

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

What Direct Support Professionals Wish Families Knew (And Vice Versa)

The DSP workforce crisis gets discussed constantly in policy terms, wages, turnover rates, funding formulas. What almost never gets discussed is the actual relationship between families and the people showing up in their homes, and how often that relationship breaks down over things nobody said out loud.

BY JIM PALASTY · 10 MIN READ · A GAP THAT RUNS IN TWO DIRECTIONS, ADDRESSED HONESTLY IN BOTH

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DIRECTIONS THIS KNOWLEDGE GAP RUNS

What DSPs wish families understood, and what families wish DSPs understood. Both sides carry real frustration. Both sides also carry real, addressable misunderstanding.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

The relationship carries enormous weight

A DSP's daily presence shapes safety, routine, and quality of life more than almost any other single service touchpoint.



STEP 2

Both sides carry unspoken frustration

DSPs navigate poverty wages and inadequate support. Families navigate feeling unheard about the person they know best.



STEP 3

Specific strategies build a working relationship

Neither side's frustration disappears through this conversation alone, but concrete practices make the daily reality genuinely better.

What each side can offer the other

Families can offer DSPs	Specific routine details, genuine respect, realistic expectations
DSPs can offer families	Honest updates, professional judgment, consistency where possible
Both benefit from	Direct, early communication about what's not working
Both should recognize	Systemic economic pressure shapes this relationship, not individual failure
Both can escalate	When a mismatch isn't resolvable, ending it cleanly protects everyone

THE ROUTINE DETAIL THAT PREVENTED A CRISIS

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Marissa, a DSP for six years, said the single most useful thing any family ever gave her wasn't a training manual. It was a specific sentence a mother said on her first day: 'He needs a two-minute warning before any transition, in these exact words, or it escalates every time.' That one sentence, passed on directly instead of assumed, prevented more incidents over the following year than anything in her formal training ever had.

ONE SPECIFIC SENTENCE, SAID DIRECTLY ON DAY ONE, DID MORE THAN ANY MANUAL EVER COULD.

What matters, at a glance

What DSPs wish families knew

Poverty-level wages, turnover driven by economics rather than caring less, and daily exposure to aggression without adequate training or backup support.

What families wish DSPs knew

This is our child, not a case file. Our expertise about specific routines and triggers should be treated as real clinical information, not parental anxiety.

Turnover is nearly constant

National DSP turnover runs extremely high, meaning many families rebuild this relationship from scratch repeatedly, year after year.

Small details prevent real crises

A specific transition warning, a particular phrase, a known trigger, passed on clearly, genuinely prevents escalations that generic training never will.

Respect runs both directions

A DSP's professional judgment and a family's lived expertise both deserve genuine weight in how care actually gets delivered day to day.

Knowing when a relationship isn't working matters too

Some staff mismatches aren't fixable through better communication, and recognizing that honestly protects everyone involved.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

☐ A written summary of specific routine and communication details

☐ Realistic understanding of DSP wages and turnover pressures

☐ A clear sense of what would indicate a relationship isn't working

☐ A plan for one direct conversation about mutual expectations

☐ A process for raising concerns early rather than letting them build

YOUR MOVE

When you're building or repairing this relationship, here is where to start

1

Have one direct conversation naming expectations on both sides.

2

Families: write down the specific routine details that actually matter.

3

DSPs: ask for that information directly rather than assuming or guessing.

4

Both: communicate concerns early, before frustration builds silently.

5

Both: recognize systemic economic pressure shapes this relationship.

6

If a mismatch genuinely isn't working, address it directly and end it cleanly.

Neither side chose the economic pressure shaping this relationship. Both sides can still choose how directly they communicate inside it.

WORKFORCE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIP RESOURCES

The National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (nadsp.org) offers training and advocacy resources for building effective, respectful DSP-family relationships.

National Core Indicators IDD data documents the DSP workforce crisis nationally, providing context families can reference when discussing turnover and staffing challenges.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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