

## Hearing Parents in Every Language: An Invitation to ECE Professionals

by Holly Elissa Bruno

### How far can the willow bend?

The wise woman said, "To find your treasure, look in your own backyard." Child care professionals do not have to travel far to find the riches of the world. Children and their families from Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Romania, Nigeria, Kuwait, Creek and Cherokee nations, urban and countryside America, bring opulent, vibrant, runny-nosed treasures to our programs.

In appreciation of these treasures, we invite each child and her family to be "at home" in our centers. We want everyone to feel welcome, respected, honored in the richness of her diversity. NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct reminds us to respect each family's differences.

What happens, however, when one of our core values clashes with the new family's beliefs and practices?

- Kaori's (age 1) mom tells you her daughter must use the toilet.
- Six-year old Amalia sleeps in the same bed with her grandparents.
- Emmaline Rae's dad declares no man is allowed to look at his baby daughter's uncovered body.
- Jinhee's mom appears dispassionate about those deep purple bruises on Jinhee's bottom.
- Mr. Khan instructs you to treat his son like a prince, and his daughter like the obedient wife she is betrothed to become.



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When is the traditional *American* standard to be upheld? Governing bodies, representing dominant cultures, name what is and is not acceptable. Our courts, for example, uphold English as the language of our classrooms. State licensing regulations mandate standardized behaviors. NAEYC sets developmentally appropriate practices. Each one of us has our own sense of right and wrong. Yet, each child is special.

This article is a gentle invitation for each of us to consider how open we can be to the richness of each child, within the context of professional rules and regulations. Consider how far you can flex to accommodate differences while upholding required standards. How far does the willow bend before it breaks?

### Assumptions, Judgments, Wonderment: Ask and Listen

Rules, written or unwritten, lead to expectations for appropriate behavior. When a child of a culture other than my own comes to me, I naturally respond according to my own assumptions.

For example, I expect girls and boys to have a right to the same opportunities. I was raised when girls were shut out of career choices, and boys were not allowed to cry. I have fought for gender equality. Mr. Khan's heritage allows more rights to males than females. He asks if I will treat Amin as a prince, while teaching Roshan obedience. My gut reacts righteously: "Never!" I have no room for wonderment, only judgment.

What if instead, I set aside for the moment my assumptions so that I can ASK AND LISTEN to Amin and Roshan's dad? Can I open myself to hear about the traditions, practices, and hopes of this man who differs from me? If I listen in wonderment, might I learn how this father loves his children? That he wants the best for them? That he wants to prepare them for success by the standards of his religious and cultural tradition?

“Ask and Listen” questions are open-ended. Examples include:

- Tell me about your child.
- What activities does your family like to do together?
- What is important to you in raising your child?
- How was your weekend/vacation/afternoon together?
- What are ways your child feels comforted, soothed?
- Is there anything you would like me to know about your child?

If I can ASK AND LISTEN, I may be able to find common ground. I may be able to find that quieter place inside myself where I relax my ego and open myself to wonderment. I “put to the side” my story that Mr. Khan is sexist, while I listen for ways to partner in support of his children.

In the end, I share with him the philosophy of our program, that we treat each child as precious. I invite him to see if together, we can find a way for Amin and Roshan to feel comfortable in our program, given our differences.

## Sitting at the same side of the table

When I think differences can never be bridged, I remind myself of President Jimmy Carter’s negotiating a peace agreement between two archenemies. President Carter created a safe, non-judgmental space of wonderment for the leaders of two warring powers, Israel and Egypt, to find common ground. Anwar Sadat and Menachim Begin carried the scars of centuries of jihad. Sadat and Begin did not want to be in the same room, and certainly not at the same side of the table.

