The Families We Serve

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Why cultural diversity is an opportunity to become better teachers, therapists, and behavior analysts

One of the tremendous opportunities we have as behavior analysts, therapists, and teachers is the opportunity to help children who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. These children have different histories, come from different places, speak different languages, and belong to families whose values and experiences may be very different from our own.

This presents challenges, certainly, but it also presents a tremendous opportunity. It is an opportunity for us as professionals to expand our perspective on the kinds of challenges families face, the behaviors children exhibit, and the ways children respond to different adults. It is an opportunity to recognize that there are myriad styles of teaching, parenting, instruction, training, and nurturing, and many different expressions of the love between a parent and child or the care between a teacher and student.

At our small clinic, we serve children from families whose roots extend to Mexico, Central America, Nepal, the Middle East, Myanmar, and other parts of the world. Many of our students hear one language at home and another at school or in therapy. Some parents speak Spanish, others Nepali, Arabic, Burmese, or other languages. The children themselves may be learning to communicate in one language, two languages, or through other forms of communication altogether.

It is important for us to remember that language differences involve more than simply having different words for the same things. Language is intertwined with culture, and culture influences how people understand and respond to the world around them. It can shape how people communicate emotions and

feelings, how they understand relationships, how they approach challenges, and how they determine the right thing to do in different situations.

Without having grown up in another culture or spent significant time within it, we cannot assume that we understand all the ways that language, history, and cultural experiences have shaped another person's perspective. Even when we speak the same language, we may not share the same understanding of respect, responsibility, affection, discipline, or what it means to be a good parent or teacher.

And, of course, people who share a language or come from the same country do not necessarily share the same values. Each family has its own history, its own relationships, and its own ways of understanding the world.

Recognizing Our Own Values

One of the first things we must do if we want to work effectively with families whose experiences differ from ours is to recognize our own values.

What are your guiding principles? What do you believe is important? What behaviors do you admire in others? What attitudes do you champion and celebrate? What do you believe children should learn, and what do you believe adults should do to help them learn?

These questions are worth considering because the things we value may be different from the things other people value.

Without recognizing this, the tendency is for each of us to assume that we are right and everyone else is wrong. We may assume that our way of doing things is the most logical, the most effective, or simply the most reasonable. When someone approaches a situation differently, we may conclude that their approach is less thoughtful or less appropriate than our own.

That is a dangerous assumption for someone whose profession involves helping other people.

We are trained to identify behaviors, evaluate environmental variables, and develop interventions. But our training does not give us the authority to decide for another family what they should value or what kind of person their child should become.

We bring professional knowledge and experience to the relationship. Families bring knowledge of their children, their histories, their circumstances, and their hopes for the future. Both are important.

Differences Are Not Deficits

Cultural differences do not always involve nationality, ethnicity, or language. They can also involve socioeconomic circumstances, family structure, religious traditions, community expectations, or the part of town in which someone lives.

A family whose daily life differs from ours may have developed routines and priorities that make perfect sense within the circumstances of their lives, even when those routines would be unfamiliar to us.

For example, we might place a high value on a child becoming independent in certain daily living skills. Another family may place a greater emphasis on family members caring for one another and may not

consider the same degree of independence necessary or desirable.

Neither perspective should automatically be treated as evidence that one family understands child development better than the other. Instead, we should ask what skills would be meaningful and useful for that particular child and family.

This does not mean that every cultural practice is equally appropriate or that we should abandon our professional responsibilities when values differ. Children still have rights, safety matters, and our interventions must remain ethical and effective. But it does mean that we should be careful not to confuse our personal preferences with professional necessities.

The Opportunity Before Us

When we meet families whose lives differ from ours, we have an opportunity to learn something that we did not know before. We may discover different ways of expressing affection, different expectations for children, different ways of organizing family life, or different approaches to solving problems.

We may also discover that, beneath those differences, we share some remarkably important values.

Most families want their children to be safe. They want their children to learn, to communicate, to experience meaningful relationships, and to have opportunities for a good life. They may differ in how they understand or pursue those goals, but those common concerns give us a place to begin.

Our task is not to eliminate the differences between ourselves and the families we serve. It is to understand those differences well enough that we can use our knowledge and skills to add value to their lives.

And if we approach that task with humility, curiosity, and genuine respect, we may find that the families we serve teach us nearly as much as we teach their children.

Continue learning

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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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