

# Assessing the Racial and Ethnic Cultural Competence of Your Support Services

A Tool to Help Get You Started

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**Adopt US Kids**

*Together we hold their future*

## WHY USE THIS TOOL?

Child welfare agencies have a responsibility to recruit and support foster and adoptive families of color in order to meet the needs of youth who are overrepresented in foster care—including Black, Indigenous, and Latinx youth. Yet our child welfare systems routinely fail to meet the needs of families from marginalized communities in culturally responsive ways.

In an information memorandum released in February 2022, the Administration For Children and Families (ACF) encourages child welfare agencies to “assess and address how its programs and policies may perpetuate systemic barriers for children and families of color.”<sup>1</sup> This AdoptUSKids assessment tool offers an opportunity for service providers to reflect on how they engage and support parents of color so they have a better understanding of what needs to be improved.

Engaging in service assessment and improvement is hard work, as race and culture affect how services are delivered and perceived in complex ways. This tool will help get you started in building more culturally competent support services and prioritize the work that needs to be done.

## KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Race equity work is challenging and never finished. As you work through this tool, you and your staff may feel daunted by the amount of effort needed to make progress or improvement in cultural competency. You would not be alone. Feeling overwhelmed by race equity work is often what causes people to disengage. But, with the right tools and partners, you can make important improvements in the services you provide to families.

We invite you to enter into this work ready to hear and do difficult things to make systemic improvements for families of color. The progress may be incremental, but small steps toward cultural competence are better than no steps at all. Keep reaching for better practices and, over time, small steps can lead to big improvements.

The Capacity Building Center for States offers a useful publication: *Focusing on Race Equity Throughout Change and Implementation*.<sup>2</sup> Consider using this publication, as well as others in their series on change and implementation in practice, as you decide how to help your organization become more racially equitable.

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1 ACF Information Memorandum, *Equity in Action: Prioritizing and Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities*. Released February 2, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/policy-guidance/equity-action-prioritizing-and-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-underserved>

2 *Focusing on Race Equity Throughout Change and Implementation*. Capacity Building Center for States, 2022. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/change-implementation-focusing-on-race-equity>

# PREPARING FOR THE ASSESSMENT

Before engaging with this tool, take inventory of what your organization has already done to improve cultural competence and racial equity in its workforce and practices. This effort should be connected to other work you've done on this topic. Bring any data that you've gathered from past efforts to inform this one.

## A baseline on biases

It's important that we recognize the role unconscious bias plays in our actions, decisions, and assessments. Before using this tool, we recommend that you and your team take time to learn about your own biases and assumptions.

Consider doing the following with your team:

- Watch this brief video from the *New York Times* on unconscious bias, available at [www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818668/check-our-bias-to-wreck-our-bias.html?playlistId=video/who-me-biased](https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818668/check-our-bias-to-wreck-our-bias.html?playlistId=video/who-me-biased).
- As the video suggests, collect data to learn more about unconscious biases that may be preventing people of color from engaging with your support services. What story is your data telling you?
- Have each team member review and take one of the Harvard Implicit Association Tests (IAT) related to race and ethnicity, available at [implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/). Debrief as a team:
  - How did you feel while taking the test?
  - How do you feel about your results?
  - Do you think these kinds of exercises can be useful in understanding bias? Why or why not?
- Child Welfare Information Gateway has collected several resources on addressing bias in child welfare practice and policy, available at [www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/cultural/disproportionality/reducing/bias](https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/cultural/disproportionality/reducing/bias). Select some of these resources to review as a team.

Ensure you and your team are in a good place and that you have time and open minds as you use the tool. It's important to be kind to yourself in this process so you can honestly assess your agency's ability to authentically engage Black, Indigenous, and other families of color. Encourage your team to accept feelings of discomfort, knowing that those feelings often mean that you are growing as individuals and as an organization.

