

Cultural Influences on Parenting

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Cultures, the shared systems of meaning in and through which humans live, shape the expectations and hopes that parents have for their children and how they understand messages about being parents from their families and friends as well as from professionals and the media. The 2009 ZERO TO THREE *Parenting Young Infants and Toddlers Today* survey underscores how far the field has come in communicating the possibilities of the earliest years but also shows how much more work remains to achieve shared understandings with parents in the core area of social and emotional development. Because the parent survey deliberately oversampled African American and Hispanic parents (see p. 7, Research Methodology and Sample, in Lerner & Ciervo, this issue), it provides a unique perspective on the opportunities and challenges that confront parents from these groups. The differences found in the survey are not limited to those between racial and ethnic populations. For example, the survey revealed important differences between mothers and fathers with regard to the parenting challenges they say they confront. Moreover, differences due to socioeconomic factors are often the largest in any of the comparative analyses. The aim of this commentary, however, is to focus attention a little more keenly on some racial and ethnic differences in the survey results on social and emotional development in order to talk more about what these might mean for a more culturally inclusive practice for infants, toddlers, and families.

The survey examines important racial and ethnic differences in parenting beliefs, understandings of developmental milestones, expectations for school readiness, and influences on parenting. Because it is difficult to keep all of the disparate results from the survey in mind, what follows is a brief summary of the main differences that seem especially worthy of comment, followed by a discussion of more general considerations

of culture and parenting that may help us to make sense of these. The summary here is necessarily selective, highlighting some of the major points that emerge from the survey as they may relate to infant and toddler development both globally and historically.

One final caveat: Although the survey did collect information on education and income, the survey results presented in the final report do not analyze racial and ethnic

differences based on income and education. Thus, we do not know how many of these differences would remain after controlling for these factors. Nevertheless, some of these differences do raise intriguing questions about the different expectations parents have for their children and the extent to which these may be shaped by valued cultural goals. The differences are worthy of discussion and consideration in our fields, even if economic influences turn out to be the paramount determinants of some of these perspectives.

Abstract

ZERO TO THREE's *Parenting Infants and Toddlers Today* survey presents an opportunity to explore areas where African American, Hispanic, and White parents may differ in their perceptions of infant development. The article highlights some of the differences in these racial and ethnic groups, such as parents' understanding of early social and emotional development, expectations for school readiness, and the sources of support and information that have the most influence on parents. Exploring these differences is an important first step in understanding ways to more effectively engage all parents.

