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## Culturally Sensitive Communication

Professionals in education are increasingly dealing with children with diverse cultural backgrounds, such as youngsters with a migration or refugee background. Providing this group with adequate support requires an understanding of behaviours or reactions that stem from cultural experiences and forms of culturally sensitive communication. This article explores the most common bottlenecks and some solution directions. You can also use these tips when interacting with refugee children and families.

What am I allowed to say? What am I not allowed to say? Am I being tolerant enough? Am I being clear enough? How do I check if my message has come across clearly? What does the term 'culture' stand for in the first place, and do 'cultures' even exist? These are some of the questions that some people struggle with more than others.



There are four forms of communication that almost always go together: verbal communication, nonverbal communication, para-verbal communication, and communication patterns. Para-verbal communication refers to the use of tone, speech rates, pauses or hiccups that allow the message to take on a different meaning. Communication patterns strongly influence the content and level of the relationship of an interaction. An example to illustrate: In some cultures, people generally communicate directly.

That means that when someone says 'a', they mean 'a'. In many non-Western cultures, indirect communication styles are more common. When people in those cultures say 'a', they do so with such intonation, pitch, and emphasis or with a certain facial expression (non-verbal) that everyone from that culture understands that what is meant is 'b'. It is helpful for education professionals to know that there might be different communication patterns than those to which they are accustomed.

Expectations that do not come true and communication problems can lead to mistrust and disappointment on both sides. We now know that accessibility and quality of education can also depend on the ability of professionals and institutions to deal with differences in background, education, gender, migration history, and other relevant distinctions.

This requires knowledge, culturally sensitive skills, and communication. In the case of refugees, it also requires empathy for what it means to have had to leave your country, work, and loved ones. Perhaps to have lived in fear, uncertainty, and war for a long time or endured torture, rape, or violence. Building trust is critical here. One way to do this is to actively invest in getting to know and understand the child and their family. Talking about their background, family, and life in their home country, the experiences that led to migration or flight, and their feelings about this, help to gain trust.

### Effective culture-sensitive communication

It is stated that the moment a person says something, they simultaneously perceive the nonverbal reaction of the other person in response to what is being said. If the listener raises an eyebrow or gives an affirmative nod, this influences the course of the conversation. Thus, there is a permanent simultaneous interaction. One can assume that we are always communicating. Even failed communication, such as when a misunderstanding occurs, has consequences for the further course of the communication and relationship. Every interaction, whether effective or not, should be seen as communication. Then when a misunderstanding arises, you have to communicate about it; we can eliminate miscommunications precisely by communicating about them.

### How to effectively communicate in a cultural sensitive way:

#### General

- Remember that the quality of any intervention stands or falls with interaction.
- You can only eliminate miscommunication through communication!
- Be approachable. Talking about everyday parenting or other ordinary subjects is valuable to many parents. It helps them become familiar with the new society.

#### Attitude

- Respect the differences.
- Be curious. Show sincere interest in the person in front of you: be open, real, and respectfully inquisitive.
- Be aware that the differences between individual families can be significant, even if people come from the same country. As with 'native' families, the role of fathers and mothers, grandparents, and other family members in parenting can vary from family to family.

#### Skills


- Start by being welcoming. Build a relationship.
- Take your time and introduce yourself: who you are, your role, and what you do.
- Discuss occasion and framework; why are we having this conversation, what are we going to discuss, and where is it leading? Why is this important to you and me? What do you want to address in this conversation?
- Take into account non-verbal communication, which is 70% of communication! For example, while speaking, the distance you keep from someone, if you touch someone while speaking, whether you look at them or not, the speed at which you speak, your intonation, and more.
- Ask open-ended questions. It's not polite in some cultures to say no. Keep cultural differences in mind.
- Practice "asking back". Enquire if you have explained it correctly, and ask about what's been agreed. Ask what the person will do now and if they will include the family in these discussions. Let the person explain what they have understood from your story.
- Talk clearly and slowly when there are language problems, using short sentences.
- Refrain from assuming there has been a mutual understanding. Check regularly with the person that you have understood what they are telling you. They appreciate the reconfirmation and feel they are being taken seriously.
- Gather information about the child and their family background.
- You can use the parent or youngster you are talking to as an 'informant' to learn more about their background. Don't presume the knowledge you have about their country or culture is "the truth" for all families.

### About culture

- Culture is taught during upbringing; we learn the cultural values that apply within the groups to which we belong.
- People are (mostly) not aware of these values. As a result, culture often leads to misunderstandings.
- Cultural values play an essential role in thought patterns and communication styles, from what people talk about to what they don't.
- Culture partly determines how complaints and illnesses are explained and presented

### The cultural iceberg

Culture, in particular, seems to be under the surface of the iceberg. The things you can perceive, such as language or (sometimes) appearance, only make up 10% of the culture somewhere or in someone; the famous tip of the iceberg. Most of it is under water and often subconsciously so.



- Behaviour: hairstyle, flags, symbols, clothing style, gestures; some things are only understood by people of the same culture. They are visible to people of another culture but often misunderstood.
- Values and standards are views underlying the cultural codes taught. Values are, therefore, not visible, but they are most profound in the (organisational) culture and are the most difficult to change.