

Essential Tools for Workforce Development

Building trust and rapport

This resource is part of a series of resources in the online Diversity in Disability Toolkit.

For further information, see:

diversityindisability.org

We work in culturally and linguistically diverse environment. Every day we engage with a wide variety of people from a range of backgrounds.

Support Workers are at the frontline of cultural engagement. Engaging with new and diverse cultures can be challenging. The good news is, positive intent and a commitment to engaging with people from diverse cultural backgrounds is a key element of success. You don't need to know everything about every community you engage with. It does however help to know some key do's and don'ts and ensure Support Workers have access to information in relation to key cultural groups in their community.

As a Support Worker, working closely with a person and their family in the home environment, it helps to focus on a few key areas of cultural behaviors to develop rapport and engage with clients and their families.

- Greetings and gestures
- Hospitality and 'good manners'
- Hygiene
- Physical contact and gender norms

Greetings and gestures

People in all cultures have protocols and norms for introducing each other and engaging with people for the first time. Physical contact is normal in many cultures.

In many European cultures kissing is common, for men handshakes are the norm. Other cultural practices can range from bowing in Japan to nose touching in Maori culture. It's not always necessary to engage in a greeting protocol you aren't familiar or comfortable with. It is however helpful to know what to expect.

For example:

- When you enter someone's home what are the appropriate ways to meet and greet?
- What are appropriate physical greetings for example hand shakes?
- Are there any expectations around eye contact?

Hospitality and 'good manners'

What's considered 'normal' in the realm of good manners very much depends on your own culture. A key element of hospitality relevant to Support Workers is the protocol observed when visiting someone else's home.

For example, in most Asian cultures, shoes are removed before entering a home. In many cultures, it is considered essential to offer a drink or snack.

It's good to find out:

- What are the norms for food & drink?
 - How is food eaten?
 - In what order?
 - Is it appropriate for you to have a snack with your client
 - What utensils are used?
 - If someone offers you food or drink is it expected that you will refuse politely but be fed regardless.
 - If you have an empty plate does that mean you are still hungry and your plate will be refilled?
 - Is it expected that you will eat everything on your plate?
 - What are the norms for washing up – should you help or not?

Hygiene

One of the elements of culture where misunderstandings and negative judgements can most often occur is in relation to concepts of hygiene.

For example, in Thailand, dishes are washed in cold water by rinsing first, then wiping with a cloth with detergent on it, then rinsing again. From a Thai perspective, to put all dishes in soapy water together is unhygienic.

From a Western perspective, it can equally be considered unhygienic to wash dishes in cold water. The reality is, germs aren't killed at the temperature of most hot water used for washing in the West – so all styles are equally effective! The challenge is, concepts of 'clean' and 'dirty' are taught and culturally reinforced throughout life.

It's important to be aware of different notions and concepts of hygiene when engaging across cultures.

- What is the attitude towards phlegm and mucous? Is it appropriate to sniff, use a tissue, or spit?
- What is considered 'clean' when using the toilet? Toilet paper, water to wash, or ...?
- How many times is it normal to shower or bathe in a week? A day?

Physical contact and gender norms

A key element of culture which is important to understand, is the cultural expectations of gender, ie. the roles of men, women, boys and girls. It's also important to know how you will be related to, based on your gender and the gender of your client.

For example, is it considered taboo for non-related men and women to be alone together? What is considered a sexual advance in different cultural contexts?

Things to think about include:

- What is culturally appropriate clothing to wear in that household?
- What are the gender norms – particularly in relation to touching?
 - Can men touch women?
 - Can women touch men?
 - What are the appropriate boundaries?

The key is to ask questions, be willing to engage and share what we know.

You probably won't get it right every time, but the right intention makes a big difference.

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