

Talking to Professionals about their Qualifications

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When you decide to use the services of a professional, you want to have confidence that the person is qualified and experienced and able to meet the particular needs of your family or child. Your first meeting with the professional is a time to get acquainted, to talk about your child’s needs, and to find out what the professional can do to help. You can use this time to ask questions about the person’s background and experience in working with children.

If you have any doubts, it is wise to ask specific questions until you are satisfied that the person is appropriately qualified to help you. Professionals should know their limits as well as their strengths and should gladly refer you to someone else if their skills are not a good match for your needs. Although this process is usually quite straightforward, it is unfortunate that there are a few people who present themselves to the public as professionals but who are not in fact qualified or appropriately trained. This information is intended to help you in recognizing and understanding professional qualifications and to guide you in finding professionals with appropriate skills and experience. It will also help you to recognize when a person may be unqualified or misrepresenting themselves for personal gain.

Why do people list all those letters after their names? Is this supposed to impress me?

The purpose of using titles, academic degrees, and specialty designations is to communicate accurate information to the consumer or other professionals about the person’s education and training and their legally recognized professional role. Unfortunately, some people do use titles and abbreviations in an effort to impress or even to mislead consumers about their qualifications. If all those letters after someone’s name look impressive but if you don’t know what they mean, you should ask. A professional will be glad to explain. If the person is defensive, it’s time to start asking a lot more questions.

What do I need to know about academic degrees?

Most people recognize common university degrees like B.A. (Bachelor of Arts), B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education), M.Sc. (Master of Science), M.D. (Doctor of Medicine) or Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy). A Bachelor’s degree normally requires four years of study, a Master’s an additional one or two years, and a Ph.D. about three to five years beyond the Master’s.

Should a professional list all of their degrees?

People with more than one degree usually list only their most advanced one. If they have a B.A. and an M.A., for example, they will usually list only the M.A. after their name, but either way is acceptable.

Professionals should not list degrees that are not relevant to their professional practice without making it clear that the degree is in another area. For example, if an Occupational Therapist has a Bachelor’s degree in Occupational Therapy and also a Master’s Degree in History, it would be misleading to use “Mary Jones, M.A.” in her professional practice since this gives the false impression that she has been trained at the Master’s level in Occupational Therapy. In this situation, she should list her degrees as Mary Jones, B.Sc., or Mary Jones, B.Sc. (O.T.), M.A. (History).

Can I trust that a master’s or doctoral degree means that the person is well educated and professionally trained?

Not always! Universities do vary in quality, and a person may be trained in an area that is not relevant to your needs. Unscrupulous people sometimes use phoney degrees to create the impression that they are well-trained professionals when they are not. If you are uncertain about someone, ask where they received their degree and what sort of training they received.

It is important to make a distinction between legitimate universities and “degree mills” or “diploma mills”. Degree mills provide degrees without providing an education. They may give credit for “life experience” or submitting a few essays, but they have few if any formal course requirements and few if any qualified faculty. Some of these so-called “universities” will provide a “BA” or “MA” for just a fee and a few months of enrolment. Degree mills provide a completely inadequate education. Some provide virtually no education at all.

“Diploma mills” are outright frauds that print counterfeit diplomas for legitimate universities. You can buy a Harvard diploma for the right price and the risk of a fraud conviction! You are quite unlikely to encounter someone with a counterfeit diploma, but it does happen and it has happened in B.C. Legitimate universities operate under a provincial or state charter or they are recognized by a national or regional accrediting agency. Be careful when asking about accreditation. Some phoney universities are accredited by phoney accrediting agencies! The Council for Higher Education Accreditation is a good source of information about universities and accreditation in the United States. The Registrar’s office at your local university can usually tell you whether they would recognize a degree or course credits from a particular institution.

What else should I watch for?

Occasionally people will claim degrees that they have not quite earned. For example, a person who has completed all the course requirements for a Master of Arts but has not completed the required thesis might improperly list M.A. (ABT) after their name, meaning M.A. (All But Thesis). You might also see Ph.D. (ABD) for “All But Dissertation”. This is unethical because it creates the false impression that the person has been awarded a degree when they have not. Since most people will not know what ABT or ABD really means, they might assume that the person has an M. A. in “Applied Behavior Therapy” or something similar. People who use these abbreviations may be deliberately misleading you, but sometimes they are just poorly trained in ethics and don’t realize that it is improper.

Do I have to go to the trouble of checking out every person’s degree?