## Start your discussion

Consider the following as you gather your team and any other stakeholders that should participate in this discussion:

- **Notice who is at the table.** Are you including staff at all levels in this conversation? What about caregivers and young people who use your support services? What about other important community members? There may be some questions that are better answered by staff and some that are best answered by those you serve. When feedback conflicts, a good option is to rely on the perspective of the people receiving your services or to double-check with a larger group of people.
- **Consider the power dynamics.** Can everyone speak freely and authentically, without fear of consequences to their job or to the services they receive from your agency? Do those from systematically marginalized communities trust that they can answer honestly and authentically? If you're not sure, you may wish to administer an anonymous survey, asking people to agree or disagree with some or all of the tool's statements. You could also hold a few different meetings to create safer settings for people to share their input. Be mindful of the fact that it may be especially emotionally burdensome and stressful for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color at your organization to engage in these conversations.
- **Account for different communication styles and accessibility needs.** How can those who are less likely to speak in a group setting provide feedback? If you choose to do a survey, what is the reading level needed to access the survey? Do people need transportation or internet access to participate in a meeting? Try to reduce any barriers to participation, including by offering a stipend for their participation.
- **Make a plan for handling disagreements.** What happens if some people think something is working well and others think it's working poorly? It will be important for everyone to be aware that they will have gaps in their understanding as they enter this discussion. Gathering a diverse group—and prioritizing the viewpoints of those from underserved communities—will help to make sure that you can collectively paint the clearest picture.
- **Think about how you handle hard feelings.** Conversations about race and bias can be difficult. These discussions can be even harder when you are specifically looking for areas that need improvement and what you've done poorly in the past. Expect uncomfortable feelings to come up and encourage your group to resist the urge to be defensive or explain away problems. Develop a plan for when challenges like this arise.

## COMPLETING THE ASSESSMENT

Read the prompts and, as a group, choose the corresponding boxes to indicate how well you think you are performing. Then, provide supporting evidence in the boxes beneath each prompt. The specific rating you give yourselves is less important than the discussion that you have as a team. The evidence of how things are—or are not—working will be important as you make a plan for improvement after you are finished with your discussion.

Families served: Who are you serving and who are you missing?	
<p>You and your staff have an understanding of the racial, ethnic, or cultural make-up of the families you serve and of the broader community.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example: Data confirms (or does not confirm) staff perception about the racial demographics of the families we serve.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>The families served are regularly invited to offer feedback. That feedback is considered in program and service changes and improvements.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example: Families receiving services are surveyed annually, but we do not collect demographics and it's unclear to families if their feedback is incorporated.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>You track, understand, and work to rectify the elements that are contributing to racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse adoptive/foster parents not engaging with your agency.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We use exit surveys with demographics to track why parents leave our program. We examine those surveys for barriers and try to address them. But we do not seek to assess why someone might not approach us at all, which is a bigger issue for us.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>You understand which populations in the community are being underserved by your agency.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We collect demographic data on the families we serve and compare it to all foster parents in our area.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>You have a plan to improve your outreach and service provision to underserved populations of families.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We are not meeting the needs of families who speak Spanish. We are prioritizing hiring Spanish-speaking staff and creating outreach materials in Spanish.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>The families served by your agency trust that they will be treated fairly and respectfully by all staff they interact with.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We don't currently collect information on if families feel respected in their interactions with staff.</i></li> </ul>	

Staffing: Who are your staff? How are you preparing them to support families?	
<p>You hire frontline staff and supervisors from all communities you serve or wish to serve.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> Needs work
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: The organization hasn't prioritized this in hiring practices so far.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>People of color with lived experience in foster care, adoption, or kinship care have key roles in your agency—either as staff, leaders, volunteers, or members of organizational boards.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> Needs work
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Several key staff that work directly with families are people of color with lived experience in adoption. The board includes several people with lived experience in foster care, though not all are people of color. Some of our volunteers have lived experience but they are white.</i></li> </ul>	



