

# Culture and False Positives

## **Sleeping arrangements**

- Sleeping on the floor is common in some Asian, African, and South American cultures.
- Some Asian cultures use clean comfortable mats to sleep on the floor, then roll them up each morning.
- In most of the world's cultures, children sleep in the same bed or the same room as their parents.

## **Flexible boundaries**

- People with low incomes and from many immigrant groups have fluid boundaries around themselves and their household.
- In traditional families, sharing of resources is not subject to debate—it is just what one does.
- Sharing resources can create a wider safety net, enabling poor families to survive.

## **Small size**

- Sometimes young immigrant children are labeled as “failure-to-thrive” because of their low weight and small size.
- Children from some ethnic groups may not approach U.S. norms and yet may be perfectly healthy.

## **Lack of cooperation**

- Non-English speakers may not understand the service plan.
- Even if they understand the words, they may not understand the concepts (e.g., “seek developmentally appropriate opportunities”).

## **Unfamiliar disciplinary methods**

- Making children kneel on uncooked rice for 5 to 10 minutes is a common disciplinary practice among some Asian and Latino groups.
- Unfamiliar practices should not be assumed to be abusive.

## **Unfamiliar medical interventions**

- Many traditional medical practices can be mistaken for abuse (e.g., coining, cupping).
- The questioning or rejection of medical care because of cultural beliefs should not be mistaken for medical neglect.

### Unfamiliar practices

- Swaddling of children up to age two during nap time is common in some Indian cultures.
- In some African cultures, children receive ceremonial markings (cuts) on their faces.
- Small crosses may be marked on the faces or shoulders of children when they are initiated into the Afro-Caribbean religion of *Santeria*.
- In some Latino and Portuguese families, it is common for a mother to bite her child as a sign of affection, even leaving a mark.

### Care of newborns

- Many cultures (Chinese, Sikh, Somali Bantu) have strict rules to protect children in the days and weeks immediately following their birth.
- These efforts to shelter infants can conflict with Western medical practices such as two-week checkups for newborns.

### Lack of information about a child

- Professionals may think that a parent who does not remember a child's birthday or other developmental milestones demonstrates a lack of interest in the child.
- Some cultures do not record or celebrate birthdays.
- A "milestone" in our culture may not be a "milestone" in the family's culture.
- In immigrant and low-income families, children may be separated from their parents for long periods of time and raised by relatives or friends of the family.

### Linguistic misunderstandings

- Linguistic misunderstandings can lead to tragic outcomes in which parents sign papers they don't understand, in which professionals think they understand what a parent is saying but don't, and so forth.
- You should assume that you are **not** going to obtain an accurate picture of risk in a family if you can't speak with the family in its native language.
- A trained, professional interpreter should help with the assessment if at all possible.

Source: Fontes, L.A. (2005). *Child abuse and culture: Working with diverse families*. New York: Guilford Press.