

Levels of Awareness: The Ostrich Phase

Dr. El Brown | The Ostrich Phase



As an early interventionist, you are in a help giving profession and you want to ensure that you are offering families help that is relevant to the family's needs. You can achieve that goal by meeting parents where they are when you first engage with them and build from there.

A large component of meeting parents where they are is being able to identify and understand what you are seeing when you engage with the parent. When you work with parents of young children with disabilities, you are operating in a very intimate space in a family's life.

You have been granted the privilege to witness some very raw and real emotions. As early interventionists, you spend time with parents who are processing and adapting to life during and after the traumatic parental experience of discovering their child requires additional assistance to maximize their personal potential. Most seasoned early intervention professionals are skilled at identifying these emotions, which are often tied to a process known as the stages of grief. However, the emotions that you witness during a parent's evolution through this emotional development walk hand in hand with a parent's progression of knowledge and understanding of characteristics of their child's disability and the support needed to assist their child's development. This process of knowing is identified as a parent's levels of awareness.

Levels of Awareness

Parents of children with disabilities have four levels of awareness (Ulrich & Bauer, 2003):

1. The Ostrich Phase
2. Special Designation
3. Normalization
4. Self-actualization

In this post, we are going to discuss the first level of awareness, The Ostrich Phase.

What do ostriches do?

Stick their heads in the sand, unaware of the surroundings.



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The first level of awareness is actually a lack of awareness. Parents, who spend time in The Ostrich Phase, typically had very little experience with disability when they were growing up and may have little or no information about disabilities as an adult.

Remember, as the professional, you have the content knowledge. You have a pretty solid idea of what you are looking at, regarding development characteristics. However, parents may not initially have the information or awareness that allows them to identify characteristics in their child that seem very apparent to you. Some parents are completely unaware of the characteristics of disabilities in young children. They have been gifted with this precious child and they really don't know what they are looking at just yet.

It is common for professionals to identify this level of awareness as denial, as it is at times paired with comments such as the following:

"My mother in law said my husband didn't speak until he was five years old, and he's fine now. He's a doctor. She's a slow starter like her dad."

"He plays well with his brothers. He's just hasn't warmed up to preschool yet."

"He's just super active. So, he may not be stimulated by the activities offered at the preschool. I think he's bored and acting out."

"It's a phase. We are just going to give her time to grow out of it."

"Are you implying that there is something wrong with my kid? He's just fine."

While it may appear that parents are denying "the truth" or evidence and characteristics that seem apparent to you, they are simply operating on a level of awareness that has not exposed them to the information that you have.

During The Ostrich Phase, parents are not yet able to see their child through the lens that your content knowledge enables you to see the developmental characteristics of their child. Therefore, the parent's truth is based on the information they have. Consequently, the parent may truly believe "everything is just fine."



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So, sometimes it isn't denial you are witnessing, but simply the evidence of things unknown – a lack of awareness.

Be Patient...It's the Process

You may get **a little push back** during this phase, if you bring a parent information about the child that he or she had not yet considered.

Be prepared.

It's not you.

It's not the parent.

It's the process.

Be patient with your families, as **parents** of young children with disabilities are developing in preparation for a lifelong journey of parenting their precious child. You have the honor of assisting them in this most sacred space.

Is there a time in your practice that you believe you may have mistook The Ostrich Phase for denial?

If so, considering your new knowledge, how would you engage differently during a similar encounter with a family now?