*You have a new job in a new town. It is an unfamiliar culture for you and you are a beginner with the language that most of the families speak, but you are confident knowing that your education prepared you well to work with children and families from a variety of social classes with differing belief systems.*

*You job is an early childhood interventionist at the state-funded Regional Center. One of the young children on your caseload has a visual disability. Your supervisor lets you know that the physician has determined that the child’s eyes are not functional and has spoken to the family about her recommendation to remove the child’s eyes and to replace them with prostheses in order to eliminate the constant discharge. This will allow her to attend school more regularly because she will be healthier and other children in the classroom will not be at a health risk. The family has missed several appointments with the doctor and they would like you to do a home visit to get a handle on what’s going on.*

*So, you go to the home. You are feeling positive; you have bonded with this child and feel like you have a good relationship with the family. During the home visit, you bring up the topic of the family missing appointments with the doctor and the doctor’s recommendations. The mom responds, “Oh, we’re not going to have an operation like that. Our whole church is praying for a miracle. How could God do a miracle and restore her eyesight if her eyes aren’t even there?”*

My immediate first response to the above situation I would say is to be caught off guard. I have never dealt with any situation like this before and it really makes me feel uncomfortable. I know that every family is entitled to their religious opinions so I would have that in my mind, but at the same time if this is a health risk for the child it seems that religion should not be the leading decision maker.

If I were talking to the mother about this situation I would ask her if she has had time to research the benefits of the surgery? I would first let her know that I understand where she is coming from and respect her decision whether or not I agree with it. I would ask her to discuss other options besides praying just so she would be aware. I would let her know that children who are blind can live healthy normal lives. There is programs that offer great resources for children who are blind. I would tell her that I am more than willing to help her look into other alternatives.

I think when I leave the home visit I will again reassure her that I respect whatever decision she has for her daughter. I would let her know that her daughters eyes are not only a health risk for her, but for other children. I would reassure her that I would help her look into some resources that maybe she feels comfortable with. I would ask her to to try and keep her daughters best interest in mind.

I think that other supervisors may have had more experience with something of this nature. Other’s may tell the parent’s that they believe it is necessary for the child’s eyes to be removed in order for the child to be at a center (for health reasons). Physicians, Other professionals may be very sensitive to the parent’s response about God creating miracles, similar to the way I would handle it. I believe physicians would push the parent’s to remove the children’s eyes because most physicians base their reasoning on science rather than religion.

I believe that the most important consideration in this case is the health and safety of the child. Being educated in the field of child development I have been told over and over that the children’s safety is our first priority. This family may feel strongly about their religion, but if it is going to cause bigger health problems for the child then I think it would be important for someone to step in and tell them so.

My final suggestion would be for the family to make sure that they have asked the questions they need to doctors and other professionals. I would recommend that they have a sit down with a doctor and to not miss their appointments anymore. I would suggest that by not missing their appointments they may find that the doctor has some really important information that they would not want to miss.

I have not dealt with a situation like one above exactly, but I have had to deal with a child who did not practice any religious holidays at a school that did. This became really tricky at times because we had to manipulate projects in order for the child to participate. I had to be sensitive to the fact that his parents did not want him involved in holiday activities, and although it was hard and I felt like he was missing out on some of the fun the other children were having I managed. This would be the only situation I have been involved in where there is a strong clash of cultural values.

I have learned throughout my educational process that there is always going to be times when differing cultural beliefs differ from our own beliefs. I have had an internship working with toddlers where we had weekly discussion meetings. Within these meetings we discussed how to handle situations where children would speak about holidays and so on. This helped me come up with my final piece of advice because during this meetings it was pushed that we needed to be sensitive to the topic.