

Parenting Support: A Pediatrician-Child Psychiatrist's Reflection

A wise pediatrician once imparted on me, "meet the family where they are - think about what YOU can do for THEM in THIS moment." For me, prevention work strongly resonates with my care philosophy. Preventative care and early interventions are staples of primary care pediatrics. From vaccines that prevent illnesses to routine anticipatory guidance, helping parents with giving their children what is good and necessary for health is the essence of a pediatric health care home. Health is not limited to physical health, however. The emotional health and the emotional development of a child is critical to overall health. As behavioral problems continue to increase stress and anxiety in families, helping parents with the anticipatory guidance of parenting becomes more necessary and pressing. This is where parenting work, specifically Circle of Security Parenting, comes into play for me and my work as both a pediatrician and a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

Circle of Security Parenting is an attachment-based reflective group for parents to 1) reframe their children's behaviors as communication, 2) receive support in their reflective work on how their upbringing influences their parenting today, and 3) begin to make changes to reach their parenting goals while strengthening their child's trust and attachment to them. I wholeheartedly believe that relationships, especially the early relationships, make a world of difference on the child's brain development, and ergo future mental and emotional health outcomes. Much of my work is supporting parents in the primary care pediatric clinic and strengthening the relationship between parent-child when children are still small and temper tantrums can still be a little cute. To do so, I facilitate virtual Circle of Security Parenting groups with the underserved, under-insured families in District of Columbia, but it is not without its challenges.

Given the daily struggles of the population, multiple reminders are often needed for when group convenes. Honestly speaking, the need for repeated reminders from support staff and myself make me question how important is this for the parents? Is it worth doing this? As I prepare myself mentally every week before the 8-session group, I remind myself that it is not because this work is not important, but that the chaos and the disappointments with housing, with jobs, with themselves all contribute to the constant last-minute scheduling conflicts. I also gently coach myself that despite missed sessions, they still come back and sometimes ask for make-up sessions. The nature of this work certainly can get discouraging when the no-shows happen. Yet, this work is not about me, but rather it is about what I can do and what I know how to do for the families with me now. After all, those who come do the hard work of self-reflection and self-evaluation of their role in the parent-child dyadic conflicts.

Parenting work is preventative work. Supporting the parents in a way that they have the tools to support their child's emotional development and growth matters and they recognize this. As the latest group came to an end, the mothers stated how wonderful it was to meet other like-minded mothers and expressed desire to meet the others in person. With Mother's Day fast approaching, the team worked together around scheduling, location, and transportation arrangement. Three families, 18 total individuals, came together on Mother's Day to celebrate the completion of the Circle of Security Parenting group. We toasted to their efforts, introduced

their families and children to one another, and of course, enjoyed good food together. I watched the mothers gather around the mothers' table as they met for the first time. The children gathered and began friendships with one another - even asking for a girl's group. Even the dads came and mingled together. What was really happening is the forging and strengthening of relationships all around, and that is so worth it.