

## Beginning the Search for Professional Services

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The realization that a child needs medical, psychological, or academic assistance is often accompanied by an emotional parental response. Feelings include, but are not limited to: frustration, self-doubt, guilt, anger, and even grief. It is normal and natural to feel strongly about a child's needs. It is not unusual to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. The good news is that these emotional responses can be a source of motivating energy throughout the search process. Identifying and exploring feelings and incorporating them into an active search for a support network helps to insure that the professional(s) ultimately selected to work with the child will be individuals who respond in a manner that is supportive to both parent and child.

Three Focus Worksheets have been developed to assist parents in search of professional services. Although these worksheets were specifically developed for parents who are searching for academic support, they can easily be adapted by parents who are looking for other support services. The use of these tools will help a parent focus on the issue being experienced, set goals related to the issue, and analyze the results of interviews with potential providers.

**Keep In Mind:** Parents are the ultimate experts when it comes to their children. Trained professionals should work *in concert* with parents, respecting their viewpoints. It is crucial that the professional selected to work with your child respects your beliefs, while providing support and exercising his/her professional talents. Pick a knowledgeable professional who sets you at ease and inspires confidence.

## Becoming the Expert on Your Child's Needs

First: Never underestimate the first-hand knowledge you have about your child. You can visit many professionals and secure a wide range of "expert" opinions and services, but your parental "gut feeling" is often the most trustworthy source of inspiration when it comes to the most appropriate action to be followed as the child grows up.

Second: Do your homework, but keep a balanced view! Expand your knowledge base by joining a support group, attending a seminar, reading, and talking extensively with other parents and experts with whom you come in contact. Keep in mind, however, that your child is a unique individual and that the information you come in contact with will relate in *varying degrees* to your own situation.

Third: While it is becoming increasingly easy to find information on a wide range of topics related to the special needs of children, it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine the merit of such information. Look for information that is based on sound, scientific research. If a program sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

### Preparing the Child for Extra Help

You will want to ask your chosen professional provider how he/she will approach the initial services for your child and then share that information in terms the child can understand. Springing the first meeting on the child is not recommended, nor is bringing up the subject weeks in advance. Both approaches can increase the anxiety level of children. Describe the impending services as a bonus or gift of assistance to the child and avoid any indication that something is “wrong” with the child or that he/she is “lazy.”

### Keys to Getting the Best Value from Professional Providers

Communication between you and the professional provider must be open and honest. Keep the provider informed about your child’s reaction to sessions and any pertinent experiences the child has between visits. The provider should appreciate this knowledge and use the feedback to enrich the therapy sessions. Check with your provider on the preferred method of communication: e-mail is emerging as an efficient tool for sharing insights, but your provider may have a different preference.

Work with the provider to set realistic, incremental goals. Resist the temptation to treat problems prematurely. Ask the provider to keep you updated on your student’s progress so that new goals can be set in motion as previous goals are achieved.

Consistency is crucial to getting the most value from your investment in professional services. Make sure that your child is rested, well-fed, and emotionally stable on the days of his/her appointments. Make sure you get the service you are paying for by arriving on time with the proper materials. Understand and abide by your professional’s cancellation policy. Keep an eye on your future schedule and apprise the professional of future scheduling conflicts.

### When it is Time to Take a Break

Although consistent professional support ensures steady progress, there are times when taking a break is desirable or necessary. Perhaps everything is going along quite well or the child has an opportunity to enjoy an extracurricular

activity that will enhance his or her skills in another area. Financial issues may also be a concern. The key to taking a successful break from services is to lay the groundwork carefully.

Some time before the break begins, meet with the professional to review progress and ensure that remaining sessions are planned so that current goals can be completed in a timely fashion. When it is time for the break to begin, discuss the upcoming break with your child, congratulating him/her on progress made and purposefully *leaving the door open* for a future return to services. Children need to feel good about what they have achieved and at the same time they need to know that challenges of various types occur as time passes. The possibility of taking advantage of the professional's services at some future time should be regarded positively and never as a sign of failure.

### Coping with your own Emotions

As mentioned in previous articles, it is normal for parents to experience a wide range of emotions when dealing with challenges being experienced by their children. The first step in coping with these emotions is acknowledging them as part of the process. The second step is in realizing that the presence of emotions does not have to stand in the way of progress. Little by little you will learn what you need to know and find solutions to current and future actions that need to be taken.

One particularly damaging emotion often felt by parents is guilt. I often hear parents express guilt by making statements such as "If only I had sought help sooner." "If only I had not done this, or known about that...." The plain and simple truth about "If only" statements is that parents seek help and the right solutions present themselves *when the time is right for that particular family*. Nothing can be gained by beating oneself up over the past. Answers are forthcoming when one concentrates on the present situation and looks forward with positive anticipation to the future adventure of parenting.

**Parental Focus Worksheet One**  
**Using Emotion to Spark an Action Plan**

*Get centered by responding briefly to each of the items below:*

This is the situation:

This is how I feel about it:

Brainstorming possible alternatives:

I will gather more information before acting by contacting the following for support and referrals:

As the search begins the best plan of action seems to be:

I can explore this plan of action with the following professional providers (include contact information):

## Parental Focus Worksheet Two Setting Goals

I am concerned that my child be able to:

His/her current level of functioning in the area of need is:

Restate your concern as a goal – be as specific as you can:

The steps I believe my child will need to take to achieve this goal are:

Identify the type of professional(s) who have the expertise to assist your child:

My expectation of this professional's performance is:

At this time the amount of time/energy/money I can devote to this process is (be as specific as you can):

Am I sure that this goal and the allocation of time/energy/money is appropriate and realistic? If not, go back to Step One and repeat the process.

**Parental Focus Worksheet Three**  
**Professional Service Fact Sheet**  
*(Have a copy of this form available during a phone or in-person interview)*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Referral Source: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ Website: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate travel time to location: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation Fee/Description: \_\_\_\_\_

Tuition or Per Session Fee: \_\_\_\_\_

Length of Sessions: \_\_\_\_\_

Physical Setting: \_\_\_\_\_

Professional Qualifications/Specialties: \_\_\_\_\_

Response to my child's stated needs: \_\_\_\_\_

Philosophy/Methods of Treatment: Are methods based on solid, scientific research? \_\_\_\_\_

Possible times for sessions: \_\_\_\_\_

My initial feelings about this provider or facility: \_\_\_\_\_

Might this be a workable situation for me: Now? In the future? \_\_\_\_\_

