



Addressing Cultural Issues In Teaching “People Safety”

Author Irene van der Zande is the Founder and Executive Director of Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International, which is commonly called Kidpower. Since 1989, Irene has led the creation of curriculum, training of instructors, establishment of centers, and development of the organization. Kidpower is a non-profit organization that has brought empowering effective “People Safety” education to over a million children, teenagers and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures— close to home and around the world. The website at www.kidpower.org offers a free monthly e-newsletter, library of free articles, free audio podcasts, publications for sale, and service information.

In every culture where I have taught “People Safety” skills, including my own, sooner or later someone always says, “But in OUR culture, things are different.” And, of course, this person is right! In EACH culture, many things are different. At Kidpower, we use the term “People Safety” to mean people being emotionally and physically safe with people, including themselves.

The reality is that human bodies are much more the same than they are different. After a career of over forty years in which I have worked with thousands of people from a wonderful variety of cultures, I have come to believe that the essentials of “People Safety” are like breathing – important to the well-being of a human being regardless of culture.

Below are some lessons I have learned about creating cultural competency to address potential obstacles in teaching people how to advocate for and protect the emotional and physical well-being of themselves and others. The purpose is always to build a mutually trusting and respectful relationship with the people from the cultures you want to serve in order to create an effective learning environment.

I. Acknowledge that cultural differences exist and have value.

When teaching personal safety skills to people in societies with strong cultural traditions, it is respectful to show awareness of these traditions and an understanding of their value before suggesting that people change what they are doing. It can be very important to have traditions that show respect, make roles clear so that people know what is expected of them, and observe spiritual practices.

The problem is when certain people in a society, usually women and children, become vulnerable to exploitation, violence and abuse because of confusion about interpretation of some traditions.

Common interpretations of cultural traditions that often lead to conflicts with personal safety include:

- Unequal rights. When men, women and children are in strict social roles, this can create structure and stability in a society – but too often this means that women and children are not allowed to speak up for themselves or to get help to escape from unsafe situations.
- Eye contact. Avoiding eye contact with people in positions of authority can be a mark of respect – but not being able to look people in the eyes can put people in a position of subservience as well as deny them the valuable information available from eye contact.
- Not saying, “No.” Being reluctant to say “No” or “Stop” can keep people from rejecting each other – but makes it hard to set protective boundaries.
- Being physically close. Standing and sitting very close together can build a sense of connection – but staying physically close instead of moving out of reach can be dangerous when an individual or group has a destructive intention to dominate, threaten or attack.
- Expecting displays of affection to show respect and caring. Touch can be a wonderful way of expressing love, of giving attention or of playing – but forcing children to tolerate touch for play, teasing or affection against their wishes (such as hugs, kisses, cheek-pinching, sitting on laps, and roughhousing) makes them more vulnerable to being abused.
- Prejudice against specific groups. People within societies or social groups often create a sense of identity by defining themselves as being better than other groups – but tolerating prejudice and making negative judgments because of race, religion, economic status, class, sexual orientation or identity, disability, or family situation almost always leads to exploitation, violence and abuse.
- Perceptions of honor and power. It is normal to want to feel proud of one’s family, friends, and possessions -- but too many people have died because they got into fights over insults or property.
- Perceptions of propriety. Being demure can make women and girls feel desirable and accepted – but not being able to be forceful verbally and physically when necessary can lead to a sexual assault.
- Beliefs about power and violence. People need to be able to be powerful to protect themselves and their loved ones – but seeing violence as the first and best way to be powerful usually leads to more violence and less safety.
- Valuing communities and relationships more than individual needs. If more people put the good of their communities and relationships ahead of their immediate gratification, the world would be a better place – but when people in communities or relationships are doing things that are destructive, then individuals need to be able to speak up for themselves, both for their own well being and for the longer-term good of their communities and relationships.

2. Point out that societies and cultures are constantly evolving.

Mention some of the changes that have made life better for people from all cultures – medicine, better health practices, more rights or increased knowledge. Find examples to make your point by mentioning celebrities from cultures who your students will relate to. Point out ways that leaders in

their culture have made changes that improved lives. Find quotes from religious texts that support change and protection of people from harm as well as upholding traditions.

Explain that evolution, change and growth are sometimes necessary and inevitable, even if they are uncomfortable and can seem strange at first. Our challenge is to keep what is beautiful, caring and spiritually important in cultural traditions while learning how to adapt so that all societies are promoting caring, respect and safety for all their members.

Give examples of how people from different cultures can easily misunderstand each other and say that our experts have found that it is important for individuals to know how to interact effectively in all the cultures they might be in contact with. For example, looking someone directly in the eyes might be seen as disrespectful in one culture – but looking away might be seen as lacking honesty in another culture. Being direct when disagreeing might be rude in one culture, but not being direct might cause someone from another culture to fail to realize that a disagreement exists.