<p>Staff at all levels understand that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ children and adolescents are often disproportionately represented in foster care. They also understand the systematic reasons why.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example: All staff receive onboarding training that includes information on disproportionality. We update staff about the numbers of children in care by race and ethnicity each year.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>Staff at all levels receive training on generational and historical trauma and are required to show the competencies they've learned during those training sessions.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example: All staff receive training on trauma, but not on generational or historical trauma. We provide training on the history of racism in child welfare but don't cover the generational impact.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>Staff at all levels receive training on structural racism, bias, and cultural competence and reflect their understanding in interactions with clients.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Our entire organization is currently undergoing cultural competence training to improve in this area. We don't have specific tests or other methods for demonstrating competence.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>You are able to retain frontline staff and supervisors from all communities you serve or wish to serve.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Our staff turnover rate is higher for people of color. We have not done exit surveys to determine why.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>Agency leaders—including program managers, administrators, executive directors, and board members—are from all communities you serve or wish to serve.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Our executive leadership is white. Some are LGBTQ+. Two of the four program managers are people of color. The board is diverse and represents the racial/ethnic backgrounds of the children in care.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>There is a system in place for staff to share ideas for better engagement with diverse families and address barriers with key leadership.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We hold specific space for staff at all levels and in all departments to share opportunities during our regular agency meetings.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>There is a system in place for staff to share concerns or opportunities for improvement related to organizational culture. Staff trust that they can share critical feedback without fear of professional repercussions.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We have a formal grievance process but haven't done anything specific related to cultural competence. We have done anonymous surveys of staff to ask about concerns and whether staff feel comfortable sharing concerns. The results show a pretty high level of trust.</i></li> </ul>	

<p><b>Environment and community: How is your agency presented to and perceived by the community at large?</b></p>	
<p>People of color and LGBTQ+ people see evidence in the agency's public spaces that they are welcome and can expect respect and safety.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We display a safe space sticker in the window of our office and photos of diverse children and families. We need more information on how people feel in our meeting spaces.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>Printed materials, websites, and social media have thoughtful and appropriate images and language that is representative of the clients you serve.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We have diverse families featured throughout our materials. We recently updated forms on our website to remove references to mother and father.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>Staff are thoughtful about using culturally appropriate language. What language is used is guided by those with lived experience from the appropriate community.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We have a written guide to help staff use welcoming and respectful language.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>Your agency, materials, and services are accessible to people with limited English proficiency.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Our outreach information is all in English. We have funds available to provide interpreters for support groups, but no one has requested that.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>Your agency, materials, and services are accessible to those who do not have consistent access to transportation, internet, or computers, or those who have other challenges with technology.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Many of our support groups are virtual and require comfort using a computer and a reliable internet connection. Public transportation is not very good in our community but we do offer several groups close to bus stops.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>It is clear to the public that your agency is actively partnering with marginalized communities on issues that they care about. You are visibly aligned with marginalized communities in public.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example: Our agency is a vocal advocate on issues such as racism and disproportionality. We partner with several BIPOC community groups on special events and activities.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>It is clear to the community that your agency is a reliable and safe source of support for people of color and the LGBTQ+ community.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example: We serve many LGBTQ+ families and they feel safe and supported most of the time. There have been some incidents in support groups where other group members have made negative comments and we've responded quickly.</i></li> </ul>	

## Services and program design: What are your services and how are they designed to help?

The services you provide were specifically designed to serve diverse populations of people. The populations the services were designed for align with the populations you are serving or aim to serve.

- Excellent
- Satisfactory
- Needs work

Supporting evidence:

- *Example: Our services were not designed with a particular population in mind so likely reflect the needs of the majority (white, middle class, straight adoptive parents). We have some specialized services (such as a support group for LGBTQ+ parents or African American parents), but we did not do a thorough needs assessment before creating them.*

There is evidence that each of our support services and programs is effective for people from underserved communities.

