Listen Before You Teach

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Why understanding a family's story is essential to meaningful intervention

One of the most important parts of my functional behavior assessment process is the initial interview with the child's family.

I typically spend a considerable amount of time listening to their story. I want to understand how they got where they are, who the important people are in their child's life, what challenges they have experienced, and what they hope to accomplish through the services we might provide.

I ask about their family, their background, their expectations of themselves as parents, their parenting styles, and their hopes for their child.

These conversations sometimes take time, but I consider them an essential part of the assessment process. We cannot understand a child's behavior adequately if we know very little about the environment in which that child lives.

Families Know Things We Do Not

As behavior analysts, we bring specialized knowledge to the assessment and treatment process. We understand principles of learning, methods of evaluating behavior, and procedures for teaching new skills.

But families possess knowledge that we do not.

They know what their child is like at home. They know the child's history, preferences, relationships, and routines. They may know which adults the child trusts, what situations are particularly difficult, and what kinds of experiences have been helpful or harmful in the past.

They also know what matters to them.

A parent may be particularly concerned about their child's safety. Another may be most concerned about communication. Another may want their child to participate in family meals, play with siblings, or become more independent in daily activities.

These goals may overlap with the goals we would ordinarily recommend, but we should not assume that they are identical.

Understanding the Family's Priorities

In my experience, many families express a relatively small number of broad hopes for their children.

They want their children to be safe. They want them to learn. They want them to be able to communicate their needs. They want them to develop relationships and participate more successfully in everyday life.

Many also want their children to listen to their teachers and other adults, although what that means may vary considerably from one family to another.

Our task is to understand those hopes well enough that we can translate them into meaningful and appropriate intervention goals.

For example, a parent who says, "I want my child to listen," may be expressing concern about dangerous behavior, difficulty participating in school, or an inability to follow important instructions. We should explore what the parent means rather than simply establishing a general compliance program.

Similarly, a parent who wants their child to become more independent may have very specific activities in mind.

Perhaps the child needs to learn to dress independently, prepare a snack, or communicate when help is needed.

The more precisely we understand the family's goals, the more likely we are to develop interventions that actually improve the child's life.

Understanding Differences in Parenting

One of the things I have noticed when working with families is that the dynamics between parents can differ considerably.

In some families, the mother is the parent who most consistently sets limits and implements behavior management strategies. In others, the father may take that role. And sometimes the parent with whom I spend the most time working is the one who feels less confident in setting limits or implementing the

strategies that their child needs.

This is not a matter of one parent being good and another being bad.

There is a balance within families, and different parents bring different strengths, experiences, and approaches to raising their children.

I am often grateful for the opportunity to work with children who live with both parents because the dynamics can be complex and can provide a rich balance of parenting styles. Children have opportunities to learn from different kinds of adults, and parents have opportunities to support one another as they develop their own skills.

We should be careful not to assume that one particular arrangement of parental responsibilities is the correct one.

Our task is to understand how the family functions and help the adults who care for the child become more effective in the roles they occupy.

When Parents Are Hesitant to Participate

There have been a number of occasions at our clinic when a parent who speaks another language has initially been hesitant to meet with me.

Sometimes one parent speaks English more comfortably and is willing to participate in meetings, while the other parent is reluctant.

It would be easy to interpret that reluctance as a lack of interest in the therapy process. We might assume that the parent is not supportive or does not want to participate.

But that may not be the case at all.

Sometimes the parent simply lacks confidence in their ability to communicate in English. They may be concerned that they will not understand what is being discussed or that they will not be able to keep up with the conversation.

They may also feel embarrassed about the challenges they are having with their child. They may already suspect that some of the parenting strategies they have used are not working particularly well, and they may be worried that we will judge them.

I think it is tremendously important that we do not contribute to those feelings.

Parents are not expected to come to us with expertise in behavior analysis. They are coming to us for help.

Children do not come with instruction manuals, and most parents begin with what they know. Often, that means using the same approaches their own parents used with them.

There were probably positive things our parents did, and there may have been things they could have done differently. That is true for nearly everyone.

Our responsibility is to help parents learn additional strategies without making them feel ashamed of what they have done before.

Behavior Is Not Rocket Science

I never want to lord my education or expertise over the families I serve.

I don't see behavior as rocket science.

There are certainly complicated aspects of behavior analysis, and professional training is important. But many of the principles we use involve relationships between behavior and the environment that parents and teachers have understood and applied for generations.

Parents do not need a degree in behavior analysis to learn how to use effective strategies with their children.

They need someone who is willing to explain things clearly, demonstrate what to do, answer their questions, and give them opportunities to practice.

When parents are hesitant because of language differences, we try to make it clear that we will take as much time as necessary to understand one another.

We have excellent interpreters who know our field and understand the terminology involved. We can slow down, repeat explanations, demonstrate strategies, and make sure that the family understands what we are discussing.

Almost invariably, over time, parents become more comfortable. They begin to recognize that they are not going to be judged for asking questions or for needing an explanation.

We are simply going to work together to make ourselves understood.

When Families Disagree

There are times when parents question a particular instructional goal or intervention.

In my experience, these disagreements often arise because the family does not fully understand why we are recommending a particular skill.

For example, we might be teaching a child to make a sandwich, and a parent might say, "Well, we don't make sandwiches at home."

That's understandable.

We might explain that the underlying goal is for the child to learn how to prepare simple food independently. Once the parent understands that broader purpose, we may be able to identify a different food preparation activity that would be more relevant to the child's life.

Sometimes the issue is simply that we have not communicated our reasoning clearly enough. Other times, we need to modify the goal itself.

I cannot readily recall a situation in which a family and I have had an irreconcilable disagreement about what was genuinely best for a child. Most of the time, when we take the opportunity to understand one another, we find that we share the same broad goals.

That does not mean disagreements can never involve serious ethical concerns. If a family's request would compromise a child's safety, dignity, or rights, we still have professional responsibilities that must guide our response.

But we should not begin by assuming that disagreement reflects ignorance or unwillingness.

We should begin by listening.

Collaboration Requires Trust

When a family shares personal information with us, they are extending a certain degree of trust.

They may tell us about difficulties in their home, challenges in their relationships, financial problems, or experiences that have been painful or embarrassing.

We should treat those disclosures with care.

We also need to recognize that families may have had negative experiences with schools, healthcare providers, or other professionals. They may have been dismissed, misunderstood, or judged in the past.

Trust may need to be earned through consistent interactions over time.

If we want families to trust our professional judgment, we should first demonstrate that we are willing to listen to theirs.

References

Behavior Analyst Certification Board. (2020). *Ethics code for behavior analysts*. https://www.bacb.com/ethics-information/ethics-codes/

Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J. A., Frankland, H. C., Nelson, L. L., & Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of family and professional partnerships: Constructive guidelines for collaboration. *Exceptional Children, 70*(2), 167-184. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290407000203

Continue learning

Open the companion resource and choose the next practical step.

https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/listen-before-you-teach

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.

Authorized Continuing Education (ACE) Provider: Accessible Behavior, LLC · Provider number OP-26-12875.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner's communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.

How to cite this resource

Beddow, P. (2026). Listen Before You Teach. Accessible Behavior. https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/listen-before-you-teach

Copyright © 2026 Accessible Behavior. All rights reserved.

Published article: https://accessiblebehavior.com/resources/listen-before-you-teach/