For example, a teacher promoting diversity in a science department in a university noticed that many of their students from non-Western cultures and a large percentage of their women students were more likely to communicate their thoughts by asking questions rather than by stating, “I disagree. THIS is what I think.” These students valued relationships and community above individual achievement. Their paradigm was that direct disagreement would be undermining of relationships, so they asked questions instead. The problem was that, in the competitive graduate school environment, their contributions and creativity were not being recognized.

The solution was to make everyone aware of this style of communicating and for students from more collaborative cultures and women students to realize that there would be times when they might need to change their style or at least to explain, “One of the ways I express my ideas is by asking questions.”

3. Work with people who your students will accept as role models.

Consult with people who are either part of the culture you are going to be working with or who are very knowledgeable and seen as allies. Find out what specific personal safety problems people are facing, what the cultural obstacles are likely to be when they are learning the skills and what solutions people have found for themselves.

When possible, get the support of your role models to help you teach and coach them to be successful in your demonstrations. Encourage them to become teachers for their community.

In one community, we were asked by the local police to hold a workshop for youth and their parents because a teenager from a local school had been killed when an argument turned into a knife fight. I asked the Police Chief and his Captain, who are both strong men of Latino heritage, to help me demonstrate walking away from an insult.

To start the demonstration, I coached the Police Captain to call his Chief “Stupid!” in Spanish. There was a delighted gasp from our audience as the Police Captain swaggered up to his Chief and yelled, “Estúpido!”

The Chief walked away with calmness, awareness and confidence. He then told our impressed students, “I do not want to see anyone else die or be arrested for murder because of a few unkind words.” His example did more to communicate with the boys we were teaching than anything anyone could have said to them.

4. Study the solutions that are working well for stopping violence and abuse within a culture.

We can learn a lot from how problems are solved in different cultures. In many cultures, people will often use questions, jokes or positive comments to express their thoughts, boundaries or wishes rather than direct statements.

In Tanzania, in Eastern Africa, for example, joking relationships are a long-established way to defuse conflict between tribes who used to be at war with each other, but who now exchange jokes instead. In this culture, joking is also used to stop sexual advances instead of direct refusals. Just as with other forms of boundary-setting, some women within the culture are much better at using jokes to stop unwanted behavior than others.

In order to understand how to use the joking technique as a tool to stop unwanted advances, you could first ask women who are good at it to show you exactly what they do and exactly what a sexual advance might look like in their culture. Sometimes people have trouble explaining behavior like this. If so, you can ask them to show you by setting up a role-play where they use the technique that works for them. Pay attention to their tone of voice, choice of words, facial expressions, gestures, body language, and level of energy. Learn how to do this yourself and add it to the self-protection choices that you offer to all your students.

5. Meet people where they are instead of expecting them to come to where you are.

People from different cultural and religious backgrounds will have a huge range of differences in what is going to be acceptable to them in how personal safety skills are taught. Instead of creating a barrier that will stop students from having access to skills that can save them from horrible experiences, meet people where they are.

For example, part of building trust in many cultures requires taking the time to get to know each other as people before doing any kind of business together. This might mean saying something about one's family or personal background in a way that connects to your students before starting to teach or drinking a cup of tea or coffee together. With martial artists, I always mention that another Co-Founder of Kidpower is a 6th degree Black Belt in Taekwondo. In one community center serving mostly Chinese elders, I said that my sister-in-law is Chinese and had two children and that she was sorry that she could not be with us that day. I also stopped the workshop for a little while in the middle so we could serve someone a birthday cake.

You have to be willing to make adjustments and to separate what is truly essential from what can be changed. For example, suppose you are a man and you are working with a religious group that does not allow men to touch women or to mention anything sexual. With a little flexibility and imagination, you can teach classes that will help women and girls gain self-protection skills to stop sexual assaults where you do not touch students at all and do not make any direct sexual references. In order to accomplish this, you could:

- ask women from the group to be your assistants and give them simple clear directions on how to help teach the girls;
- show girls how to move instead of touching them;
- touch the air near the girls as if you were about to touch them and have them act out what they could say and do to stop you;

- discuss potentially sexual assaults in nonsexual terms such as “If someone tries to bother you, you can...” or “If someone tries to say or do something that is unsafe or not appropriate, you can...”

6. Get ideas from your students about what will best meet their needs.

People Safety problems and solutions look different in different cultures. It is safest to teach students whenever possible how to stop problems in the early stages, before they get to be big problems. This means that it is important to understand what the beginnings of problems look like. Like differences in sound being hard to distinguish in different languages, it often takes understanding and practice to recognize the subtle signals that show that someone is starting to get frustrated, test boundaries, or be about to explode.

In any culture, it often takes both understanding and practice to communicate in a way that others will understand. Remember that HOW something is done can make a huge difference in how someone else will respond. A calm look, an aggressive stare, a friendly smile, a nervous glance, a proud strut and a suggestive wiggle are all different ways of letting someone know that you know he or she is there – and each action is likely to produce a different result.

