Finding Common Ground

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Kindness, the joy of learning, and the values that guide our work

When families come to us for help with their children, we cannot simply decide for them what their values should be. We cannot assume that the behaviors we consider important, the skills we believe children should learn, or the goals we might ordinarily establish are necessarily the same ones that matter most to the family.

This is why I believe that one of the most important things we can do when working with families from different backgrounds is to identify the things we share in common.

We need some common ground upon which to build a relationship and develop meaningful goals for intervention. We need to understand what the family hopes to accomplish and determine how our knowledge and skills can help them accomplish those things.

Over the years, I have identified a few core principles that I find useful in beginning these conversations.

Kindness

The first is kindness.

I believe that kindness is a value that is shared, at least to some degree, by people across a tremendous variety of cultures and backgrounds. We cannot assume that everyone understands or expresses kindness

in exactly the same way, but it is a good place to begin.

Kindness can mean understanding another person's feelings and trying to make sure that our behavior does not unnecessarily hurt them. It can mean refraining from behaviors that inflict physical harm. It can involve recognizing when harm has been done and trying to make the situation right.

Kindness can also mean recognizing the needs of people around us and, to the degree that we have the ability and capacity to meet those needs, doing what we can to help.

It can mean using words that uplift others rather than emphasizing the negative or problematic aspects of their lives. It can mean treating people with dignity even when their behavior is difficult, when they disagree with us, or when they cannot do what we would like them to do.

These are things that we can teach children, and they are things that we should demonstrate in our own interactions with them.

When I talk with families about the values that guide our work, kindness is one of the first things I emphasize. We want children to learn how to be kind to other people, and we want the adults around them to model that same kindness.

The Joy of Learning

Another value that I have emphasized throughout my career is the joy of learning.

I have staked much of my professional life on what I believe to be a remarkably important truth: learning can bring joy.

Obviously, the joy that comes from learning depends on a variety of factors. The skill must be accessible to the learner. It helps when the skill is relevant and useful, and when the learner has opportunities to experience success. But even when a skill is not immediately necessary, learning something new can bring a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

It might be something as simple as learning to fold a piece of paper into a boat, sharpen a pencil, tie a pair of shoes, or jump across a little creek in the backyard.

When a child learns how to do something that they could not do before, that learning can bring a sense of empowerment. It gives the child an experience of success and, potentially, greater confidence when approaching future challenges.

One of the greatest things we can give a child is the expectation that learning something new can be enjoyable.

Of course, in order for us to teach a child, the child must be willing, at least to some degree, to participate in the opportunities for learning that we present. They must be willing to engage with us, try unfamiliar things, and sometimes persist when a task is difficult.

That willingness often depends on trust.

Trust Must Be Earned

It is easy for adults to assume that children should be willing to learn from them simply because they are adults, teachers, or therapists. But a child's history with adults may not have given them good reasons to trust people in those roles.

Some children have experienced repeated failure. Some have experienced rejection, criticism, or mistreatment from adults who were supposed to teach or care for them. Others may have had experiences in which instructional demands were associated primarily with frustration, coercion, or an absence of meaningful success.

We cannot simply look at a child's unwillingness to participate in instruction and conclude that the problem lies within the child.

The child's response may be a reflection of their history.

If that is the case, we may need to overcome that history, at least to some degree, through repeated and consistent positive interactions. We may need to demonstrate, over time, that learning with us can be safe, enjoyable, and worthwhile.

We need to become adults whom children have good reasons to trust.

This does not mean abandoning instruction or waiting indefinitely for a child to become interested in every activity. It means arranging instruction so that the child can experience success, predictability, encouragement, and a growing sense of competence.

Trust and learning can develop together.

Safety and the Behaviors That Interfere With Learning

Another area in which we can often find common ground with families is safety.

There are several categories of behavior that I tend to emphasize when working with children who have significant behavioral challenges. I sometimes refer to three of these as the "big three": aggression, property destruction, and running away.

Self-injurious behavior is another serious concern. I tend to think of it alongside aggression because it involves harm to a person who is just as important and valuable as anyone else: the child.

These behaviors may create risks to the child or to other people, interfere with learning, damage important relationships, or limit the child's opportunities to participate in everyday life.

The particular behaviors that require intervention, and the priorities we establish, must depend on the individual child and family's circumstances. But protecting children from serious harm and helping them learn safer, more effective ways to communicate and respond to challenges are goals that many families readily understand and value.

We should be careful, however, not to confuse safety with mere compliance. A child who never objects, never refuses, and always does what an adult asks is not necessarily safer or better prepared for life.

We want children to learn how to communicate discomfort, refuse inappropriate requests, seek help, and advocate for themselves. Those are important skills, too.

Beginning With What We Share

Kindness, the joy of learning, trust, and safety are not the only values that may guide our work. Nor should we assume that every family will define or prioritize them in the same way.

They are simply useful starting points.

When we can explain what we value, listen to what families value, and identify the places where those values overlap, we establish a foundation for meaningful collaboration.

We can then develop goals that reflect not only our professional understanding of behavior and learning, but also the family's hopes for their child.

That is a much better foundation for intervention than simply assuming that the way we have always done things is the way they should be done for everyone.

References

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

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Scope and safety

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