Parents' Perspectives on Strengthening Clinician-Parent Partnerships to Promote Early Relational Health

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Background

- As defined by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Early Relational Health is a "framework that explores the role of early relationships and experiences in healthy development across a child's lifetime." [1]
- Frequent contact provides pediatric clinicians the unique opportunity to promote early relational health and support safe, stable, and nurturing caregiver-child relationships, which lay the foundation for future development, health and wellbeing, and help mitigate the effects of toxic stress.
- Few studies have sought to understand parents' perspectives on how pediatric clinicians can further strengthen relationships with families in the primary care setting to support early relational health.

Methods

- **Study design:** virtual focus groups using guide prepared with input from community partners and parent advisors
- **Study population:** Convenient samples parents of children age ≤ 7 years in New Jersey.
- **Recruitment:** Community-engaged approach via collaboration with local partners and pediatric clinicians.
- **Data collection:**
  - Demographic survey
  - Focused groups recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- **Data analysis:** data analyzed via an immersion- crystallization approach to identify themes within and across focus groups
- **Protection of participants:** project approved by Institutional Review Board

Objective

To understand parents' perspectives on how pediatric clinicians can strengthen relationships with families to more effectively support early relational health.

Results

29 participants (median age 36 years; 48.3% Asian, 17.2% Black/African-American; 37.9% Hispanic/Latino; 82.8% mothers)

THEME 1: Parents identified clear and timely communication as one of the most important components of effective care.	**THEME 2:** Parents expressed a strong need for a personal connection between clinician and child, and the clinician and themselves, but felt that lack of time during visits, and lack of continuity with the same clinician prevented the development of this connection.	**THEME 3:** Parents needed clinicians to demonstrate empathy and respect for the family's perspectives and culture, in order to build trust.	**THEME 4:** Parents desired additional resources, such as instructional pamphlets and videos on child development, to allow them to feel more confident in their knowledge and skills.
"What they can do is, before we leave, they can go the extra mile and they can ask, "Would you like to- are you satisfied with today's visit? Would you like to know something else? Can I do something for you or do you need a translator?" or something like that, you know? Which **gives you a comfort zone** which **makes…you feel important and makes you feel like you were heard, and they care about you**, you know?"	"We rely on our doctors. And when our doctors disassociate themselves from the patient and from the parents of the patient and **when we become just numbers and prescription slips, that's the problem.** That becomes the problem. And **you do not just see the individual person and what they need."**	"There should be some kind of thing around um **empathy… How can you understand this parent from a different background or from another culture?** You need to listen carefully. Like just take a minute to listen, ask some questions without trying to insult. **Ask some questions just trying to understand the culture, their feelings.**"	"They **should also give parents a list of activities which we can do with our kids.** And it would be really reassuring for us to think- 'Wow… this is the activity which I did which will help my baby's brain development,' and so on and so forth… And **this is how we would feel confident** and it would reduce the time that we go in to visit the pediatrician."

Limitations

- Findings might not transfer to other settings.
- Focus on young children and their families; findings might not transfer to other developmental stages.
- No direct observation of clinical encounters.

Discussion

- Clear and timely communication, empathy and cultural sensitivity, adequate time and continuity to build relationships, and additional informational resources were identified as main contributors to effective partnerships between clinicians and families.
- Clinicians and policymakers should pay careful attention to these factors in order to build trusted partnerships with families to effectively address early relational health.

Future Steps

- To implement parent suggestions in pediatric practice then reevaluate parent-clinician relationships and the promotion of early relational health.

References

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