

Clinical Parenting Approach To Autism

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Parents of children with autism want to move mountains to help their kids. They want professionals who work with their autistic children to be excellent at what they do. They want to have their input about their autistic children welcomed and integrated into the child's programs. But obstacles frequently occur that create hopelessness and frustration. I know these feelings from my personal experience in my efforts to help my son Benny get the optimum autism treatments that he needs and deserves from the educational and medical communities. I call my approach to assuring that these standards happen for my son, "clinical parenting."

The major goal of the "Clinical Parenting" approach is to **1)** establish effective communication patterns with professionals, **2)** develop more parental expertise in autism, and **3)** to ask for what is needed for your autistic child in a firm and informed way. Without this level of parental involvement, the clinical and educational programs that you have established for your child may be ineffective or possibly have detrimental results.

The concept of "clinical parenting" may sound contradictory and confusing. Doesn't the idea of parenting involve a loving, intimate supportive dynamic for raising children? Doesn't "clinical" imply a distant, analytical and controlling relationship? How can you relate to your child from both perspectives and be effective in your role as the parent of a special needs child? The answer lies in the understanding about autism and how normal development does not naturally occur with these autistic children as it does for typical children. Normal developmental gains must be facilitated and developmental milestones need to be introduced to these children in the form of goals and strategies. Autistic children lack many of the natural instincts to engage, take action and communicate and therefore parents must understand their role as facilitator or their autistic child may not develop to their capacity.

This clinical approach to parental advocacy is strong, informed and collaborative. It combines the desire to enjoy aspects of a typical parent / child experience with your autistic child, with the need to make sure that the professionals intervene at a high level of consistent expertise.

Essential Components of Clinical Parenting

Thinking like a "clinical parent" involves monitoring gains in the areas of initiation, self regulation, integration, and generalization of learning. It involves the questioning of professionals, partly for self education, and partly to discover inadequacies that may exist in your child's program. The following strategies will keep you in the right therapeutic direction:

- (1)** Search for the "why" of your child's behavior. Don't become stuck in changing behaviors before you understand what they might be telling you about your child. Obtain medical and educational assessments on a yearly basis to obtain accurate data about your child's progress and deficits.
- (2)** Challenge over-generalizations about autistic functioning. Question suggested interventions, so you can challenge the ones that are wrong, and trust the ones that are appropriate.
- (3)** Challenge anyone's "rigid" beliefs about your child's level of functioning or prognosis.
- (4)** Educate yourself about autism and stay current with new findings. Become an "autism expert" about your child.
- (5)** Develop satisfying and effective systems of engaging with your child that promote social and emotional responses in both of you.
- (6)** Demand that your suggestions be considered for integration into your child's program. Provide current information from seminars, autism literature and current evaluations of your child to validate the credibility of your suggestions.
- (7)** Exert your right as a parent to discontinue any autism intervention or service that you believe is detrimental or ineffective to your child.
- (8)** Make time to observe your child at school and in other treatment settings.
- (9)** Don't "over do" the process. It is important not to burn out, so take regular "off time" to just be with your child with acceptance and peacefulness.

This process involves both expectations of the self and others. There are specific expectations of the educational and medical systems that must be maintained to insure optimum intervention for your child. It

is important to be both diplomatic and sensitive in the manner that you express expectations, but it is just as important to be unyielding if you know you are right.

The Clinical Parents Expectations of Others

- (1)** Expect regular communication about your child from all professionals.
- (2)** Expect your questions to be respected and answered.
- (3)** Expect data to be taken to measure the effectiveness of programs and autism treatments and ask for the data to be explained. Expect program changes based on this data.
- (4)** Expect educators and clinical professionals to be involved in continuing education about current changes in autism treatment and education.
- (5)** Expect "generalization" to be monitored to measure the quality and effectiveness of autism interventions.
- (6)** Expect the schools to provide a written program for the special education department so you can monitor whether the program is being followed.
- (7)** Expect your request for monthly team meetings to be met.
- (8)** Expect the school district to intervene in school site situations where deficits in the programs are discovered.

These expectations reflect a level of expertise that autistic children need in order to benefit from autism intervention. Approaches that are rigid, uncreative or "boiler-plate" demonstrate a low standard of autism intervention that a "clinical parent" should not accept for their child.

While as a parent it is essential to assert these rights and expectations, it is important to listen to the professionals reasons for their decisions and perspectives. The people working with our children get to know them, care about them and develop an objective perspective that as a parent, we cannot always maintain. The emotions involved in the love and concern for a child with autism can at times overcome parental perspective. Some professionals use this emotional vulnerability as cause to dismiss parental collaboration, but secure, competent professionals will welcome a parents perspective, despite the emotions involved. Clinical parenting skills help parents determine for themselves when they cannot be objective (and need to trust the professionals) and when to demand that their opinions and feelings be heard and accepted.

Autistic children can be challenging to work with and live with and to understand. Autism is a complex and unpredictable disorder that can frustrate and drain the most well-meaning person. But as a parent, you have to take good emotional and physical care of yourself so you can be a clinical parent and not deplete yourself. With all of the work that lies ahead, do not lose sight of the wonderful child in front of you and the life experiences that you hope they will be able to have with your help.