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Parental Decision Making

Parents have the responsibility and authority to make medical decisions on behalf of their children. This includes the right to refuse or discontinue treatments, even those that may be life-sustaining. However, parental decision making should be guided by the best interests of the child. Decisions that are clearly not in a child's best interest can and should be challenged.

Medical caretakers have an ethical and legal duty to advocate for the best interests of the child when parental decisions are potentially dangerous to the child's health, imprudent, neglectful, or abusive. As a general rule, medical caretakers and others should challenge parental decisions when those decisions place the child at significant risk of serious harm. When satisfactory resolution cannot be attained through respectful discussion and ethics consultation, seeking involvement of a State child protection agency or a court order might be necessary.

There are four situations in which minors have the legal authority to make decisions about their health care: Economically self-supporting and not living at home; Married; A parent; On active duty in the armed services.

A case in which parents are not legally challenged to accept is “Childhood vaccination.” While most physicians believe it is in a child’s best interest to receive the routine childhood vaccinations, some parents do not believe in the fully necessity of this procedure. Therefore, steps are taken in educating the parents on the full importance of childhood vaccination in order to decrease the spread of diseases which could be easily prevented.