Knowing Your Children

You know more than you think you do.
—Dr. Benjamin Spock, Baby and Child Care (1976)

Parents have a lot of help today. There is a whole backup team of teachers, doctors, and other specialists available to help you give your children the best care. But, like many parents, your confidence may sometimes drop when you face these experts and their special knowledge. When teachers or doctors say things that don’t seem right to you, you may think: “Well, they’re the experts. They know best.” If you feel this way, you are forgetting one important point: in order to put their knowledge to best use, specialists in all fields need the help of another expert—you.

Reading between the lines

Advising parents is a big business these days. There are thousands of books available on child care. While we’re lucky to have access to such a wealth of knowledge, it’s hard to make sense of this information. At times authors disagree with each other and can give conflicting advice. You have to use your common sense in deciding whose advice to follow; you can’t raise your child by a book. You, your child, and your family are unique. Because you have been on the scene since the beginning, you know:

• the history of your child’s growth and development,
• the values and traditions he or she has been taught,
• what your child’s everyday life is like,
• how he or she acts in different situations,
• what your child has already learned and experienced,
• who are the important people in your child’s life, and
• what your child likes to do in his or her spare time.

You are the link between your child and the outside world.

Confronting the experts

You also must use your common sense when dealing with experts on a personal basis. Accepting all advice without ever questioning is as foolish as refusing to accept any. Don’t be intimidated by the professionals’ secret language, position, or authority. Don’t hesitate to ask them what they mean or speak out when you disagree.

Remember that, as a parent, you are an expert too—on your child. Teachers and doctors may know a lot about children in general. But they don’t know as much as you do about your child in particular. They depend on you to share the inside information you have when they are making crucial decisions about your child.

Bridging the gap

Children benefit most when you blend what you know about them with what the specialists know. You and the professionals you meet should use each other as information sources about your child.
You can strengthen this partnership if you:

- Stay tuned to your child.
- Use your experience to interpret what you read and hear about children in the mass media.
- Share your special knowledge with professionals.
- Stand up for your rights when necessary.

Think of yourself as the conductor of an orchestra of specialists. As the conductor, you are the only one who knows the whole score. You are the one who has to keep everyone else in tune.

**Becoming partners**

Your relationship with other experts should be a partnership in which both parties have certain rights and responsibilities. Your meetings should be a time to swap information in order to better understand and help your child.

**The doctor.** When you visit your child’s doctor you can help in the diagnosis by sharing what you know about your child’s medical history. Tell the doctor about any

- allergies,
- medications,
- past illnesses or operations,
- special problems, and
- immunizations.

A written record is the best way to keep track of these facts. It also can prevent anyone from suggesting that your memory is bad or that you aren’t being objective.

Carefully describe any problems. Be as specific as possible, and give examples of symptoms and behavior. Remember, even minor details are important. One of those “unimportant” details may turn out to be an important diagnostic clue.

**Be sure you understand everything the doctor says.** Don’t be afraid to ask questions like:

- What does that mean? What do you propose to do?
- What are the alternatives?
- What is this prescription for?
- Are there any side effects?
- Why can you help your child?

Feel free to ask about anything that bothers you and make sure you get answers. If something the doctor says puzzles or concerns you, don’t let it pass. Ask the doctor to explain what he or she means and to define any unfamiliar terms. If you disagree, say so. If you want to know more, ask the doctor to elaborate.

If your child has problems, work with the doctor to resolve it. You may have information about your child and be able to recommend a good way to handle him or her in certain situations. Or the doctor may suggest how you can help the child at home.

Sometimes it helps to make a list of questions you want to ask before your meetings.