



Notes From the Trenches—

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An Educational Therapist Talks to A Parenting Psychologist About Parents and Kids: Parent Involvement in the Therapeutic Process

An important aspect of educational therapy is working with the parents. This may be challenging at times. Educational therapists may find it helpful to seek the guidance of an allied professional with expertise in parent and behavior support. This column is structured as an Q & A between educational therapist Karen Lerner and clinical psychologist Dr. Brett Patterson.

You’ve done a lot of work in schools and cross-referral support with educational therapists. What is a common client experience that bonds you to your ET colleagues?

I’ve had numerous conversations with educational therapists about our shared experiences around parental involvement in the therapeutic process. As an intervention and support plans begin to take shape, we sometimes find ourselves trying to pull the parent/caregiver into more of an active role in the child’s treatment. On the flip side, there are also times where we see the need for a proverbial “helicopter parent” to change their flight plan a bit so that the child/student has enough space to learn with a greater sense of independence, gain some much-needed confidence, and truly begin to work toward meeting their potential.

Given these common realities we face in our work with children, adolescents, and families, I’ve found that many of my conversations with colleagues across specialties often circle back

to questions about appropriate boundaries around healthy (and essential) parental participation throughout the process.

So, what is your general philosophy around parental involvement in the therapeutic processes?

I’m a behavioral psychologist that leans heavily on “systems-based” interventions, which means I believe that successful treatment is often directly associated with the involvement of those who support the child on a day-to-day basis in the environments where they live and learn. A better way of saying this is that I believe strongly that the “all hands on deck” (systemic) approach is, generally speaking, the most effective. However, if you’ve been in the field for very long at all, you’ve also likely observed a tipping point at which “over involvement” can impede the learning process and overall progress of the student/child. This is the proverbial “helicopter” parenting style mentioned above.

Where do you draw the distinction between an involved “helpful” style of parenting versus the overinvolved “helicopter” approach?

This is a great question because I think we often go with the “we know it when we see it” approach but never really consider how we functionally define what differentiates these two styles. For me, I pay particular attention to the amount of room a parent is allowing for the child to explore and learn from their own choices and experiences. I’ve found that the well-meaning intentions of a parent who tends toward the helicopter-style are generally in wanting to protect the child from negative emotions and experiences such as frustration and failure. However, without having some room to fail and recover, how is the child ever going to gain the experience and confidence they need to manage the adversity and challenges that are inevitable throughout life?

How do you share this perspective and with a parent that may tend toward this over-involved style?

This can be a difficult, and sometimes scary, territory to navigate with a parent, particularly given the good intentions behind their parenting approach. Because of this, I think it’s important to validate their intentions while also having them take a step back to clarify their long-term goals for what it means to be a “successful” parent. This conversation typically includes questions like:

“Is it possible for your child to have a life that is free from things like adversity, frustration, failure, conflict, etc.?”

After what can be a rather spirited conversation around this, examples of follow-up questions include:

- “If these parts of life are inevitable, what can we do right now to teach the life skills that will best prepare a child for success?”
- “What can kind of things can we do right now to help build their confidence to overcome challenges and adversity?”

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- “What do you think a child learns when we do the work for them versus teaching them the skills and then giving them space to figure it out? Which option best prepares them to be the happy, healthy, and fulfilled adult that you want them to be?”

How can this perspective specifically relate to our work as educational therapists?

A parent may be even more prone to a helicopter style when it comes to school work, especially when academic challenges are a primary and prominent point of frustration for the child. This is understandable when we consider how difficult it can be for a parent to watch their child struggle and often fail. As the child gets older, it is also common for this parenting style to become even more entrenched as they begin to fear the potential long-term consequences that may come from the child’s poor academic performance. We often hear comments like, “I can’t allow them to fail because of what it could do to their future!” As a result, parents will often default to taking over and “doing” rather than teaching and supporting the child through some of the necessary growing pains. However, by being able to redirect the parent back to the importance of *teaching life skills* as the true foundation for long-term success, we increase the likelihood of developing and maintaining a supportive alliance that helps keep everyone oriented on the shared goal of the child’s growth and enduring best interests.

What about the parent that doesn’t seem very responsive to this perspective?

This question often comes up and is an important reality when it comes to working with children and families. It always reminds me of an important piece of advice that I received from a mentor many years ago. The summary of her advice was this:

You can’t control every factor in the child’s environment. In fact, you can only influence a handful of them at best. What you *can* control is how you use the limited time you have with the child...so always be sure to use that time wisely and to his/her best interest.

This counsel has been one of the most important pieces of advice I’ve received over the years. It serves as a consistent reminder that in some cases, certain barriers and challenges exist where we may need to recalibrate what a “successful intervention” looks like. While the time you spend with a client may be limited, every session is still a unique opportunity for them to engage in a learning experience that they may not otherwise have in their current environment. As my mentor would often remind me, always be mindful to use that time to the best of your ability and recognize that growth and progress for the client/student is still being made in small, yet critical, steps.

Karen Lerner, MA, ET/P, holds a bachelor’s degree from Rutgers University and a master’s degree from New York University—both in dance. After teaching in dance departments at both the University of California, Irvine, and Chapman University for a dozen years, Karen received a teaching credential and education administration credential from UCI and a special education credential from Chapman University in preparation for a 21-year career as a teacher and school principal at The Prentice School. After obtaining an educational therapy certification from University of California, Riverside, she now works as an educational therapist at The College Blueprint and as the principal of The Craig School, both in Irvine, California.

Brett Patterson, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and founder of The Behavior Compass Academy, an online behavior support resource for parents and educators. For more than 20 years, Dr. Patterson has been developing prevention/early intervention programs targeting behavioral disorders (ADHD, oppositional defiant disorders, etc.) in association with Children’s Hospital of Orange County, University of California, Irvine, and most recently through his Orange County based private practice (www.drbrrett.net). When he is not developing or delivering positive behavior support services for individual clients or consulting with schools, Dr. Patterson is with his wife and two young daughters striving to “practice what he preaches.”