

## Ep #11: You Are The Expert



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With Your Host

**Lisa Candra**

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You are listening to episode 11 of *The Autism Mom Coach*. You Are The Expert. Whether you are new to the diagnosis of Autism or an OG like me, you have likely heard the phrase, 'you are the expert on your child'. But what does this mean exactly? Keep listening to find out.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach*, a podcast for moms who feel overwhelmed, afraid, and sometimes powerless as they raise their child with Autism. My name is Lisa Candra. I'm a certified life coach, lawyer, and most importantly I'm a full-time single mom to a teenage boy with Autism. In this podcast I'll show you how to transform your relationship with Autism and special needs parenting. You'll learn how to shift away from being a victim of your circumstances to being the hero of the story you get to write. Let's get started.

Hello everyone and welcome to the podcast. I hope you are doing well. I'm recording this episode a couple of days after Mother's Day so I hope you all enjoyed the day. And for those of you who didn't, I'm with you. The last three months have been difficult and Mother's Day was no exception because as you all know, Autism does not take a break. Anyhow for the next two episodes I want to talk about a topic that is very near and dear to my experience right now and that is experts.

I have been spending a lot of time on the phone, at appointments and emailing and texting with the various professionals on my son's team. They are talented, and caring, and most of all, really invested in my son's wellbeing. And that's an amazing thing to have. But these are not the experts I want to talk about. I want to talk about us as the experts on our children. In this week's episode I will talk about what an expert is and what makes you the expert on your child.

Next week I will talk about stepping into your role as the expert. I think this is an important topic because in my experience most parents are dismissive of what they know. We get a diagnosis like Autism and we immediately begin looking outside of ourselves to the doctors, the teachers, and the therapist for answers. And this makes perfect sense. And while all

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of these professionals may be experts in their fields and may play important roles in our children's lives, they are still not the experts on our kids.

It took me a long time to think of myself as an expert. In my mind an expert is someone with formal education, or a professional experience, or some combination of the two. And here's the thing, while formal education and professional experience are an aspect of expertise, they are also a very limited view of what makes someone an expert, or where expertise comes from. So, let's talk about that.

What is expertise and where does it come from? To answer these questions and to make this episode a bit entertaining I hope, I am going to use examples completely unrelated to Autism or parenting. Instead, we're going to talk about the federal rules of evidence and two movies, My Cousin Vinny and Legally Blonde. Are you ready for this?

Let's start with My Cousin Vinny. This is the comedy about two New York college students accused of murder in rural Alabama. One of the kids is played by Ralph Macchio and his cousin is a lawyer named Vinny played by Joe Pesci. Okay, during the trial, Vinny calls his fiancé, Mona Lisa, played by Marisa Tomei, as an expert in the area of general automotives. Now, before Mona Lisa can testify, Vinny needs to qualify her as an expert under the federal rules of evidence. What does this mean?

Okay, so the movie doesn't go into this for good reason, it would be really boring. But the federal rules of evidence provide that a witness can be qualified as an expert by knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education. So, let's take a look at each of these factors. We start with knowledge. Where does knowledge come from? Anywhere. I'm pretty sure my son is a Star Wars expert based on what he knows from watching the movies and YouTube reviews. I'm pretty sure that I'm an expert on what ticks him off from living with him for 14 years.

Skill, where does skill come from? Doing something over and over, refining, perfecting through trial and error. Doesn't that sound like parenting to you? Experience, where does experience come from? Life. In fact, the federal

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rules of evidence do not say what kind of experience qualifies someone as an expert. There is no requirement that the experience be acquired in a formal setting, like a classroom. This means that experience acquired anywhere qualifies as experience.

Think of your kitchen table when you are introducing a new food to your child, or your living room when you're trying to get your child to put down the iPad and pick up the backpack. That qualifies, that's experience. Next, training and education, again, the federal rules do not contain any formal requirements about what constitutes training or education. This means that training and education may include formal degrees and certifications, but they're not limited to it.