No. If a person is registered with a professional college such as the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, the College of Physical Therapists of B.C., the College of Dieticians of B.C., the College of Psychologists of B.C., etc. then the College will have evaluated the person’s educational credentials before allowing them to be registered. The Colleges also put candidates for registration through an examination process to assess their professional knowledge and skills. Colleges also require a period of supervised practice before the person can be registered.

What is a professional College and how do I know if a person is registered?

In British Columbia, many different health professions are regulated under the Health Professions Act. Each profession has a “College” that sets educational and training standards and standards of practice, evaluates applicants for registration, and is responsible for enforcing a Code of Ethics. People must be registered to practice these professions. Consumers can file a complaint with the relevant College if they believe a registered health professional is practicing unethically or incompetently. If a person is registered with a College, you can be confident about their educational credentials. A health care professional should indicate that he or she is registered on any promotional materials, or on his or her business card or correspondence. He or she should be able to provide you with a registration number. If in doubt, you can call the relevant College or visit the College website and you can quickly confirm whether the person is registered.

What about all those other letters after the person’s degree?

Some abbreviations refer to registration with a professional College (for example, R. Psych. for Registered Psychologist). Other letters show that a person is a recognized specialist within their profession. For example, a physician with FRCPC after their name is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Canada and has advanced training in a specialized area of medicine such as Pediatrics, Psychiatry, etc. Other abbreviations may indicate that a professional has met some nationally recognized standard of competence in their field of practice. For example, Speech Language Pathologists sometimes use CCC-SLP to indicate that they have qualified for a Certificate of Clinical Competence that is recognized throughout North America.

Generally speaking, professionals should not list certificates and diplomas in specific techniques after their name. These abbreviations usually do not mean much to the consumer and may only indicate that the person has passed a course or taken a few workshops. These qualifications may be relevant, but for the sake of clarity they should be spelled out in a short statement about the person's background and services rather than listed as abbreviations after their name. If you see a lot of letters that mean nothing to you, ask questions. Be curious rather than impressed. Keep in mind that an unqualified person could have a certificate in a completely discredited or potentially harmful practice.

What is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst?

The letters BCBA mean that the person is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst. This means that they have met the standards of the Behavior Analysis Certification Board, which requires in-depth training in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) at the Masters or doctoral level, supervised experience in ABA, and passing of an extensive written exam. This is quite a high standard and means that the person is well trained in ABA theory and methods. It does not necessarily mean that the person is trained and experienced in autism treatment, however, since Applied Behaviour Analysis is a very broad field. Note that Board Certification in Behavior Analysis is entirely voluntary for professionals, so a person can be competent in this field without a BCBA designation. The letters BCABA refer to a Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst. These are specialists in ABA trained at the Bachelor's degree level; they must have a supervisor.

What are the warning signs that I really need to check someone out more carefully?

Be suspicious of anyone who presents themselves as a professional but does not clearly identify what their profession is. Professionals should be accountable to a regulatory body that sets and enforces standards of practice. If a person claims competence in a great variety of different things, they may not be truly competent in any of them. You should also be cautious if one method is offered as the treatment for a great many different conditions. There are no "cure-alls".

Professionals do not offer guarantees nor should they promise a particular success rate. They should not use testimonials from "satisfied customers" to convince you to use their services, but might provide names of people they have worked with as references. They should be able to refer you to research articles about their methods.

Be suspicious of any degree that seems unusual or unfamiliar. If you've never heard of a "M.A. in Esoteric Studies" or a "Ph.D. in Integrative Physiology" then find out more about it. Where was the degree earned, what did they study, how much and what kind of training did they receive? Use the Internet to check out the institution where the person was trained. The bogus ones are usually not hard to spot.

Be concerned if the person cannot explain what they do in understandable terms. If they give you a lot of scientific-sounding talk that makes no sense, there may be neither sense nor science in their methods. Are you getting an explanation or a sales pitch? If you are not satisfied with an explanation, do an Internet search or ask another professional for their opinion.

Okay, so the person has checked out as a registered professional. How do I know he or she has the skills and experience that I need?

Do your homework in advance by finding out as much as you can about autism treatment methods by reading, using the internet, and talking to professionals and other parents. A professional will normally begin his or her relationship with you by asking about your needs (or the needs of your child) and then suggesting what they can do to help you. Feel free to ask questions about their methods or approach. If you have heard about a program or treatment method that you think may be appropriate for your child, ask their opinion about it and also about their training and experience with that approach.