



Guide to Cultural Awareness for State and Local PTAs

**National
PTA[®]**
everychild.one voice.[®]

Every person has a culture – the many customs and beliefs that shape our perspectives and create a lens through which we see others. We are our own experts in the cultural experiences that influence our lives. Yet, when we try to communicate with people from other cultures, we need to ask ourselves whether or not we are doing so in an effective and appropriate manner. It is impossible to become an expert in every culture. Even so, we can become more culturally aware, understand our own cultural influences, and respect and value the differences of other individuals and groups.

Every day provides us an opportunity to seek out experiences and situations that help us learn about cultures that are different from our own. Engaging in continuous learning about cultural commonalities and differences can help us expand our ability to communicate effectively with other people, especially at school.

If we strive to learn from and about those with whom we interact, we will naturally become more culturally informed.

Tips for culturally informed communication

- **Think beyond race and ethnicity.** Opportunities to expand our cultural understanding exist everywhere, especially when we consider culture beyond its association with ethnicity. Culture is central to our identity and, as such, may be seen or unseen by others. Culture is shaped by personal experiences that may include: ethnic and racial identity; religion; age; educational level; body size; heritage and family tradition; physical and cognitive abilities; sexual orientation; gender identity; and geographic and socioeconomic experiences.
- **Think outside your own box.** We are influenced by our own values, beliefs, biases and life experiences. We need to carefully consider how our perspectives affect our understanding of other cultures and avoid making assumptions about others based on our own experiences. Becoming culturally aware starts with recognizing the limitations of our own cultural knowledge.
- **Experience culture.** Consider experiential ways that you can learn about other cultures and endeavor to participate in activities that may not be familiar to you. When possible, take part in social, community and educational activities like viewing films, reading books, and attending faith-based services, festivals, parades, concerts, sporting events, art exhibits, workshops and lectures.
- **Use language that evokes images of people actively engaged in life** when working with people with disabilities. Avoid phrases that suggest helplessness or tragedy. For example, say “Bob uses a wheelchair” instead of “Bob is in a wheelchair.”
- **Listen carefully.** Hearing is not necessarily listening. Our own perceptions, biases and expectations sometimes make it difficult to really listen to and comprehend both overt and covert messages. Be mindful to focus on and identify the information being conveyed.

“Recognize that common colloquialisms, slang terms and cliché phrases can be culturally specific and may be confusing.”

“People often consider eye contact as a sign of honesty and interest in conversation, but some cultures view direct eye contact as a sign of disrespect.”

- **Learn by asking.** People feel respected when others are genuinely interested in learning about their views and perspectives. Consider incorporating questions into conversations that demonstrate your desire to learn more about others’ cultural experiences. Use simple or open-ended questions that encourage dialogue, such as: “What do you think?” “How can I be of assistance to you?” “What information is important for me to know about you and your culture?” “If I was a member of your community, how would I most likely react to/cope with this situation?”
- **Avoid insensitive comments.** In group contexts, individuals sometimes make insensitive and hurtful comments about others (e.g., jokes, slurs, etc.). Do not reinforce this behavior. If you are comfortable doing so, make known your discomfort with what has been said and ask that no more insensitive comments be made.
- **Tune in to non-verbal behaviors.** Sometimes, behaviors can provide more details about how someone is reacting to a situation than what they may be comfortable saying. It is important to recognize welcoming behaviors as well as those that may be defensive so that you can adjust your approach accordingly. Similarly, be aware of your own body language. Does standing while others are sitting demonstrate authority, or aggressiveness?
- **Expand your comfort zone.** It is likely that there will be individuals or cultural groups with whom you do not have experience working. Acknowledge this challenge and make an effort to learn as much as possible about the individual or group so that you can build your confidence and bolster your outreach. Ask questions to make it clear that you want to learn more and to ensure that you’re delivering information in a way that is useful.
- **Make local connections.** What community-based organizations and venues are respected and trusted by those with whom you work? Organizations like social clubs, advocacy groups, religious institutions, civic groups, unions, colleges and universities can help you deliver your messages in a forum that is relevant to your audience. In some cases, you may want to partner with leaders from these organizations to help you communicate even more effectively.
- **Exchange stories.** Storytelling and personal sharing are important communication techniques that transcend most cultures. Consider sharing relevant personal stories as a way to start a conversation or build rapport.
- **Respect language preferences.** Before approaching a new group of people, consider whether the materials you have to offer or your presentation need to be adapted to ensure that you are understood. In some cases, it might be necessary to translate materials or invite an interpreter to the presentation. Other times, such as when communicating with young children, simply adjusting your vocabulary might suffice.
- **Honor flexibility in people’s self-identification.** We may make assumptions about people’s cultural identity while they may have an entirely different perception of themselves. Listen for information about self-perception. For example, do they consider themselves as having a spouse or a life partner? People may identify with a particular aspect of their diversity at different times (e.g., being a lesbian may be very salient in some circumstances but not in others).

Consider this:

Engaging the community can help you communicate.

- Religious beliefs and spirituality play a significant role in many communities. The opinions of religious and other spiritual leaders may be important to those with whom you work and may have an impact on their receptivity to certain (including psychological) information. Find out whether or not inviting faith-based leaders to partner with you is a welcome strategy.
- Culture can influence the manner in which individuals express their emotions. To best communicate with people in any community, it is important that you be open to differences in how people express their feelings. Ask community leaders to help you understand any differences and to identify effective ways to communicate and/or provide support. For example, individuals in some cultures may be uncomfortable with any type of confrontation and, as a result, may go along with an idea you present when in reality they do not support it.
- Some cultures mistrust civil institutions such as police and law enforcement, health care systems, disaster relief, mental health agencies and others. This can present unique challenges – especially in disaster situations – that may need to be addressed. Consider partnering with individuals who are perceived as community leaders or natural helpers, or organizations the community trusts. Gaining their support can increase your credibility and help you deliver services more effectively. Learn about the culturally appropriate ways to engage community members (for example, speaking to elders, offering gifts or sharing food). Make sure you know who can endorse or authorize your presence in the community.

What is ...

- **Culture?** The belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices and social institutions, including psychological processes. All individuals are cultural beings and have a cultural, ethnic and racial heritage.
- **Race?** The category to which others assign individuals on the basis of physical characteristics such as skin color or hair type. These characteristics can be the basis of generalizations and/or stereotypes.
- **Ethnicity?** The acceptance of the group mores and practices of one's culture of origin, and the concomitant sense of belonging.
- **Multiculturalism and Diversity?** Terms that have been used interchangeably to include aspects of identity stemming from gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status or age.
 - **Multiculturalism?** A broad scope of dimensions of race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, class status, education, religious/spiritual orientation and other cultural dimensions, all of which are critical aspects of an individual's identity.
 - **Diversity?** An individual's social identity, including age, sexual orientation, physical disability, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, workplace role/position, religious/spiritual orientation and work/family concerns.

American Psychological Association, 2002. *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists.*