

Relationship between parents and professionals



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Although each relationship between parents and professionals is unique and complex, some “types” and categories of these relationships have been identified in order to light up the position and the role each partner takes in several circumstances in different times. These types of partnerships are actually ways in which parents and professionals communicate and cooperate. Each of them has its own limits and barriers. Some of them are the expert model, the consumer and the negotiating model which will be described in details in the text below.

For many years there was not any close relationship or collaboration between the parent and the professional, as the professional was the one who was considered as the expert and the one who had the power and control not only to assess but also to decide about what kind of help a child would get (the expert model). The parent did not involve in this procedure nor his feelings, his experience with the child and his opinion (Dale, 1996). This model had many disadvantages as through this procedure the parent learnt to depend on professional’s thoughts and views without having the right to question anything. They were only receiving directions and structures. As a result, parents in most cases felt unable to help their child in any aspect of its life considering that only the professional had the essential knowledge and experience give the right treatment. The main problem with these views was that often professionals had exceeding confidence, without admitting that they did not have the right answer in every difficult situation. They somehow gained protection in the wider context. One other major disadvantage of this model was that professionals did not collect all the important information by focusing mainly in the child’s symptoms

(Cunningham & Davis, 1985). This approach served parents who did not want to take the responsibility of assessing or deciding for the intervention of their child for several reasons (e. g. lack of knowledge, capability or time). Although many changes have occurred over the last decades and parent involvement is crucial nowadays, the expert model still influences the interaction between parents and professionals. Professionals continue retaining their status as “ experts” and expect that parents will follow their instructions. They keep accrediting that parents are not well informed and that they are suitable for setting the appropriate treatment for a child (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Nevertheless, sometimes it is essential for both partners to follow this approach, as the professional is the one that can inform parents about specific issues (e. g. exam results).

The consumer model (Cunningham & Davis, 1985) was the first approach which established partnership in a first level. In this approach the parent is given a new, more energetic role, as he is the one who regarding alternative solutions which are suggested by the professional, decides which treatment will be more effective for his child. The role of the professional is to gather as much information as he can from the parent. This means that he/she must listen carefully to all the questions, worries, complaints, aims and opinions in order to give a number of decent proposes for the child’s treatment. The professional’s position is to consult the parent and give him all the necessary knowledge to accomplish his aims. It is the first time that characteristics as mutual respect, honesty and collaboration are included in the relationship between parents and professionals. Of course professionals do not lose their “ power” and status as they remain in a very considerable position. The

major difference with the “ expert model” is that the parent is now considered as having a different expertise from the professional, bringing in the decision-making process crucial information. One advantage of this model is that each disabled child and each family are considered individually. The professional has to take every need, strength and view of the child and the family into account, in order to decide which of all solutions is more compatible to the child’s needs. Professionals and parents are not equal though as their knowledge and roles are different. Parents now have the opportunity to negotiate about the treatment which their child is taking for the first time and that makes professionals’ position susceptible. This two- way communication helps both sides to understand the views and the expectations of each other and hopefully come to a solution that will satisfy them. The characterization of the parent as the “ consumer” is not the appropriate one though as the limited options which are available to parents in order to make a choice in many cases show that the parent does not have “ consumer” power like in a market context (Dale, 1996).

Dale (1996) suggests negotiating as the most complete model of partnership. It is called negotiating because the main characteristic in this approach is the continual discussion between professionals and parents in order to resolve all their differences and discover the best they can decision for their child’s disability. Negotiating model takes into account the power relations between both sides and considers disagreement and conflict as an inevitable part of the decision making procedure. Its fundamental principle is that parents and professionals have different personalities with different way of thinking and different perspectives as they have different roles in the

wider social context. As the professional's mission is to provide assistance to parents and their child, he first has to consider seriously the background of each one. That means that he has to get as much information as he can for the roles, positions and views of everyone included in this procedure in order to fill the gap between individual perspectives. Negotiating model is also a combination of previous models as the professional needs to take several roles (expert, consultant) during the decision making process. Both partners have an energetic role, influence each other and affect the final outcome which might be either a decision made with cooperation and understating or a dissatisfying arrangement. This approach recognizes the fact that there might be times of mutual understanding and others of conflict which may balk the discourse or even damage any chance of collaboration. The professional still keeps his power position and in some extent the parent still depends on his goodwill, although he now has every right to get involved whenever he wants during the decision making procedure.

What is special about negotiating model is that it focuses on the communication and the barriers between parents and professionals during the discourse and the effort to solve and manage them in order to develop a strong relationship of understanding for both sides, as conflict and disagreement is very possible to happen and balk the main purpose of partnership. Parents often face difficult situations, as they have to work out problems for which they might need help. Negotiation is the key in communication and both sides have to work hard in order to achieve their goal. Although many times this goal is the same for all partners, the opinions and the views may differ. The first step to accomplish this goal is to realize

and recognize that everyone has his/hers own perspectives which are very special and important. In this relationship the role of the dominant must change over time in different occasions. There are some suggested steps for all partners for negotiation to be successful. First, they have to identify the problem and think about possible solutions and options. During the whole process listening to each other is very crucial. The professional also has to transfer all of the knowledge parents need, in order to think clearly. The most important part is the decision to be taken jointly and planning their action afterwards. There are also some methods which may help in case of disagreement. Familiarity is a key characteristic which can help by spending time together both sides in order to build a stable relationship. Compromise and developing a solution which includes both viewpoints and also shifting perspectives and beliefs by both parents and professionals may be benefactory in the decision making procedure.