



Photograph by Ludwig Studio

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller

What Do You Do When a Parent Is in Denial About a Child's Special Needs?

Dear Reader,

I am frequently asked the question posed in our article this month. As the child's first child care provider, you are sometimes the first person to notice that something is not quite right with a child. You see the child in a broader context, while a new parent may know only this child. It can be frustrating when the parent isn't concerned and doesn't want to talk about it. Then you're faced with the question: "What is my role here . . . just to take physical care of this child, or to support the parents to maximize this child's potential?" Most of us would say the latter.

It helps to realize that parents of children with special needs go through the same grieving process as those facing a death — shock, denial, anger, blame, and finally coming to terms and growing as they face the problem. You get them at the very beginning . . . the denial and anger phases. Not easy!

I've interviewed three people here who have some very sage advice. We will carry this forward as an "Open Discussion" topic. Please write to me and share your own experiences and insights.

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Karen Miller".

Helen Young, child development center director of the Clayton/Mile High Early Head Start in Denver, emphasizes developing a sense of partnership and collaboration with parents. "We validate the parents' feelings. We make them an active part of the team, rather than presenting ourselves as the experts." Helen and her staff use a simple screening tool, *The Ages and Stages Questionnaire* by Diane Bricker, Jane Squires, and Linda Mounts (Hall & Brookes Publishing Company). Parents are active participants in the implementation of this tool so they are right there getting information first hand. They have a number of local agencies to refer parents to, and lots of helpful resources on hand to share with parents. Even with all this support, Helen reports, parents are sometimes reluctant to see the red flags that point to a special need. So they keep coaching and giving information, respectfully gaining the parents' trust.

"Please prove me wrong," is a phrase **Amy Weaver**, owner of Daily Discoveries Infant and Child Care Center in Gambrills, Maryland, uses. Amy is herself the parent of a special needs child, and recalls how she devoted her life to proving the professionals wrong, so she is able to empathize fully with the denial parents are experiencing. With her staff, Amy emphasizes extensive recording of anecdotal records for all the children. Thus, when they ask themselves "What is making me feel uneasy about this child?," they have spe-

cific behaviors to refer to. Never, never, never make a diagnosis, Amy emphasizes, or even hazard a guess as to what the problem is. Instead, say there are some behaviors you've noticed that are causing concern and urge the parent to have the child evaluated by other professionals.

Amy is a super networker and has numerous professional friends to call upon. She'll offer to have a physical therapist, for instance, come by and observe the child, at no charge. Of course, the parents must agree. Never forget the family's pediatrician — their first stop. It helps to get to know the pediatricians used by many of your families. Amy also maintains a huge file of articles stored by topic that she can share with parents, offering them information and different points of view.

Again, calling upon her perspective as a parent, she never talks about how this child is affecting the rest of the children or the staff. The parent doesn't care about that. Keep your mutual concern focused on the well being of this particular child. She tells parents, "I am not expert enough to know the best strategies for working with your child. I need professional support." One effective way to reach parents is to talk about the child's "happiness." Every parent wants their child to be happy.

Rochelle Bunnett, early childhood consultant and author of picture books including children with special needs, *Friends in the*

Park and Friends at School, and a new inclusion poster series for toddlers, *First Friends*, feels that this issue is more common today than in the past. Because of training, advances in the field, and better information, early childhood professionals are quicker to pick up on differences. In her consulting, she finds that the provider's *hunch* is usually right.

One reason parents may be in denial is that they have often been given well-meaning advice by family and even pediatricians that "they will grow out of it." It is natural for them to want to hang onto that hope. There is a fear of the unknown and questions like "What did I do?" Denial is a way to protect themselves.

A good starting point, Rochelle suggests, is to take a good long look at yourself, your attitudes, your knowledge. Quiet yourself and address any anger or discomfort you may be feeling. Above all, work as part of a team. You are not alone. Teachers/caregivers, of course, should always work through their administration. Become acquainted with community professionals and services that can be supportive. Network!

You cannot rush families. Recognize that coming to terms with the situation can be a long road for some families. Realize that the *team* can include grandparents and friends of the family, who can sometimes receive the information better than the parents. Make it your goal to keep the lines of communication with the family open. Listen, listen, listen, Rochelle advises, and respectfully ask families what they are ready for. Rochelle also urges providers to develop a range of helpful resources for parents (books, articles, picture guides, and videos) and keep in mind the different learning styles of families.

Suspend judgement. Steer people away from the blaming questions of "why" this happened and put your energy toward what all members of this team are going to do to support this child. Believe, and help the parents believe, that all kids have a tremendous capacity for learning. Rochelle gives us an excellent conclusion by remind-

ing us that we have a very short time with families. Make every interaction count. Be compassionate and authentic and allow yourself to grow as a professional and as a human being as you help families with difficult issues.

For information about Rochelle Bunnnett's products, contact Our Kids Press, PO Box 486, Bellingham, WA 98227, (360) 734-2335.

Karen Miller is the author of *Ages and Stages*, *Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *The Outside Play and Learning Book*, and her newest book, *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House, 1996).

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas, as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to: Karen Miller, PO Box 97, Cowdrey, CO 80434-0097.