**A Primer on Talking to Medical Professionals**

Doctors and therapists are human. They have gone through a lot of training, and take pride in their expertise. But because they are human they are also fallible. This doesn’t necessarily mean they are bad or stupid or out to get you. It simply means that they are not perfect.

You, too, are human. You are working extremely hard, dealing with tremendous daily stress, and you too have expertise: You know your child better than any professional ever will. The chances that your treatment professional will ever truly understand your personal stresses and triggers are almost nil. Don’t expect it. What you can and should expect is that your expertise will be listened to, and your opinion respected, because the goal of your relationship with doctors and therapists is to form an expert team.

They are the experts in things therapeutic and recovery-inducing. You are the expert in providing them with information that helps them do their job more effectively.

But remember: they have egos.

Here are some tricks of the trade that will allow you to claim YOUR expertise without invalidating theirs.

1. When you want to make a point, ask a question instead of making an assertion.

Instead of protesting, “But that target weight is too low!” or demanding, “We need to aim for mental state, not weight!” you might ask the professional, “What’s the evidence on target weights? Do all kids recover within a certain range, or do some need to overshoot to reach health? I’ve heard that the real goal is mental state, not target weight, and I’m wondering what the story is.”

This approach appeals to the professional’s knowledge without pricking the ego, allows you to assess what he/she knows, and opens the way for discussion IF the professional is open to exploring the issue.

2. When you want to express a concern, talk about what you SEE instead of jumping to conclusions.

Think of yourself as a reporter. Keep track of facts, like actual intake, length of standoffs over meals, and chart weights. Log the frequency and intensity of incidents. Then say something along the lines of, “I’ve noticed a significant increase in anxiety as she nears target weight. She used to have meltdowns X times a week, and now it’s a daily occurrence. I used to be able to calm her using \_\_\_ strategies, but now the intensity is greater. Is this normal? And what can we do about it?”

This raises the issue and allows the professional to address the problem. Even if you disagree with the strategy she proposes, a discussion of alternatives is still possible.

3. When a professional jumps to conclusions with which you disagree (and this includes parent-blaming), pause as if to consider that opinion carefully, then ask, “Huh! Are there other possible explanations?”

Asking the question allows space and time for the professional to back up and realize that there may indeed be other reasons for your child’s behavior than the first one that came to his or her mind.

An alternative response is, “Gee, I never thought of it that way! I always thought of it as [whatever you think the real reason may be.]”

Note that intelligent people can and do disagree. (We even see this on EDPS!) Allow the professional the opportunity to reconsider her opinion. If it’s clear that he or she is unwilling to do so, it’s also clear you need a new doctor.

4. When a professional says something that seems outrageous, circle back (after you have calmed down) and address the issue, preferably in person. “The other day you said \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and it felt like you meant \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Is that what you meant, or did I misinterpret?”

If the professional is horrified and clarifies matters, you are dealing with a blip in communication. If he or she digs in, you can assess if this is a relationship breaker.

NEVER rely on your sick child to accurately report what a doctor or therapist says. If your kid reports something that makes you flip, contact the clinician. Don’t accuse, simply ask for clarification. “[Name] came home and said you’d said \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I just wanted to check what actually transpired.”

*Written by Julia Attaway, member of EDPS*