Something inspired President Carter to invite each man to talk about his grandchildren. “Tell us about them, what they are like, what they love, what they want to be,” encouraged Carter. Slowly the stiffly defended men softened into gentle, beaming grandfathers with endless stories of delight. In the end, leaders Sadat and Begin agreed that the world should be a safer, saner place for their grandchildren than it had been for them. The peace accord was signed. A humble President Carter added his own cultural history in announcing the

accord: “In my religious heritage, we say ‘blessed are the peacemakers.’”

An ECE professional, by sitting at the “same side of the table” with a parent from another culture, can be a peacemaker. By looking together for common ground in how we can serve the children, we may in wonderment find ways to honor the cultures we represent.

## When the dominant culture prevails

When does the willow bend too far and break? When might valuing differences go too far? At times, our state, federal, and professional standards mandate that we enforce what is right for the majority, while negating the difference of the minority.

For example, every child has been mandated to learn English in this country. The necessity for a common language has meant that children raised with “minority” languages, have to abandon their primary way of communicating at school.

This principle is the same in our profession: for the health and safety of the children, standardized practices prevail. Universal precautions like hand washing and wearing of plastic gloves are required. Class sizes are mandated. Child abuse and neglect are criminal offenses in America.

By law, we are mandated reporters of abuse. What do we do when a child has puffy red streaks on her back? Some of us immediately file an abuse report with the state. Others talk to the parent first. The parent explains “coining” is a practice her culture uses to heal a fever. “Look how much better the child is!” answers the proud mom. Do you report abuse?

Remember Jinhee’s bruised bottom? Jinhee is my Korean-born daughter’s middle name. Mongolian spots polka-dotted her bottom throughout her preschool years until they faded away. Such purple pigmentation is not unusual with Korean children. Her brother Nick’s ear lobe still appears bruised. If the observer had failed to ASK AND LISTEN to me as a parent, he may have reported me for abuse.

America has a painful history of denying rights to minority cultures. Recall the injustice done to Japanese-Americans during World War II. Our Supreme Court banished them to camps, leaving behind homes, trust, businesses, and respect. Our country’s history of denying human rights to African-Americans sadly speaks for itself.

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Balancing the need to uphold accustomed ways of the majority, while respecting the unaccustomed ways of the minority, is a dilemma that may always be with us. The “letter of the law” does not always reflect the “spirit of the law.”

When we sit at the same side of the table, however, our differences do not divide us. They unite us in facing a common problem. Sadat and Begin peered deep beneath the surface of their differences until they found their common dilemma. They could then sit together on the same side of the table, examine their common problem, and unite on its solution.

## The “Ask and Listen” practice

Here are the steps to asking and hearing. I call this the “wonderment” approach as opposed to jumping-to-conclusions response.

- *Acknowledge the assumptions* I bring to the conversation. This includes noticing what offends me at a gut level. I assumed Mr. Khan was sexist and wrong.
- *Set the assumption to the side.* This does not mean I let go of the assumption, even if I could will myself to do so. I name and hold the assumption off to the side, to better hear the other person.
- *Keep my eyes on the prize of serving children and families.* I choose to learn about the family’s practices, beliefs, desires.

- *Find common ground.* Seek ways in which the parent and I agree to interact with the child.
- *Name the differences.* Note what the parent and I cannot negotiate.
- *Review the standards and requirements* of laws, regulations, accreditation, program philosophy. Work together to: a) find ways to honor the difference while acting “in the spirit of the law;” or b) help the parent find another center that better fits his/her needs.

## Eyes on the prize

Each of the families in the following case studies is worthy of respect. The life experiences and beliefs of some of these families/staff members may differ from your own. As you read these real-life situations, ask yourself:

- What assumptions might I bring to this situation?
- How could I “ask and listen” for what the parties desire?
- At what point, if any, would I feel I must tell the parent/staff member that her/his practice is not acceptable?

Each family’s diversity is to be honored. At the same time, state and federal rules and regulations mandate certain standardized practices. What decisions can you make when the individual and the dominant standards do not match?

