

*family*

A D V O C A C Y

PO Box 502  
Epping NSW 1710

305/16-18 Cambridge St  
Epping NSW 2121

Phone: (02) 9869 0866  
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722

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Author: Perske, Robert

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### Abstract

This paper acknowledges the discomfort parents and professionals often feel in each others company. It also draws attention to the fact that when parents and professionals work together truly and genuinely, their teamwork can achieve a great deal for people who have disabilities. **Keyword: Professionals**

# PARENT/PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Robert Perske

In the past, parents did not always feel comfortable with professionals. Gail Stigen, a professional, and the parent of a child with developmental disabilities, wrote an extremely humorous book, *Heartaches and Handicaps* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Science & Behavior Press, 1976) which focused on this issue. Among her many hilarious descriptions of parent/professional encounters was this sketch of her first session with a social worker.

Suddenly, I became aware of this person standing next to me ... I got up to look into the face of this elegantly turned-out person who was watching us with no expression. What I had at first perceived to be a store dummy finally asked if I was her nine o'clock appointment. I quickly checked my driver's licence to remember my name, which I blurted out before I forgot it. It was conveyed to me that I should follow this humanoid ...

There followed a scene only an overtrained professional can stage manage. When we entered her office (with me trailing as due my inferior role), the door was firmly closed and my Social Worker sat down behind her desk in her Executive Swivel Chair. At first I thought I had been forgotten. What seemed like hours went by as she perused an impressive file, while I stood there like a lump, my shoes pointed inward, and I fought an overwhelming urge to whistle or hum ...

The office was shoe-box shaped and not much bigger. My razor-sharp mind told me that there was no chair for me and I realised immediately that we were going to have quite an informal session, with me either on the floor (as in Girl Scouts) or perched on her desk (as at the office Xmas party).

At last this deity seemed to decide that my hulking, looming mass was distracting her from her homework, and she motioned me to an area to the left of her desk, where I obediently stood. Finally, she told me I could sit down. I thought that was very thoughtful of her, but I couldn't find anything to set my considerable bulk on without courting disaster (by then I had discovered what appeared to be a doll chair next to her desk). But yes, by God, yes. The "doll chair" was MY chair. You've all seen those *National Geographic* photographs showing (members of a primitive tribe) squatting with their knees under their chins, staring blankly ahead. You now have the picture of my posture ... It was going to be a long fifty minutes.

Stigen makes us laugh at professionals, all right. But she is also uncanny at expressing the unsettling discomfort many parents used to feel in the presence of such trained people.

On the other hand, professionals did not always feel comfortable with parents. And the more prim and perfect those highly trained ones appeared, the more they may have been putting up a false front to hide their own feelings of inadequacy.

I recall a psychologist who was deathly afraid of non professional encounters with the parents of his clients. On one occasion, he left a shopping cart full of groceries in the aisle of a supermarket and quietly walked out when he spied a parent shopping in the same store.

These discomforts extend to other professions, as well. I was once invited to a Hooray-It's-Over-Again party, held by school teachers who were celebrating the end of their semester parent-teacher conferences. Imagine that! After all those years of attending uncomfortable sessions and trying to avoid slips like, "Hello. Ms. Prim, I'm Robert Failure. Tell me where I am a flop as a father this time." After all those years of gosh-I-must-be-a-lousy-parent feelings, suddenly and a little too late, I learned that teachers felt just as incompetent around me! But that was then.

Today, when you observe boys and girls with handicaps performing skills that, a couple of decades ago, none of us thought they could accomplish, take a closer look. More often than not, you will find parents and professionals working together as team-mates, in such ways as ...

- parents in classrooms from time to time
- teachers in home
- learning from each other
- continuous two-way communication (notes, telephone calls, meetings)
- developing individual education plans together
- discussing divisions of labour (what tasks in home, classroom, neighbourhood - and for how long)
- emergency meetings
- happy communications (guess-what-Jim-did-today messages)
- evaluating progress
- sometimes laughing for joy after an achievement
- other times, feeling whipped
- patting each other on the back
- respecting each other
- knowing how much they need each other.

What happened to the discomfort? I guess nobody had time for it. Too much attention and energy was being expended on pinpointing a child's specific developmental delay and on determining what each person could do about it. When a this-kid-needs-us-all-so-let's-go-to-work attitude becomes uppermost in everyone's mind, parents and professionals often become close-knit comrades with a common cause. Without their planning it - or even thinking about it - it happens.

When partnerships like these really click, it often carries over into other areas. For example, in Nebraska, from 1967 through 1975, some parents and professionals worked so closely together that they developed a common human-service philosophy and specific goals for achieving it. Then they became active with the governor and state law makers in a massive overhauling of legislation for persons with developmental disabilities. They developed state plans, county plans, attitude-change programs, regionalised community-based service systems, and funding to operate the programs.

Parents and professionals had come as partners to the state capitol at Lincoln from places like Norfolk, Hastings, Scottsbluff, Ogallala, and Omaha. They had delivered a "double whammy" to state government. Parents spoke in hearings and approached legislators in the foyer. They spoke clearly about the problems people with handicaps faced in Nebraska. And, of course, legislators - being used to such people - knew how to listen respectfully, thank them for coming, and quietly shrug it all off a few minutes later. But no sooner did the parents finish than their sidekicks - the professionals - took over, providing the law makers with detailed statistics.

It was obvious to everyone that neither the parents or the professionals alone could have influenced the government so powerfully. It was their well-planned, carefully detailed teamwork that did it. Many senators expressed amazement at the effectiveness of that. Said one, reminiscing at a later date, "You people were too much. If we could have kept you apart, we would have been OK. But when you came at us together ... well, you were too much."

Later, when professionals in other, larger, more powerful states began to wonder how such a conservative state as Nebraska could have increased the quality of living for persons with mental retardation in such a short time, two of the movement's leaders explained.

We are now convinced that failure of parent and professional to cooperate *truly* and *genuinely*, rather than merely working alongside each other, must have accounted for the failure of many a planning effort, and for some of the confrontational clashes in certain large states. And in our opinion, those professionals who believe that substantial sustained progress can be achieved at the agency level alone, without regard to the consumer or to cultural concurrence, will be doomed to eventual failure in their enterprises.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. Wolfensberger and F. Menolascino, "Reflections on Recent Mental Retardation Developments in Nebraska," *Mental Retardation* (December 1970).

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Strong words. They remind us never to underestimate the power that can be developed when parents and professionals pull together to help a child with a handicap.

### **Consider These Options**

- Stop feeling insignificant in the presence of professionals.
- Look for professionals willing to team up with you.
- Know that you and only you possess and can provide crucial information about your child with a handicap.
- Never think you must apologise for asking professionals to join with you in developing training programs for your son or daughter.
- Do not feel you always must be so patient. A biological developmental time clock is ticking away inside your child. He or she is already behind schedule on some things. Do everything you can to see that neither you or a professional wastes your child's time.