

Cultural Differences in Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication or body language is an important part of how people communicate and there are differences from culture to culture. Hand and arm gestures, touch, and eye contact (or its lack) are a few of the aspects of non-verbal communication that may vary significantly depending upon cultural background.

Gestures:

There are a number of gestures commonly used in the United States that may have a different meaning and/or be offensive to those from other cultures. One common example is the use of a finger or hand to indicate “come here please”. This is the gesture used to beckon dogs in some cultures and is very offensive. Pointing with one finger is also considered to be rude in some cultures and Asians typically use their entire hand to point to something.

Touch:

While patting a child’s head is considered to be a friendly or affectionate gesture in our culture, it is considered inappropriate by many Asians to touch someone on the head, which is believed to be a sacred part of the body. In the Middle East, the left hand is reserved for bodily hygiene and should not be used to touch another or transfer objects. In Muslim cultures, touch between opposite gendered individuals is generally inappropriate.

Eye contact/gaze:

In mainstream Western culture, eye contact is interpreted as attentiveness and honesty; we are taught that we should “look people in the eye” when talking. In many cultures, however, including Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American, eye contact is thought to be disrespectful or rude, and lack of eye contact does not mean that a person is not paying attention. Women may especially avoid eye contact with men because it can be taken as a sign of sexual interest.

Of special note when working with babies:

Although it is common in Western culture for adults to admire babies and young children and comment upon how cute they are, this is avoided in Hmong and Vietnamese cultures for fear that these comments may be overheard by a spirit that will try to steal the baby or otherwise cause some harm to come to him or her.

More information:

The above is a brief introduction to some of the non-verbal communication differences between cultures. For more information, please refer to other resources found in “Culture and Language Differences” in this toolkit.

Sources:

Joanne Ikeda, M.A., R.D.; University of California, Berkley

Charles Tidwell Jr. Ph.D.; Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan

Providers Guide to Quality and Culture:

<http://erc.msh.org/mainpage.cfm?file=4.6.0.htm&module=provider&language=English>