So back to My Cousin Vinny, before Marisa Tomei can testify, Vinny needs to qualify her as an expert by laying the foundation. So how did Vinny establish that Mona Lisa, an out of work hairdresser was an expert? Her vocational classes? No. Her certifications? No. He established her expertise by the fact that she had worked in her father's garage doing tune-ups, oil changes, brake realignments and engine rebuilds. The point here, no degree, no formal training, just her experience, what she picked up working in her father's garage.

Here's another example from Legally Blonde. So, in the final courthouse scene, defense attorney, Elle Woods played by Reese Witherspoon, is cross examining Chutney Windham, the daughter of the victim. Chutney is a 27 year old woman with a head full of curls who testified that on the day of her father's murder she had left the house, got a latte, got a perm, returned home and went straight upstairs to take a shower. So that last piece strikes Elle as odd. So, here's how it goes.

Elle, Miss Windham have you ever gotten a perm before? Chutney, yes. Elle, how many would you say? Two a year since I was 12, you do the math. At this point Elle turns to the jury and says, "You know, a girl in my sorority, Tracey Marcinco got a perm once, we all tried to talk her out of it. Curls were not a good look for her. She didn't have your bone structure.

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But thankfully the same day she entered the Beta Delta Pi wet t-shirt contest where she was completely hosed down from head to toe.”

Elle then addresses the witness, Chutney, why is that Tracey Marcinco’s curls were ruined when she got hosed down? Chutney, because they got wet. Elle, exactly, because isn’t it the first cardinal rule of perm maintenance that you’re forbidden to wet your hair for at least 24 hours after getting a perm at the risk of deactivating the ammonium thioglycolate? Chutney, yes. Elle, and wouldn’t somebody who’s had say 30 perms before in their life be well aware of this rule? And at this point very dramatically Chutney folds and admits to killing her father.

Now, Elle was not presenting Chutney as an expert on perms but she probably could have based on her experience and knowledge, 15 years, two perms per year for a total of 30 perms. Chutney could testify as an expert based on this alone. No cosmetology degree or salon experience required. The same with you. You do not need a degree in childhood development or to work as a therapist to be an expert on your child based on your knowledge and experience.

If I were to put you on the witness stand and lay the foundation for your expertise on your child, what would you tell me? How long have you been parenting this child? How many years, weeks, days, hours of experience do you have? How many intake forms have you filled out? Now, this alone can make you an expert because the person filling out this information has to have very intimate knowledge of every milestone met or not met, every doctor, every therapist, every medication. How many bed, baths and meals have you supervised?

How many nights have you stayed up with a sick or sleepless child? How many meltdowns have you navigated? More than 30. How many mysteries have you solved by figuring out what the crying means or what your child is trying to say or communicate that no one else in the world except for you can interpret? How does your child act when they come home from school? How do they handle unstructured time like weekends and holidays? How

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do they interact with other family members? These are just some examples of the knowledge and experience that make you the expert on your child.

I just want to be clear here, being an expert does not mean you know everything or you have all the answers. In fact, part of expertise is knowing what you don't know, knowing when an issue is beyond your ability to handle, knowing when you need to call in other or additional support. So, let's sum it up. Being an expert is much more expansive than formal education or a professional experience. Mona Lisa worked in her dad's garage and Chutney had a bunch of perms. It includes your lived experience and your knowledge of your child.

So, what makes you the expert? Look for the evidence of your expertise and the questions I posed above. If I were to put you on the witness stand and question you about what makes you the expert on your child, what would you tell me?

Okay, have some fun with this one and be as expansive as possible. Next week I will talk about stepping into your role as the expert on your child. Talk to you next week.

Thanks for listening to *The Autism Mom Coach*. If you want more information or the show notes and resources from the podcast, visit [theAutismmomcoach.com](http://theAutismmomcoach.com). See you next week.