

Source: “The Importance of Trust in Medical Care,” a review of recent writings by David Mechanic, available from the National Program Office of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research at the Academy for Health Services Research and Health Policy, 202/296-6700, e-mail: [info@ahsrhp.org](mailto:info@ahsrhp.org)

This review of recent writings by a leading researcher and policy analyst in the health care area, David Mechanic of Rutgers University, has great applicability to the children’s mental health field although it doesn’t deal directly with it. The review summarizes a series of nine articles by Mechanic on “trust” in medical care. It is significant in and of itself that a leading researcher, who is well known for his work in adult mental health, should choose this topic as a focus of study.

Mechanic makes the point that in health care, trust is the “glue” that makes care work. He says that as medical practice has changed in the managed care era with power shifting away from physicians to entrepreneurs and managers, there has been a sizable erosion of patient trust for their physicians. Research done with three groups of patients – those with breast cancer, Lyme disease, or mental illness – found that interpersonal competence is the most important aspect of trust from the patient’s perspective. Patients characterized trust as an iterative process that developed over time, and were highly concerned about whether physicians advocated on their behalf. Patients also expressed great concern about the technical competence of their physicians.

While this work does not deal directly with children with emotional problems, their families, and the practitioners who they see, it is certainly relevant to the field. It has potential implications for staff selection and training, for the establishment of organizational and fiscal arrangements to facilitate trusting relationships, and for research on treatment effectiveness. It is consistent with the apparent growth in the use of independent case managers in the children’s mental health field, particularly when the case manager role does not involve rationing of resources but does involve a strong element of advocacy for the children and families that they serve. The focus on trust also has great implications for the development of partnerships in general between parents and professionals, between various service sectors, and between individuals at neighborhood, county, and state levels.