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COLLABORATION/ PARENTING: THROUGH THE YEARS

Finding Pediatric Specialists

If your child is having difficulties, dealing with professionals who discount your concerns can be discouraging. You may resent the fact that you must be the one to do the research and try to solve the mysteries. But after all, you *are* the leader of your child's health care team. It is your right and your obligation to be the one to ask the questions, examine the options, and choose the treatments that you believe best fit your child's needs.

Sometimes a multi-faceted approach is necessary, but sometimes answers can be found by a specialist who addresses one critical underlying piece. Specialists who insist that their one little piece is the linchpin are more likely to be correct if they are

- Looking at the situation from many angles
- Seeing your child's strengths as well as the constellation of problems
- Able to talk about the big picture

In general, trust your own assessment of proposed or ongoing treatments. Value the therapists, specialists, or teachers with whom any of the following is true:

- Your child is growing or thriving under this individual's care
- The caregiver's ideas are consistently on track and backed with explanations and clarification that make sense to you
- The caregiver's instincts seem to be in line with yours, and he or she seems interested, available, connected, and willing and able to really tune in to you and to your child

- You feel that you can look to the caregiver for support, hope, inspiration, collaboration, or active attempts to find answers
- The caregiver is willing to talk about painful topics and to stay with you as you process the information and review your perspective.

It can certainly be a relief when you find someone who sees what you see, who can assess the situation in ways that make sense to you, and who attends to all of your questions, ideas, and concerns. Remember, though, you are not looking for someone to just concur with your observations, but to help you explain, expand the framework, and intervene. Your trust is based on the specialist's ability to be empathic and present with you through the process, and you feel your viewpoint is respected even when he or she has a perspective or assessment that differs from yours. You're also not looking for someone who can just give you all the answers, but someone with whom you feel like a partner in your child's care. When you sit down together to compare notes, your child's specialist hears what you have to say and responds to it -- either by explaining it from a different perspective, or by integrating it into his or her framework and treatment approach.

If you're taking multi-faceted approach and enlisting the aid of multiple specialists, when even just one of them collaborates well with you, you're more likely to discover the real underlying problems, whether mild or severe, and find solutions that address them. You can also be a more effective advocate for your child when you have the support of at least one professional you are working with. This key professional can help you facilitate collaboration among all of your child's specialists.

The best specialists are also not bound by charts and timetables or restricted to hard science and research. They have a natural instinct, an ability to see your child as a unique individual who requires a unique approach. And they understand that a child's whole being cannot be summed up through the lens of one specialty. Find specialists who are interested in your child as a whole and who recognize the complexity of your

child's problems, even if they only feel "qualified" to evaluate their small piece of the puzzle.

The best specialists also see your child in the context of your family, community, and school or child care. And they consider your need for support and guidance with regard to parenting this child. Whether they provide that guidance or refer you to a family counselor, you may feel relieved and comforted by their acknowledgement that it is normal and natural for parents to sometimes respond in ways that are less than helpful to the challenging or troubled child. And when you know they value you and your relationship with your child, it is easier to trust their advice on how you can more effectively respond to your youngster. Their suggestions "feel" right because they strengthen your connection with your child.

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