



# Constructing Intercultural Dialogues

## Case Study #1

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## Lullabies

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### Context

This situation occurred in a training that I led on intercultural competencies for caregivers. Caregivers are frequently put into situations where they take care of patients from various cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages and having different ways of understanding and coping with health problems. In training sessions, participants frequently relate situations where they were puzzled about cultural differences in the way families accompany patients, politeness behaviors, decency norms, etc. Participants may mention the fear of doing something wrong, and/or the fear that they might have to adapt beyond what they think right.

During the trainings, I take time to explain some “cultural” differences because problems often occur as a result of misunderstanding, but I also emphasize the fact that there are a lot of similarities between cultures, and that when we find them, these are quite useful. Participants go back to their workplace and see me a couple of weeks later to learn, among other aspects, whether they could notice those similarities.

### Participants

A participant in one of these trainings, who we'll call Pierre, returned with a particularly interesting story. We are in a small city an hour's drive from Belgium's capital Brussels, and Pierre is a Belgian who speaks French. He is employed by a company that organizes home visits to families coping with the birth of a handicapped child. He works as an educator on a multidisciplinary team, including a nurse, a social worker, a psychologist, and other health care professionals. The team organizes itself for the visits, sending the professionals that seem likely to be most useful for each family. Contact is made on a long-term basis to accompany the family until they feel confident on their own.



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Pierre described a Moroccan family he had visited two or three times, with a handicapped child born two months earlier. The family had been in Belgium for two years; the father had a job and spoke French, but the mother didn't speak a word of French as she stayed at home to take care of their first child. During each of his past visits, he had no opportunity to meet the father because the mother was always alone with the child when he arrived. The mother was welcoming and friendly, but communication stayed very basic, relying on nonverbal elements and gestures.

### **Description**

Pierre questioned the fact that this mother seemed to have difficulty investing in her child. She didn't talk to him, she shifted her eyes away from him, she didn't seem comfortable holding him, so building a secure relationship didn't seem to be taken for granted in the way he expected. As a result, Pierre wasn't comfortable continuing to visit this mother and child: he thought of things he could have tried and said with somebody who understood his language, but in this situation he couldn't really figure out what to do.

He thought about the idea of "What do we have in common" and he remembered a few films he had seen with people from different cultural backgrounds, and documentaries, and linked them with a few travel experiences abroad. It occurred to him that everywhere he had seen mothers singing lullabies to their babies. So he thought "Maybe I could sing the lullabies I know to this child, the mom could see an example of contact with her child, and we could both get interested in the child's reaction." And so he started to sing those lullabies. The mother was at first astonished, but then she laughed; she didn't know any of his songs, but she listened. Then Pierre made signs to make her understand that he was interested to hear the lullabies that she knew. She felt shy at first but then she actually started to sing a few of them. They were both in contact with the baby during that time: he stayed calm and seemed to listen, and the mom seemed pleased with her child.

### **Dialogic features**

The mother didn't sing a lot during that visit, but it was enough for Pierre to create contact around the child, to exchange knowledge about songs at first, and show a way to build a relationship with the child. Getting to know the family better, and afterwards having contact with the father, Pierre learned that this mother had



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thought that there was no point in developing a relationship with the child because she believed that a handicapped child wouldn't understand relationship matters. But with this song idea, Pierre showed her that the child could react, and that mother and child could both gain by investing in an emerging relationship.

### **Lessons learned**

In this specific situation, incorporating an interpreter would probably have been of great help, but other important elements helped to resolve an uncomfortable situation. Curiosity about the mother's culture, and the lullabies in her culture, interested Pierre as a way to encourage attachment between this mother and her handicapped child. Searching for similarities as a result of the question "What do we have in common?" lead this man to lullabies, and, finally, to a path that built up a dialogue.