- Excellent
- Satisfactory
- Needs work

Supporting evidence:

- *Example: We don't ask for demographic information on our evaluation surveys, so we don't know. We have good participation from the Indigenous community but not as much from the African American community.*



<p>Staff responsible for designing your programs have the skills and expertise to develop services that will be relevant for and used by diverse audiences.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: Some of our staff have done extensive work with BIPOC communities; some have not. Those leading our program design have less experience.</i></li> </ul>	
<p>A diverse group of professionals and/or people you serve have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on agency programming and service provision.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Example: We hold focus groups and have been able to ensure diverse attendees. As noted above, we don't have demographic information on surveys.</i></li> </ul>	

<p>Data drives your service design and delivery. You are collecting the data you need to make informed decisions about how your services affect people in underserved communities.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Needs work</p>
<p>Supporting evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>Example: We do needs assessments every year and have good representation from the people we serve, who are fairly diverse. But we haven't found a good way to assess the needs of those we are not—but could be—serving.</i></li></ul>	

# AFTER THE ASSESSMENT

## Understanding your results

As you review your results, remember that the discussion itself was a large part of what you gained from this assessment. The descriptions of what is and is not working in each area are likely the most useful parts of your results.

Here are some helpful things to keep in mind as you look through your results:

- **If your ratings are “excellent”**—If you are effectively engaging and supporting families of color, that’s great! Do consider carefully if the group doing the rating was reflective of the communities you are or should be serving and whether the results feel accurate. And remember that there is always more work to do. Where can you make even more progress? Are you doing well with some marginalized communities, but not others?
- **If your ratings are “satisfactory”**—It could feel like you don’t have a clear direction on what to do next. Encourage your team to come up with a small number of priorities so that you know where to put your energy. You may also consider reaching for the low-hanging fruit first, making improvements to areas or work that require less time or resource investment to build your momentum.
- **If your ratings are “needs work”**—This could feel daunting and like you need a substantial increase in capacity to make the necessary changes. Identify a handful of goals to work on first, prioritizing those that are most urgently needed according to stakeholders from underserved communities. Include some that are a bit easier to provide yourself with encouragement. As you make progress, slowly add more goals to your plan. Help your team keep the mindset that this is a great opportunity to make important changes. Keeping the momentum going for improvement will be critical to your success.

## Action planning

Now that you have a better understanding of your results, it’s time to act. Here are some suggestions to get you moving toward larger action:

- **Include goals that you can take action on immediately, in the near term, and in the long term.** You may have many areas that need work. Focus on a handful of goals so that you’re more likely to make progress. Identify one goal that can be achieved in the next month, another that you plan to achieve in the next quarter, and then another in the following year. Early achievements can help keep you and your team moving and focused on the broader goals around improving cultural competence. Remember: progress is what matters!

- **Create workgroups to address your goals.** Don't work alone! Having a workgroup assigned to each goal can help drive the work forward. Just like the stakeholders who were critical to the cultural competence discussion, the workgroups should prioritize—and compensate—those with lived experience from marginalized communities.
- **Collect better data.** This discussion may have revealed that you don't know how families of color or the larger community perceive your services. A portion of your action plan could revolve around improving your evaluation practices and asking the right people the right questions. It may be helpful for your team to watch the AdoptUSKids webinar, *Evaluating your family support services*, available at <http://professionals.adoptuskids.org/evaluating-your-family-support-services>. Consider discussing with your team ways that you can apply insights from this webinar into your work.
- **Add to this assessment.** This assessment may not capture everything important to the communities you aim to serve. It may be useful to do some additional assessments and combine your results to get a broader picture. AdoptUSKids offers many other resources that may help you, such as tools to complete a community needs assessment or assess your entire support-services array. Find all the tools that AdoptUSKids has to offer at <https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/category/format/tool>.
- **Learn from others.** Many leaders in the field are working to improve the cultural competence of the services they provide to families of color. The AdoptUSKids Minority Professional Leadership Development (MPLD) program has seen many fellows take on this challenge. Review how these leaders took action in Georgia (<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/addressing-disparity-and-disproportionality-in-georgia/>), Florida (<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/leading-systems-change-efforts-in-florida/>), California (<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/screening-resource-families-in-to-a-role-where-they-can-succeed/>), and Washington (<https://professionals.adoptuskids.org/finding-more-african-american-families-for-children-in-care/>). Could you take similar steps at your agency?
- **Get capacity-building support.** AdoptUSKids may be able to help your agency in this work. Contact [consultation@adoptuskids.org](mailto:consultation@adoptuskids.org) to talk to us about your system's needs and priorities.



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