

"What did they say?" To this day, following every appointment, that is the question I ask my wife. Always it is tinged with anxiety; always anticipating the worst. And I expect an immediate answer, a full blow-by-blow account. It doesn't matter if the evening meal is just ready for serving; now it must be! I have tried saying this question in various ways - calmly, with a smile, from another room in a casual, semi-interested way - but inevitably my deep-rooted anxiety comes through! Invariably, I will follow up my wife's account with "And did you ask about...?" Either she did, and the answer was unsatisfactory, or she did not - in which case she feels guilty because she failed in her imposed role as our envoy. Is this really a healthy state of affairs? Does it act in a supportive way to the family of a child with a disability? Does it not create tension, disempower the father, cause the mother to feel inadequate? What was the overall value to that family of the professional interview? Has it really acted as a catalyst for strengthening that family's resolve to care more effectively for their child? Was it a growth point? As yet, my answers to these questions would tilt towards the negative. But then I am only the father, the secondary partner.

Conclusion

An overwhelming question throughout this study has been that of professional accessibility in the journey parents make following the birth of their child with a disability. For fathers this is an unresolved issue because it is assumed by the professionals that the ongoing dialogue can be sustained in the main through the mother.

Is this fair to fathers? Are we meeting their needs? Are we being professional in our response to them?

Implications for practice

There are several implications for practice arising from this research and this parent-professional analysis of its findings:

1. Training

Training should be available to ensure that the professional support worker (of whatever discipline):

- has appropriate listening skills.

- has up-to-date information about the dynamics of the family.
- uses vocabulary which conveys a positive image about the child whilst being realistic about the true nature of the disability.

2. Co-ordination of services

It is important that information is not held in pockets. Amongst the professionals there should be:

- clearly established procedures for information exchange in order that the families feel supported and do not perceive each service to be working in isolation.
- clear acknowledgement of the key worker/lead professional who may be tackling the more sensitive issues.

3. Accessibility

Parents need to be able to access both information and personnel easily. They may need help with questions such as 'Where do I go?' and 'What are the key sources of information I need and want?' Booklets giving clear explanations of roles and telephone numbers would help with this.

4. Networking

- Professionals need to know the network within their area in order that they can make it available to parents who should not be expected to undertake this search alone.
- Sensitive networking of families is crucial. They have a tremendous capacity for self-support.

5. To address the issue of consumer needs

Services should be tailored to meet individual consumer needs not pre-packaged. This will entail flexibility and adaptability by all professional support workers.

6. To address the needs within the family

Professional support workers should look at the needs of every individual within each family and should not neglect or forget those who may be absent during the day.

Whilst professionals like researchers prefer not to work unsocial hours, we must look at the triad