islands or to America.

When you take interest in your own culture, you'll be more likely to take interest in the ethnic and cultural history of your foster child and their biological family.



## 7: Don't Be Overconfident

Having experience in fostering has its benefits, but there are pitfalls as well. Parents who have been providing foster care for a while may develop a false sense of confidence. Research shows that the longer foster parents provide care, the easier it is for them to overlook unique cultural nuances, especially with children of diverse cultural or religious traditions. Or one child may remind you of another with whom you have provided care and you may not bother to discover the new child's uniqueness.

The key is to stay fresh, ask questions, and keep an open mind. Remain open to being surprised and allow each child to teach you about his or her unique reality. Remember, culture is complex and has many dimensions, and diversity is more than ethnicity. Religion may stand out more in your foster child's reality than ethnicity. Or the geographic area of where your foster child was born may bring greater pride to them than their racial classification. A Caucasian foster child, for example, may have specific ethnic roots but have never had the opportunity to share it because the team has intuitively grouped the child with other Caucasians.

It's important to build confidence in caring for diverse youth but it is also important to guard against overconfidence, as this can lead to a kind of stereotyping as well. The cultural and professional knowledge you develop can become no more than props on a stage of which the child is the lead actor. Remember that they write their own script and use the props in ways that makes sense to them. Part of our job as caregivers is to acknowledge that the stage exists, help set the stage, and then know which cultural props to put out, when, and under what circumstances.



## 8: Come to Consensus on Family Matters

It is extremely challenging to do the work of fostering alone; yet if you are doing it with a partner (spouse, friend, older child, parent) that is not on the same page, then it can be even more difficult. Being on the same page with your partner in disciplining your foster child is more important than the disciplining strategy itself.

All adult caregivers in your home should come to consensus on basic family matters. The list is long, and can include use of the phone, amount of TV or play time, where and when meals are eaten, the time for lights out, policies on sleepovers and/or dating, household responsibilities like chores, rules about swearing, and so on. Be clear in setting boundaries. In regard to swearing, for example, you and your foster child might not even agree on what constitutes a swear word.

Similarly, all adult caregivers should also be sensitive to issues of diversity and agree on strategies used to strengthen the child's cultural or social identity. Anything short of this could undermine your efforts to create a home environment that validates the child's cultural identity and self worth.



## 9: Good Words Give Life

There is an old Hawaiian saying, “I ka ‘olelo no ke ola; i ka ‘olelo no ka make,” or “In the language is life; in the language is death.”

Words matter. Harsh words — including name-calling, yelling, negative comments, or poking fun — can tear at the child’s self-esteem. Words that offer praise and encouragement are life giving. They uplift and strengthen the child’s self-worth. As we saw before, words of praise are universal — they transcend culture. Every child loves praise.

- Praise can be verbal or nonverbal, such as writing a short note telling the child that you are happy to have him or her in your home.
- Find opportunities to praise the child’s biological parents and extended family. Children like hearing good things about their family.
- Praise aspects of the child’s cultural heritage or ethnicity, especially those that run counter to stereotypes. To dispel the myth that Hawaiians are lazy and always late, for example, you might find an opportunity in an informal talkstory to share with the child how hardworking Native Hawaiians are. You could retell the myth of “Hawaiian-time” by playfully telling the child that, “Hawaiians were the first to come to the islands. Everybody else was late.”
- Avoid combining praise with a put-down, like “Hey Chanelle, nice job at the hula competition. It’s about time you got with the program.” Remember the rule — six expressions of praise for every one of criticism.

**DID YOU KNOW?** Researchers studying the use of praise have found that in order to balance the negativity children face on a daily basis, they need to hear six praise statements for every one of criticism.



## 10: Extract the Cultural Elements that Matter

Culture can be defined as a set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and standards of behavior that are passed down from one generation to the next. Culture defines what is natural and expected in a given group. This includes language, food, dress, styles of communication, childrearing patterns, and so on. Asking the child, “How do you identify in terms of your cultural identity?” is unlikely to help you extract the cultural elements of a child’s world. Instead, ask the child about meaningful life events, such as birthday parties or holiday celebrations.

For example, prior to accepting the child into your home, you may want to find out how his or her family celebrates birthdays – who usually gets invited, games that are played, music and food preferences, and any cultural or religious ritual that is practiced. Compare these to your own birthday or holiday celebrations.



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What kinds of foods are prepared and who helps in the preparation? What kind of entertainment is allowed? Are there any “no-nos” like drinking alcohol, smoking, arm wrestling, talking about finances, etc.? From here you can make adjustments to help the child feel more at home during these kinds of events.

Asking these questions will yield more information about the child’s cultural identity than a self-report. You may get a number of cultural clues that you can put into practice in your home.

- cultural ways of communicating
- the importance of the extended family to the child
- the importance of church or religion
- hygiene habits that are different from your own, like caring for ethnic hair
- foods that should or shouldn’t be eaten at certain times of the year

You may find out about adults in the child’s extended family that can serve as cultural mentors on an on-going basis, a place to go for suggestions as to how to make a good cultural environment for the child.

