



A MESSAGE FROM A CHILD FORMERLY IN FOSTER CARE

During the Pediatrics for the 21st Century symposium at the 2009 AAP National Conference & Exhibition, Mia Behrens provided some practical advice for the pediatrician attendees. Mia had a life of horrific abuse and emotional trauma, and entered foster care where she had to undergo a great deal of health care services.

Below, Mia offers some tips to health care professionals about how they can make kids of trauma feel safe and valued. Her presentation can also be viewed at www.dcprovidersonline.com/aap/250e3ca3631120123d823edef816678e//902d.html



1. In Order To Treat Me You Have To Recognize Me As A Whole Person With Emotional and Medical Needs.

One doctor did not think I needed a referral for rapid heart rate because he thought it was emotional. After a change in doctors, I got the proper diagnosis. I had atypical AV node reentrant that required 2 heart ablations. It made me feel good it wasn't in my head; it wasn't my fault. Just because you have emotional problems doesn't mean you can't have health issues.

2. The Best Doctors Knew How to Talk to Me and Not Just My Mother.

Getting the attention even briefly with a child who is hysterical or yelling potty mouth words is a little difficult. They got pretty creative at times. One of my doctors called me "his little friend" and would come in with a mystery bag that held small treasures and tell me he had been saving it for me until I came in next. If he was waiting for me to come in he must like me. Another doctor told me silly jokes or drew funny pictures on the paper. Another did magic. These doctors changed the tone of the exam.

3. They Didn't Ignore Me Even If I Refused to Talk to Them.

They were not offended. They would continue to speak to me as if they hadn't noticed. They knew it was not about them. The hope was I would decide some day to trust. Most knew that trust is not immediately established. A breakthrough came when my neurologist who had been seeing me for a few months began drawing a funny picture of himself. I suddenly laughed, startling all of us. He thanked me and said it was the best thing that had happened to him all day. I liked him and learned to trust him. Over the years we had quite a few laughs. It was the gift he gave me.

4. Children Need to Be Told the Truth About Uncomfortable Procedures in Words They Can Understand.

However, understand children of abuse don't have a lot of ability to tell the difference in the level of discomfort. When you tell a child that something will feel like a little pressure or small sting, they may feel pain.



5. Empathy Goes a Long Way.

Words that discount a reaction to what you do don't help. Comments such as "oh, now this doesn't hurt" or "you're being silly", do not help. Once I yelled at a nurse "I am not silly. I am mad". I didn't lie awake last night and then decide to go to your office and make a fool out of myself by overreacting. Trust me; it is exhausting to stir up those emotions. Tell me I can make all the noise I want, but wiggling might make it hurt worse.

After one painful hospital procedure when I was 5, a doctor I didn't know came in and started checking. It hurt and I started trembling and chattering because I was so terrified. My mom told me to tell him with my words what the problem was. I loudly asked, "Do you know how to do this on kids, like me, or what?" Because I didn't think he did this very much. He laughed and said I could be right and went to get a female I knew. When it was done, I told him I liked him. He was able to do his job because with the good humor, he acknowledged my fears and came up with another solution.

6. Be Careful About What You Say Around Children.

We observe and get the meaning mixed up. When I was 5, my doctor was reviewing with my parents the negative things that could happen during a procedure. As he rushed through the list he said quickly and quietly as he stood in the doorway, "death could occur". No one realized how much I heard until I asked "who will sleep in my bed when I get dead?!" Because I was young and had emotional problems, did not mean I was deaf or stupid.

7. Kids Do Have Good Suggestions.

For many years I had occasional NG [nasogastric] tubes. It was so uncomfortable and frightening that I had a hard time cooperating. Being restrained only added to the trauma. Mom asked me if I had any suggestions for holding still. I wanted my sister the RN to do it at home. So for years, that is how we did it. With the doctor's total agreement, I complied and we even told jokes about it. Ask us and listen to us. Kids do have good suggestions at times. I learned to trust the doctor because he listened to me and looked for options. I used to tell him he was awesome.

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Doctors' Comments Have Been Funny, Self-esteem Building, and Trust Building.

Things that doctors have said to me that made me feel good about myself:

The doctor who kept trying new treatments that kept failing said to me, "Mia, you know that **none of this is your fault**. You didn't cause this. I will just have to work smarter for you." I'm not a problem or a mistake.

A gastric doctor I went to see for a consult said, "Mia, I am like a mechanic that works on Chevys and Fords. I don't do Ferraris. You are a Ferrari. I am sending you to a Ferrari doctor." It was funny and true humor helps.



My heart doctor told me he was going to find solutions to help me get my dreams because I deserve the best. **I felt valued.**

My psychiatrist has told me how funny and smart and creative and tenacious and capable I am. It has made me feel so **worthwhile.**

My pediatrician who has been through so much with me, told me one day that I was an awesome, tenacious kid who made her glad she was my doctor. **It made me feel I counted.**

None of these doctors had magic dust that took away all my issues. They had something better. They helped me learn how to trust, gave me the power to push through difficult things, and came up with solutions. I learned I was not alone; I was part of a team.

Through my experiences, I have come up with a growing list of things I believe.

- I am a young woman of promise with so many possibilities.
- I know I am more than my disabilities and my mistakes.
- How we live our life is a choice.
- There is healing in helping others.
- You can't change the past, so practice living each day with hopefulness, laughter and the knowledge that you are a work in progress.
- Never, never, never give up. I am who I am today, because so many people cared.



I want you to keep doing your job to help children, keep trying to do it better and remember we need all of you to stick in there.

Life is good; pass it on.