The key is to LISTEN to your students and to LEARN from them. Ask people to show you what personal safety problems look like in their culture from their point of view. How do these problems start? What does someone who is causing the problem do or say at the beginning? What is the best solution from their point of view? What is it that they want to happen or not happen? Ask your students to share with you solutions that they have found work for them or that they have seen others use.

7. Suggest answers to objections from family and friends.

It is normal for people to dislike change or to be unhappy when new boundaries are set. It can be very helpful to acknowledge the kinds of resistance that students are likely to face and to give them ideas about how to explain about personal safety to the important people in their lives in a way that takes the underlying intent of the cultural practice being changed into account.

For example, students in our parent/caregiver education class often at first worry about the Kidpower safety rule that touch for play, teasing or affection should be the choice of both people, safe and allowed by the adults in charge. They are concerned that giving children permission to choose will somehow make them less loving or that older members of a family will feel rejected.

We offer ways to explain to grandparents or other older relatives such as, “The way the world is nowadays, our children have to understand how to say no to being hugged and kissed if they don’t feel like it. If they can do this with people they love and who love them, they will be better prepared to set boundaries in situations where someone might harm them. Anyway, true affection should not have to be forced.”

At the same time, adults can insist that children who are old enough to understand be respectful and acknowledge their elders. Children can shake hands or wave to show respect and care, without having to be smothered with kisses or have their cheeks pinched. For children who do not like physical affection at all, a very positive way to express caring can be through making a present for the older relative such as a drawing, home-made card, cookies, or hand-picked flowers or serving tea or cake.

8. Present People Safety techniques as options rather than as the one and only BEST WAY.

Instead of arguing that one way is better than another, tell students that you want them to have as many choices as possible. If they already know how to fight, you want them to know how to walk away from a fight and feel good about themselves, because it is almost always safer to not fight than to fight. If they already know how to be very polite, you want them to know how to be very firm and even behave in a way that they might think is rude, just in case it is unsafe to be polite.

One of my most memorable workshops was at a senior center for elderly Chinese people who were living in Oakland. After practicing awareness skills to avoid trouble, I had come to the part of the workshop where we were going to work on dealing with a more dangerous situation.

"Now we are going to practice yelling, 'No!'" I told the group through Eva, who was their Activities Director and my Interpreter. There was a resounding silence. I took a moment to sort through the sea of seventy blank faces to make eye contact with Eva and the other staff members and smiled at them. "I suspect there is going to be a slight cultural problem here."

All of the staff people looked at me seriously and nodded their heads. No way in the world could they imagine that anyone would yell.

"There's no word in Cantonese for 'no,'" Eva explained.

"Is there any word that's close?" I asked.

"Well, we could say, "'Mmm...ho!' which means don't."

"Great!" I looked at the room full of seniors and staff and said slowly, so that Eva could translate, "I understand that it is against your culture to yell. However, it's important to your safety that you are able to yell if you are in danger. Yelling takes away the privacy and control that gives an attacker more power. So Eva is going to help me warm up your voices by playing a game. I'll start by whispering 'no' in English and Eva is going to whisper... 'mmm...ho!' back at me in Cantonese. Then we'll get louder and louder until we're shouting. "

Eva finished translating, registered the meaning of what she had just said, and suddenly stared at me with dismay. "I CAN'T yell!" she gulped.

"Of course you can!" I said firmly. I waved towards the crowd who were watching us with total comprehension and interest, even though the translation had stopped. "Eva, they need to have your example. . . .We'll start softly." I faced Eva, microphone in hand so everyone could hear. "no," I whispered.

"mmm..ho" Eva whispered back in her microphone.

"No!" I said a little louder.

"Mmm.ho," Eva said back.

"NO!" I shouted.

"Mmm...ho," Eva muttered softly.

I reached out to Eva, gently touching her arm with my fingertips. "Eva, I know you really care about the people here. It's not safe for them to be soft and polite if someone is threatening them. I want you to yell as loudly as you would like THEM to yell if they were truly in danger. Please take a big breath and try again." Then I looked at her and shouted, "NO!"

With a tortured grimace as if she were jumping into an ice cold lake, Eva gasped for air and yelled, 'MMM...HO!'

A stir of lifted heads, surprised faces and impressed murmurs rippled through the room. As Eva translated, I turned to the crowd and said, "Now, it's YOUR turn -- start softly and get louder and louder."

"no!" I whispered into my microphone.

"mmm...ho!" All the staff people and most of the seniors whispered along with Eva who was still using her microphone.

"No!" I said a little louder.

"Mmm...ho!" they responded.

I set the microphone down and stepped away from it. With my whole body, I shouted, "NO!"

"MMM...HO!" my students all yelled back. The sound reverberated from the high ornate ceiling to the tall imposing columns of the normally sedate room. There was an instant of startled silence. And then seventy surprised people burst into excited clapping and cheers.

Practicing People Safety skills that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable culturally does not take away people's ability to do what has worked for them in the past or to be true to their cultural values. Instead, having these skills and ideas gives them more choices about what they are going to do when confronted with a problem out in the real world.

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