What Makes a Great Clinical Teacher in Pediatrics? Lessons Learned From the Literature
Susan L. Bannister, William V. Raszka, Jr and Christopher G. Maloney
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What Makes a Great Clinical Teacher in Pediatrics? Lessons Learned From the Literature

Medical student education in pediatrics has changed significantly over the past 2 decades. There has been an increased emphasis on ambulatory experiences and greater use of community- and ambulatory-based faculty.1,2 A shift from inpatient to more outpatient primary care and subspecialty rotation experiences combined with productivity and academic demands may result in faculty spending less time with students.3 However, these same faculty, often with little formal training, are critical to the pediatric education of medical students. The goal of this article is to review the peer-reviewed literature that describes the attributes and skills of a great clinical teacher, whether community or university based, and outline some strategies used to enhance medical student learning.

TEACHING IN THE CLINICAL SETTING First, what is a clinical teacher? The Council on Medical Student Education in Pediatrics (COMSEP) defines a clinical teacher as someone who interacts with a student in the context of ongoing patient care. The feature that sets clinical teachers apart from other types of teachers, then, is the involvement of, and teaching about, a patient. Teaching in the clinical setting is complicated, because the preceptor needs not only to diagnose and treat the patient but also the student. The preceptor needs to learn what knowledge or skills the student does or does not have and ensure that the student has progressed to where he or she needs to be by the end of the session. The educational goal of clinical teachers, and a primary goal of our work in COMSEP, is to ensure that students are prepared to practice effective patient-centered care.

ATTRIBUTES OF A GREAT CLINICAL TEACHER We can all remember during medical school or residency having teachers that made the experience memorable and inspired us to work a little harder, study a little longer, and sleep a little less. Unfortunately, we can also remember teachers who made the learning experience either unsatisfying or at least less enjoyable. Distinguishing between these 2 types of teachers is of keen interest to all educators.4 The results of several studies have suggested that great clinical teachers possess both unique noncognitive and cognitive attributes.5,6 In a review of the literature on effective clinical teaching published between 1909 and 2006, 480 unique descriptors of good teaching were classified into 49 themes. Although cognitive attributes such as knowledge and procedural skills are important (as shown in Table 1), noncognitive attributes play equally important roles.

Noncognitive Attributes For example, consider the key role of enthusiasm in a great clinical teacher.6–8 The importance of enthusiasm is not a new concept. In the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm,” and Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, “Nothing is so contagious as enthusiasm.” Enthusiasm is not necessar-
A student has to say. Memorable teachers focus on the supportive learning environment, and listen to what the student develops a positive relationship with students, creates a literature that the great clinical teacher is nonjudgmental, and helps students thrive when their opinions and views are valued and they are allowed to voice their views in a safe, supportive environment.

Although a great number of noncognitive attributes other than enthusiasm are highly valued, most can be summarized by a single word: respect. As Ralph Waldo Emerson also wrote, “the secret of education is respecting the student.” A great teacher recognizes that the student-teacher relationship is a bidirectional exchange. We learn from the literature that the great clinical teacher is nonjudgmental, develops a positive relationship with students, creates a supportive learning environment, and listens to what the student has to say. Memorable teachers focus on the learners’ needs rather than their own teaching interests and involve the learners in setting relevant educational goals. Students thrive when their opinions and views are valued and are allowed to voice their views in a safe, supportive environment.

Great clinical teachers also serve as professional role models and mentors for students, which is a complex and purposeful activity that involves not only modeling clinical competence but also professionalism. The clinical teacher occupies the role to which the student aspires. In that role, the clinical teacher shows genuine concern for patients, recognizes his or her own limitations, shows respect for others, and takes responsibility for his or her actions. The student quickly learns whether the observed behaviors are either acceptable or worth emulating. The importance of appropriate role-modeling cannot be underestimated. In a study that looked at medical students at the beginning and midway through their clerkship year, observation and participation in unprofessional behaviors increased and students increasingly perceived unprofessional behaviors as being appropriate.

Cognitive Attributes

When faculty and residents are individually asked to rank the critical characteristics of clinical teachers, both rank clinical competence as the most important cognitive quality. Great clinical teachers are universally expected to be not only clinically competent but also able to demonstrate and explain clinical skills. They use highly developed communication skills to converse with patients, families, members of the health care team, and students. Moreover, they articulate their thought processes and describe the clinical patterns used to make clinical decisions with clarity and in language the student understands.

The great clinical teacher relies on a variety of skills and strategies to enhance medical student learning. Briefly, great clinical teachers set goals with students and hold them accountable. Students highly value setting goals, debriefing after clinical encounters, being involved with patient management decisions, and receiving timely feedback in a learning environment that combines both independence and supervision. Direct, competent supervision, particularly when combined with focused feedback, positively influences both patient care and student education.

In a study of more than 1200 medical students who had completed their clinical rotations, supervision correlated far better with the overall effectiveness of the clinical rotation than patient mix and numbers of patients seen.

SUMMARY Great clinical teachers occupy a unique and powerful role in the education of medical students. Their noncognitive and cognitive actions and behaviors influence future student behaviors and career choices and, most importantly, result in a future generation of physicians who are equipped to care for children. Although we continue to have difficulty defining the critical characteristics of a great clinical teacher, identifying such a teacher is easy: they are the ones to whom students and residents flock. If we return to a teacher we each remember as having made the clinical experience memorable and inspired us to work a little harder, it is the person, not necessarily the content, that we remember. Although some have advocated that great teaching is innate, many of the skills and strategies can, in fact, be learned and developed. Over the next several issues we will explore in greater detail the skills and strategies developed by COMSEP that can be quickly and efficiently assimilated into daily practice and help make a good clinical teacher great.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Noncognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is knowledgeable</td>
<td>Is enthusiastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates clinical skills</td>
<td>Is stimulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is well organized</td>
<td>Is encouraging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has excellent communication skills</td>
<td>Creates a positive, supportive learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides feedback</td>
<td>Models professional characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explains concepts clearly</td>
<td>Focuses on learner’s needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets goals and expectations</td>
<td>Interacts positively with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides direct supervision</td>
<td>Listens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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7. Masunaga H, Hitchcock MA. Residents’ and faculty’s beliefs about the ideal clinical teacher. Fam Med. 2010;42(2):116–120


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