Respect in Practice

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How cultural responsiveness should change the way we teach, communicate, and treat families

It is one thing to recognize that families come from different cultures and backgrounds. It is another thing to allow that understanding to influence the way we actually provide services. Cultural responsiveness cannot be limited to an annual training, a statement in an employee handbook, or a general expectation that staff should treat everyone with respect. It should influence the way we communicate with families, select instructional targets, develop teaching materials, schedule services, and respond when families' circumstances differ from our own.

Making Communication Accessible

One of the most practical things we can do is make important information available in languages that families understand. When parents speak a language other than English, we should consider whether our written materials, treatment recommendations, and routine communications are accessible to them. The development of modern translation tools, including artificial intelligence language models, has made it easier to prepare materials in different languages. These tools can be tremendously useful, particularly when preparing routine information or developing preliminary translations.

But we need to use them carefully.

A translation that appears accurate may contain errors, awkward expressions, or terminology that is unfamiliar to the intended audience. Cultural differences may also influence how a particular expression is understood. When information is important to treatment decisions, informed consent, or a child's safety, we should take appropriate steps to ensure that the translation is accurate and that the family understands what is being communicated. Our goal is not merely to provide words in another language. It is to communicate meaning.

Teaching Skills That Matter to the Child

Cultural responsiveness should also influence the skills we teach and the materials we use. It is easy to develop instructional programs using familiar foods, household objects, activities, and routines without considering whether those things are familiar or relevant to the child. For example, we may teach a child to identify foods commonly found in American households, even when those foods are rarely present in the child's own home. We may teach a child to make a sandwich when the family does not ordinarily eat sandwiches.

The underlying skill we are trying to teach may be important. Perhaps we want the child to learn to prepare a simple meal or snack independently. But if the family does not prepare sandwiches, we can teach that same general skill using foods and routines that are more relevant to the child's life.

There may be good reasons to expose children to unfamiliar objects and experiences. Learning about the wider world is valuable. But we should not neglect the things that are already meaningful in the child's environment.

Using the Child's Own Family and Experiences

One practical thing we try to do is incorporate pictures of the important people in each child's life into our instructional materials. We ask families to provide pictures of parents, grandparents, siblings, and other people who are important to the child. We also ask what the child calls those people. We cannot assume that the child uses the words mom, dad, aunt, or uncle. The child may use different words based on the family's language or traditions. If the child calls a grandparent by a particular name, that is the name we should use in instruction.

These are small adjustments, but they matter. They help us teach skills that are directly connected to the child's actual life rather than relying entirely on generic instructional materials. Our goal is not to teach every child exactly the same set of skills in exactly the same way. It is to help each child acquire skills that improve their ability to participate meaningfully in their own life.

Respecting Family Traditions and Schedules

We should also recognize that families may observe holidays, religious traditions, and important events that differ from those with which we are familiar. At our clinic, we have had families ask us not to include particular Halloween activities because of their religious beliefs. For example, a family might prefer that their child not participate in carving faces into pumpkins or other activities specifically associated with Halloween.

We simply honor that.

We can still do activities involving pumpkins, but we might focus on fall, the harvest, apples, leaves, or other seasonal themes rather than Halloween. The child can participate in meaningful and enjoyable activities without requiring the family to compromise its values. The same principle applies to Christmas. Christmas is a major holiday in the United States, and many schools and organizations build activities around it. But not every family celebrates Christmas, and some families observe it at a different time or in a different way.

We should be aware of those differences so that children are not unnecessarily excluded or placed in uncomfortable situations. Cultural responsiveness does not require us to eliminate every holiday or tradition from our programs. It requires us to recognize that not everyone shares the same traditions and to make reasonable accommodations so that children can participate meaningfully.

Respect When Families Are Not Present

There is another aspect of cultural responsiveness that I consider especially important, and it concerns the way we talk about families when they are not around. I try to be very careful with my team to speak well of our families and to talk about them in an understanding way.

There are times when therapists work tremendously hard with a child and become frustrated because they believe the family is not following through at home. They may feel that the progress they are making in therapy is being undermined because the parents are not doing what they are “supposed” to do. I understand that frustration. But when those conversations occur, I try to redirect them toward understanding the family rather than judging them.

Parents are going to learn on their own timeline, just as our children learn on their own timeline. We need to do the best work we can do, look for opportunities to teach, and help parents understand the value of the strategies we are recommending. But judging a parent’s lack of willingness is not going to do anything to make that parent more willing. We need to build relationships. We need to demonstrate the value of what we are doing. And we need to do those things without being heavy-handed or judgmental.

This does not mean we cannot discuss genuine concerns about a child’s treatment or a family’s difficulty implementing recommendations. Those conversations are often necessary. But there is an important difference between discussing a problem in order to solve it and criticizing people because they are not doing what we wish they would do. We should be careful about that distinction.

We Are Not Trying to Make Children Like Us

Ultimately, we need to remember that the children we serve are their own individual people. They come from families with histories, relationships, values, and traditions that deserve our consideration. Their lives will not necessarily look like ours, and they do not need to. We are not trying to take away their cultures. We are not trying to make them think exactly as we think, behave exactly as we behave, or value everything that we value. We are trying to help them learn skills that will improve their lives, increase their opportunities, strengthen their relationships, and help them navigate the challenges they encounter.

Sometimes we will need to explain why we believe a particular intervention is important. Sometimes families will agree with our recommendations, and sometimes they may have concerns or prefer a different approach. Those conversations are part of responsible professional practice. We should be willing to explain our reasoning, listen to families' perspectives, and work together to identify goals and procedures that are both effective and respectful. If we can approach families with the same kindness, patience, and understanding that we would hope to receive if we were in unfamiliar circumstances, we can build relationships that make our work more meaningful and our interventions more effective.

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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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