There are a number of cultural traditions and celebrations that you can take advantage of, especially around the New Year. During this time when Christians celebrate Christmas, African Americans celebrate Kwanza, Buddhists celebrate Bodhi Day, Hindus celebrate Diwali, Jews celebrate Hanukkah, Native Hawaiians celebrate the Makahiki, and Muslims celebrate Ramadan (during the winter in certain years). If your child relates to one of these traditions, try to incorporate an aspect of it in your home.

## 11: Pick the Communication Style that Fits

Communication is almost always influenced by culture. Some cultures, like those of Asia and Native Hawaiians, rely less on verbal communication and more on shared experiences, non-verbal cues, and implicit messages. They may even perceive excessive talking as inconsiderate.

Other cultures, such as those that originate in Europe, rely more heavily on verbal communication, pay less attention to nonverbal cues, and feel uncomfortable with long pauses. It is important to learn the communication preferences of your foster child so that you decrease the probability of miscommunication.

If you have an adolescent foster child, pop culture influences may play a bigger role in how they communicate than cultural ways. To complicate matters, there might be a combination of pop culture and ethnic influences at play. Take a look at these contrasting points of communication described by a local Hawaiian family who experienced cultural shock after spending some time in the Midwest.

MIDWEST	HAWAI'I
They say "hello"	We say "how you"
They appear assertive. "If you want it, go get it."	We appear more passive. "If you want it, be respectful, and it might be given to you."
They believe in the freedom of speech.	We believe in the freedom of silence.
They shake hands and might hug or kiss.	We shake hands, and will more than likely hug, and/or kiss.

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MIDWEST	HAWAI'I
They give the firm handshake as a sign of respect and strength.	We give the soft handshake as a sign of respect and humility.
They say "sorry" when it's their fault.	We say "sorry" when it's our fault <i>and</i> the other person's fault. We are sorry for the situation, not the act.
They get to the point, then they talk story.	We talk story first, then we get to the point.
They value credentials (Ph.D., MD., JD).	We value relationships (Kupuna, Aunty, Uncle).

Some of these examples may be consistent with the belief system and communication style of your foster child. Knowing that there are many ways of being in the world is key. One is not better than the other, just different.

Matching your communication style with the cultural style of your foster child will increase your connection to the child and make the youth feel more comfortable in your home.

***DID YOU KNOW?*** The "Soul Brother Handshake" in American culture began among African-American men, and is now used widely in Hawai'i between men of various races and particularly among teenage boys as a gesture of close friendship. It is usually a two-move procedure, beginning with a traditional, palm-to-palm clasp, followed by a hooked clasp of only the fingers.

## 12: Answer Questions about Differentness

There will be placements in which your foster child does not look like you. This may cause some anxiety in your foster child, especially around peers. Prepare your foster child to answer questions about race differentness in ways that make sense to him or her. Having ready-made answers is not about being phony, it's about keeping information private so that other kids don't use the information to tease or harass. For example, some foster children choose to refer to their foster parents as "mom and dad" while at school, even if they don't call their foster parents "mom and dad" at home. Let your foster child know that this is okay. Another option is referring to you as "auntie or uncle," which fits nicely with Hawai'i's local culture.

***DID YOU KNOW?** Hawai'i has the highest percentage of mixed-race individuals in the country with twice as many families living in homes with multiple generations – great grandparents, grandparents, parents, and children. The concept of 'ohana is alive and well in Hawaii.*

If your foster child's birth parent(s) is/are in prison, teach them to say, "My mom/dad is unable to come to visit right now," or "My mom/dad is out of town." As long as your foster child understands the truth there is no harm in keeping this information within your family.

Also, think twice about introducing your foster child as "my foster child." It could make your foster child feel inferior, as if they are not considered part of the family. "This is my daughter/son or my nephew/niece, and he lives with us," is a better introduction.

If they respond, "But he doesn't look like you," tell them, "You're right, he's better looking!" Be ready for the people out there who are naïve or lack basic consideration. Remember that the concept of 'ohana is not limited to biological ties or whether or not people look the same within a family. Love is the primary pre-requisite; in time it will transcend all differences.

## A Final Thought about Culture

All these techniques will yield good results if given a chance to work. Through interaction over time, you will learn of the differences in communication patterns — many of which are culturally influenced — between you and your foster child. And you will learn how to adjust your parenting to improve communication. This is partly what folks mean when they say “culture matters.”

You will learn to accept that, within a single family, members express their ethnic cultures to differing degrees and in different ways. Consider the Samoan father who may wear traditional clothing, but buys takeout Chinese for a family gathering. The young Japanese family who enjoys attending the traditional mochi pounding festival, but then rushes home to watch American Idol. Or the Native Hawaiian mother who persuades her children to attend a Hawaiian immersion school, although she prefers jazz and yoga classes over more traditional pursuits. In some respects we are all multicultural and culture is always evolving. Being open to learning, and being non-judgmental and non-defensive is the key.



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When children are in foster care, they need the support of loving, caring foster families to help them through the toughest time of their lives.

It Takes An 'Ohana offers resources and information to those in the community concerned with protecting the interests of children and youth in out-of-home care, while providing responsible advocacy.

By empowering families, by collaborating with governmental and private agencies, and by advocating for foster families and the children they support on a local and state level, ITAO has become an indispensable part of the foster care system.

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