



Parents and Professionals in Respectful Partnerships

September, 2001

A relationship between parents and professional service providers that is based on mutual trust and respect is probably the most critical factor in the development of a quality system of family support and intervention services. Its presence is as necessary as air, so basic that it can be invisible.

The relationship between parents whose children have disabilities and the professionals who provide services to them can be quite complicated. Part of the adjustment process for parents can include mixed feelings, including a certain animosity toward professional service providers who may represent lost dreams. Parents may feel that while their children need and depend on those services, if life were unfolding to their hopes and dreams, the presence of service providers would not be necessary.

Both parents and professional service providers want what is best and are focused on the child with a disability, but their perspectives are very different:

Parents:

- Understand that they have lifelong commitment and responsibility for their child
- View the present as one small segment of a long distance marathon
- Assume complete responsibility for their child
- Do not choose this role

Professionals:

- Do not typically have long term contact or follow up for a number of years
- Address a deeper, narrower segment of life, compared to “running a sprint”
- Are responsible to various governing boards and/or taxpayers
- Choose this role in life

Parents and professional service providers need one another. They cannot afford to become adversaries, because neither alone can do what needs to be done. Real partnerships are one of the best ways to keep the most important needs addressed in an efficient manner. On a larger scale, the political reality is that children with disabilities are a very vulnerable population, particularly when most services that support and maintain them are dependent on tax dollars. Adversarial relationships between parents and professional service providers can threaten the very existence of the help that has been so tediously gained legislatively over a period of many years.

We know that respect and trust can only genuinely be earned, as part of the process of building a relationship with another individual. Developing a respectful and trustful

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relationship will not happen automatically, only by the choice of **both** parties. It is important enough to keep an ongoing effort in place to do so, even though it may seem tedious, unnatural, and illogical at times. A relationship based on trust and respect will not be accomplished if we bring old negative attitudes or adversarial biases to our dealings with one another. When either party continually guards their own position of power, respect and trust are defeated. The following should be kept in mind:

We cannot control what other people say and do, but we can control our own response.

- Do I give honest credit to you, and believe you participate for the right reasons?
- Do I believe that you are capable?
- Do I reframe behaviors that irritate me, looking for the positive as well as negative characteristics of the same behaviors?
- Do I make an effort to “walk in your shoes,” learning to see things from another direction?

We can practice basic rules of courtesy, treating others as we would like to be treated.

- Do I say what I mean and mean what I say?
- Do I follow through and do what I say I will do?
- Am I respectful of your time?
- Am I respectful of your opinion?
- Do I use the opinions and expertise of the whole group in decision making, not functioning as a solo act with my own self interest in mind?

We can decide to reduce tension between us by maintaining ongoing communication with one another.

- Do I check in with you regularly enough to ensure that the direction of our thoughts and efforts are mutually understood?
- Do I talk with you directly if I have an issue with you, avoiding a gossip triangle?
- Am I available and easy to reach, keeping appointments and returning calls promptly?
- Do I listen and respond honestly to what you say?

Building a relationship of trust and respect is worth going beyond our level of comfort to accomplish.

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Kathryn Barnard, Ph.D., R.N. *There seem to be stages in achieving a family-professional partnership, stages which go something like this:*

- *First, we begin to talk. "Yes, parents should be involved." We talk about parents' involvement and we talk about getting them on committees.*
- *The next stage comes when the service delivery system says, "Parents are involved. They are working in our center, they are deciding some of our policies."*
- *The third stage is one I hear reflected in the phrase, "We use parents as part of our service delivery program."*
- *And what to me seems to be the goal that we're working toward is reflected in the statement, "Parents are the core of our team."*

