

Insights

Pediatricians Partnering with Families

Three Ideas for Effective Partnerships

Georgia—Artkelian Cameron knew that her 3-year-old son's development wasn't where it was supposed to be. But when she talked to her son's pediatrician, her questions were repeatedly dismissed and her son's diagnosis with autism was delayed until he was 5. Even after diagnosis, Cameron and her son struggled to access supportive services through her pediatrician. Fed up, Cameron eventually moved to a more urban area where they connected with a new pediatrician and were finally referred to the services her son needed.

"His earlier pediatrician didn't show us any empathy, and not having that strong relationship delayed my son's diagnosis," says Cameron. "With my new pediatrician, I find myself thinking, 'where have you been all my life?' We have this wonderful, comfortable relationship and I'm connected to the services we need, and my son is getting on track. This experience with my pediatrician gave me back my hope."

Alaska—Tamar Ben-Yosef was determined to nurse her first baby even though an earlier surgery significantly lowered her chances of successful breastfeeding. Despite the odds, her pediatrician immediately supported her decision and went on to be a pillar of support at every step of her journey. He was in the hospital room holding her son the day he was born, and he called her most nights during the first two weeks after she went home.

"I felt so much guilt because I couldn't nurse my son; I felt I couldn't provide for my him in the way I knew was healthiest," says Ben-Yosef. "My pediatrician was always present and supportive, going through every possible thing that might help me, even though he knew I probably wouldn't be able to breastfeed exclusively or for very long. This made such a big difference. He never gave up on me, not for my first son or for my second. And that's how I knew I had made the right choice for a pediatrician. He is like a family member."

Both Cameron and Ben-Yosef's stories illustrate why successful relationships between parents and pediatric health professionals rely on trust and compassion. For Ben-Yosef, her pediatrician's dedicated support during her breastfeeding journey cemented him as an ally she could lean on. In contrast, when Cameron's voice wasn't heard, she and her son were left feeling isolated until she finally found a pediatrician she could trust, someone who saw her as a person and partner.

A lack of trust, then, negates one of the most powerful partnerships for improving children's health: the partnership between parents and pediatrics. When this partnership is successful, pediatric health professionals can support parents on multiple fronts—providing preventive care and explaining what parents can expect as their children grow, advising parents on how to support their child's social and emotional development and, when necessary, connecting families with supportive services and resources.

How can pediatric health professionals build and sustain trusting relationships with families?

Ben-Yosef and Cameron are family partners supporting [Pediatrics Supporting Parents](#), an initiative seeking to help pediatric health professionals foster interactions between parents and children that support healthy social and emotional growth. Ben Yosef is a family partner with the Alaska Center for Pediatrics, one of the initiative's participating practices, while Cameron is a family partner for [Georgia's Project Launch](#). Along with their fellow parent partner, Latisha Spikes (also of Project Launch), Ben-Yosef and Cameron's perspectives can help pediatric health professionals engage families in trusting and sustainable partnerships. Interested in learning from them? Below are three of their ideas:

Treat families with respect

Trust isn't possible without respect. Families should feel their opinions, culture and voices are valued—that they are equal partners working to improve their children's health.

Listening is critical to ensuring that culture of respect, says Ben-Yosef. "When you are a new mom or having a baby, you're constantly feeling uncertain and questioning yourself. It's really important that your pediatrician listens to you and acknowledge what you're saying instead of telling you what to think."

Along with giving families time to talk and acknowledging their concerns, there are small things pediatricians can do to demonstrate they are listening. For example, always remember to call both parent and baby by their first name, says Spikes. This small step tells parents that you remember them from their earlier visits and you're building on your relationship with them. Similarly, adds Cameron, when a mother is sharing her concerns and questions, write down what she is saying. "This tells me you're tracking my concerns, that you care about what I'm saying, and I won't have to just start fresh every time."

Empathize with parents

When talking to families, it's important to always remember the bigger picture. There is always more going on with families than you can see during a visit. And while judgement sparks suspicion, empathy inspires trust.

Take time to ask parents how they are doing, remembering that a mom is a person as well as a mother. When parents feel like you care about their life outside of the office, they're more likely to share personal challenges or changes at home that may be affecting their child's health. And with more information, pediatric health professionals can proactively connect families with the services and resources they need.

Similarly, says Spikes, keep that bigger picture perspective in mind when advising families about what their children need. What's meant as helpful advice can sometimes feel accusatory for busy parents struggling to do it all.

"Try to remember that a lot of times, we are all just tired and stressed and trying to do the best that we can for our kids," says Spikes.

Create a warm office environment

The pediatric office should be a place where families feel welcome and safe from the moment they walk through the door, says Ben-Yosef. This means ensuring that all staff, from nurses to physicians to the receptionist, project a warm and friendly demeanor—one that tells parents they are in a safe space.

Greeting families with a smile when they arrive; helping families manage children while they fill out patient forms or read medical information; remembering to explain long wait times—these seemingly small steps go a long way towards making families feel comfortable and valued.

And, if possible, try to decorate your office in a way that reflects the same warm tone. Bright colors, a dedicated play-space, and plenty of children's books all come together to create an inviting environment.

Interested in learning more about developing powerful partnerships between families and healthcare professionals? [This handbook](#) includes a framework for improvement and a detailed guide on the steps families and healthcare professionals can take.