The Challenges We Don’t See

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Why understanding a family’s circumstances requires compassion rather than judgment

When a family brings a child to us for therapy, we are usually focused on a particular set of concerns. We may be evaluating behavior problems, communication difficulties, developmental delays, or deficits in important daily living skills.

These are the things we have been trained to address, and they are naturally the things that occupy much of our attention.

But it is important to remember that the concerns we are addressing may represent only a small portion of the challenges that family is facing.

We may see a child for several hours a day and develop a detailed understanding of their behavior and learning needs, while knowing relatively little about the circumstances of the people who care for them.

When Attendance Becomes Difficult

At our clinic, we have sometimes had children who arrive late to therapy on a regular basis.

This can be frustrating because we have plans. We have an order of activities, instructional opportunities, and routines that we have developed to help the children learn.

When a child arrives late, they may miss important parts of that routine. We may have to adjust our schedule or find ways to incorporate missed activities later in the day.

It would be easy to become frustrated with the parents.

But there have been occasions when, after several weeks of these difficulties, we learned that the parents were going through a divorce. The child was spending time in different households, and the parents were struggling to coordinate transportation and schedules.

Suddenly, what appeared to be a problem with punctuality made a great deal more sense.

The parents were managing a difficult family transition while still trying to make sure their child received the services they needed.

Understanding that did not make the scheduling challenges disappear, but it changed how we understood and responded to them.

Challenges We Could Not Have Anticipated

On another occasion, a child began missing therapy repeatedly over a period of several weeks.

We did not initially understand what was happening.

Eventually, we learned that the family had needed to travel back to Ecuador, their country of origin, to address important immigration documentation so that they could return to the United States with the appropriate paperwork.

They had to leave behind their routines, their work, and much of their daily life in order to navigate a complicated legal and administrative process.

For us, the immediate concern had been missed therapy sessions.

For the family, the concern was considerably larger.

They were trying to make sure they could continue living in the United States and provide stability for their family.

Experiences like this remind me that we often know very little about the challenges families are facing outside the clinic.

Families Have Lives Beyond Therapy

Consider the experiences of a family that has immigrated to the United States.

In addition to the ordinary responsibilities of raising children, the parents may be learning a new language, navigating unfamiliar schools and healthcare systems, establishing financial stability, or trying to understand laws and administrative requirements that differ considerably from those in their country of origin.

They may have difficulty finding familiar foods, obtaining important documents, arranging transportation, or communicating with people in positions of authority.

Some families may also face uncertainty related to immigration status or separation from extended family members.

These challenges are not experienced by every immigrant family, of course, and many families possess tremendous resources, resilience, and community support.

But the possibility of these additional demands should influence how we understand the circumstances of the families we serve.

We should not assume that because a parent is having difficulty participating in therapy, they are uninterested in their child's progress.

They may simply be managing more than we realize.

The Limits of Time and Resources

As professionals, we may be eager for parents to participate in every aspect of the treatment process.

We may want them to attend meetings, practice new skills at home, complete recommended activities, communicate frequently with staff, and implement strategies consistently throughout the day.

These may all be reasonable goals, but families do not have unlimited time, energy, or resources.

A parent may be working multiple jobs. Another may have several children with competing needs. Another may be caring for an elderly relative or managing a household without much outside support.

Some parents may have reliable transportation and flexible work schedules. Others may struggle to get their children to therapy at all.

We have families in which a single parent is working and must rely on other people to pick up their child. Sometimes a parent has to leave work to come to the clinic. Sometimes transportation arrangements fall through, or something happens at work that makes it impossible to arrive at the expected time.

These situations are difficult for us as a business. We have staff schedules, financial obligations, and responsibilities to other families.

But we also have to understand that these parents did not ask to be in a situation where their child requires specialized therapy services.

They may wish that they could simply put their child on the school bus every morning and have the same schedule as other families.

Instead, they are managing transportation, appointments, therapy schedules, and the additional responsibilities associated with their child's needs.

The fact that one family can attend therapy more frequently than another does not mean that one family loves their child more.

Likewise, a parent’s inability to participate in every recommended activity does not necessarily reflect a lack of commitment.

We need to distinguish between what we would ideally like families to do and what they actually have the capacity to do.

Helping Families Navigate Difficult Systems

Sometimes our role involves helping families access resources that are difficult for them to obtain independently.

We have helped parents navigate processes for obtaining devices, equipment, and services that may be available to their children but are difficult to access because of language barriers or unfamiliar administrative systems.

Something that seems relatively straightforward to a person who speaks English comfortably and understands the local systems may be considerably more challenging for someone who does not.

When we can help families understand those processes, complete necessary steps, or connect with appropriate resources, we may remove barriers that would otherwise interfere with the child’s progress.

We should not assume that a family has failed to obtain something because they do not care enough to pursue it.

Sometimes they simply need someone to help them understand how the process works.

Socioeconomic Differences Matter

Socioeconomic circumstances influence many aspects of family life, including the resources available for children’s learning and development.

We may recommend particular toys, instructional materials, communication devices, or household arrangements because we believe they would be helpful to a child.

But not every family can afford those things.

We should be careful not to place families in situations where they feel judged or inadequate because they cannot purchase the materials we recommend.

If an item is genuinely important for a child’s treatment, we should consider whether we can provide it ourselves, identify a less expensive alternative, or help the family locate available community resources, grants, or other forms of assistance.

Sometimes the most effective intervention is not the one that requires the most specialized materials. It is the one that can be implemented reliably using the people, objects, routines, and resources already available in the child’s life.

A program that depends on resources a family does not have may be poorly suited to that family, regardless of how effective it appears on paper.

Expectations Should Reflect Capacity

If we ask a family to implement a complicated behavior plan at home, we need to consider whether the plan is realistic within their circumstances.

Can the parent understand the instructions? Do they have the time and resources necessary to implement them? Does the plan fit naturally into family routines? Have we provided sufficient training and support?

If the answer to these questions is no, we should not simply blame the parent when the plan is not implemented as intended.

We should examine the plan.

Our job is to develop interventions that are both effective and feasible. That may mean simplifying procedures, reducing unnecessary demands, or identifying a smaller number of meaningful strategies that a family can use consistently.

Grace Is Part of Good Practice

I believe we need to extend a considerable amount of grace to the families we serve.

We may wish that a parent could attend more meetings, practice skills more frequently, or respond to our recommendations more quickly. But wishing that a family had greater capacity does not give them that capacity.

We need to work with the circumstances that actually exist.

That does not mean abandoning important goals or failing to communicate concerns when a child needs additional support. It means approaching those conversations with an understanding that families may be doing the best they can with the resources available to them.

We are invited into people’s lives because they need help. We should be careful not to make their lives more difficult through unnecessary demands, unrealistic expectations, or judgments about circumstances we do not fully understand.

If we can recognize the challenges families face and respond with practical assistance rather than criticism, we may be able to accomplish far more for their children.

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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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