

Tips for Communicating With Clients & Families

At the heart of cultural competence is learning to communicate effectively with individuals and their families. Here are a few tried and true suggestions:

- When working with people different from yourself, it's important to put your own personal biases aside. Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions. Because a person speaks with an accent does not mean they are not a native-born citizen. Take time to learn about the person you are speaking with, which demonstrates respect and an understanding of cultural competency.
- Establish rapport. In many cultures, it is important to establish some type of relationship before discussing business. Taking a few extra moments to ask questions and learn more about an individual and his/her family often makes an enormous difference in the long run.
- While developing rapport, refrain from discussing topics, such as personal relationships or behaviors that may be misinterpreted. As a practice, avoid making jokes or displaying questionable posters or artwork in your office or workspace.
- If you don't know what their native language is, use the "I Speak" document available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/outreach/translations.htm>, which lists, in 36 different languages, the words "I Speak." Give this document to your clients so they can point out for you which language they speak when they spot it.
- Respect personal space. When you first meet with potential clients, ask them to sit where they feel the most comfortable. This will allow people to choose the personal distance that makes them most comfortable. Similarly, refrain from casually tapping or touching someone, which in some cultures can be perceived as being too familiar.
- Identify the decision maker. Find out who the influential parties are and how they make decisions. It may be important to ask, "Do you want to discuss SNAP with other members of your family?"
- Send a message through children but do not use children as interpreters. For many parents who don't speak English well, their children often serve as conduits for information. They can take home what they received in school—for instance, information on summer programs or SNAP. However, some caution must be taken if a parent brings a child to a meeting to serve as an interpreter. Children may be able to informally convey casual conversation points. However, eligibility for a government program is different. Children may not understand the meaning of technical words such as income and resources. Also, parents may not feel comfortable discussing certain information such as household income in front of their children.
- Ask questions and listen to the answers. Asking questions shows that you really are interested in what a person has to say and his or her perspectives. But pay attention. Do not interrupt your client or try to put words in his or her mouth.
- Check for understanding. In some cultures, people are reluctant to ask questions of authority figures. Explain that asking for clarification is acceptable then ask follow up questions to determine whether they correctly understood you. Ask open-ended questions to ensure the information has been adequately understood.
- Learn greetings and titles of respect in other languages that you commonly encounter.
- Write numbers down. People easily confuse numbers spoken in a new language.