## Case Studies

**Kaori** — Kaori’s parents recently arrived from Japan. Much of Kaori’s care has been given by her beloved grandmom, who has just passed away. Grandmom always gently placed Kaori on the baby toilet when grandmom felt Kaori’s little body move as if she were ready to go. Mom says Kaori has come to “know” those feelings inside herself. Kaori’s teacher Leah, who has just gotten an A in her developmentally appropriate practices course, is offended that Kaori is being “forced” to behave this way.

**Jinhee** — First grader Jinhee is a quiet, cautious child, who doesn’t like group activities. Observant Jinhee is quick to learn and try things on her own. She always comes to your afterschool program attractively dressed and immaculate. Bruce, the new lead teacher, notices dark purple bruises on Jinhee’s back when she wears a halter-top. Jinhee’s usual teacher is out for the week. Bruce comes to you to say he must report Jinhee’s mom, a single working parent, for abuse.

For more Case Studies related to this article, visit the “Free Resources” section of [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).

## Case studies

### Tyrone

Tyrone is busy, active, spontaneous, and commanding at age seven. He doesn't like to sit still. He interacts confidently with children and adults of any background. When Tyrone play-acts the daddy, he spansks the boy doll for "foolishness" and yells he's going to hit that baby "upside the head." Teacher's aide, Rebecca, and team teacher Margaret disagree over what to say to Tyrone's dad. The Anglo teachers fear they might say something offensive to this African-American parent.

### Amin and Roshan

Mr. Khan chose your program because your brochures say "honoring diversity" is a high priority. He notes your NAEYC accreditation and has read their standards for valuing differences. He wants to enroll his son and daughter, Amin and Roshan. Amin is a prince in his family; Roshan was betrothed at birth to become one of seven obedient wives of a wealthy man back home. Mr. Khan expects you to respect his culture by helping his children prepare for their future roles.

### Amalia

Amalia is a happy, free-spirited, physically loving six year old. She is very close to her mom's family, all of who emigrated from Cuba. Amalia speaks Spanish and English fluently, often explaining terms to her relatives who come to pick her up. One day, as children are doing a project on their rooms at home, Amalia draws a picture of herself in bed with two adults. She readily tells you she sleeps and snuggles with her grandparents every night. Your team teacher is upset about *lack of boundaries* and inappropriate exposure to sexuality.

### Emmaline Rae

Baby Emmaline Rae's dad, Wilbur, tells her teacher, Luis, that Luis cannot change the baby's diaper. "No man may see my daughter's body, or she will be shamed," Wilbur says. Wilbur is very strong in his fundamentalist religious beliefs about gender roles and modesty. He himself never bathes or changes Emmaline Rae. He relies on his wife, female church and family members, all of whom are strongly supportive. Luis is your best infant teacher, and you are often understaffed.

### Scooter

School-aged Scooter adores dressing up. He is willing to wear anything from a frothy wedding dress to an astronaut suit. He likes wrapping long, colorful scarves around his neck to fly around like the Red Baron aviator or Isadora Duncan. You have to work with other children so they won't make fun of Scooter's theatrical ways. Scooter's dad, Ramon, is fiercely supportive of Scooter's individuality. His other dad, Timothy, urges you to "make Scooter learn to fit in better." Timothy and Ramon arrive at pick-up time to find Scooter playing dress-up with all the girls; boys are out playing soccer. Timothy demands you tell Scooter "in no uncertain terms" never to play dress-up again.

### Laura

Laura's mom, Mrs. Petrezullio, believes her child is perfect. Every time Laura's teachers attempt to share information about Laura's disruptive behavior, Mrs. Petrezullio insists: "Laura never does that at home; you must be provoking her!" On Monday, Laura bit Clarence. On Tuesday, Laura punched Josefina in the belly; on Wednesday, Laura refusing to sit with others at circle time, began to pull everyone's belongings out of their cubbies. Laura often swears to herself, making no sense to others. Laura's teachers want Laura to be evaluated; they are afraid of Mom's reaction.