



Choosing Your Child's Medical Provider

Whatever your reason for choosing a medical provider for your child—whether you are a parent-to-be, recently relocated, unhappy with your child's current provider or have switched jobs or insurance—choosing your child's doctor is one of the most important tasks you will undertake. The professional you choose may be entrusted with your child's health and wellness for many years to come. You will want to find someone both you and your child feel comfortable with—someone who will respond to and care for your needs and concerns. This guide provides information and practical tips for selecting the best doctor for you and your child.

Beginning Your Search

Start your search by determining what type of insurance you have. Traditional insurance plans, also known as fee-for-service plans, typically allow you to select any doctor you like and go to any hospital without a referral. However, the most common insurance plans today are managed care plans, which include Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs) and Point-of-Service plans (POSs). Managed care plans often require you to choose a primary care physician who will be in charge of providing preventive care; making diagnoses; treating your child's illnesses, chronic disorders, and minor injuries; and coordinating referrals to specialists. Since managed care plans limit the number of doctors in their networks, you will probably be required to select a provider from a list. If you select a

Tip—If you are expecting a baby, experts recommend that you begin searching for your child's doctor during the seventh month of pregnancy.

"I'm seven months pregnant, and my husband and I need to select a pediatrician," states Julie, a first-time mother. "How can we find the best doctor for our baby?"

provider not found on the list, you will typically be responsible for a higher portion of the cost of the doctor's visit or even the full cost of the visit.

Regardless of your insurance plan, seek referrals from the following sources—and then check to see if the doctor accepts your insurance:

- A friend, co-worker or neighbor who is satisfied with his or her child's physician
- Your obstetrician, midwife or pediatric nurse
- Your county medical society
- A physician referral service
- Your local hospital (most offer a physician referral service)
- The Yellow Pages (Use this as a last resort, as some of the best-qualified doctors do not advertise here.)

Note—Referral resources may recommend particular doctors if they meet *their* requirements. Local hospitals, for example, usually recommend doctors affiliated with the hospital. Be sure to ask what the criteria are when someone recommends a doctor. And, check professional credentials of doctors on your managed care plan's list in the same way you would other doctors.

Types of Medical Providers

The medical provider you select for your child will play an important role in your child's well-being—becoming familiar with your child over time; observing his or her periods of transition; and providing care and help with illness, injury, behavioral, emotional and social development. If you belong to a managed care plan, your child's doctor will also be responsible for coordinating and authorizing referrals to other services and medical specialists. When selecting a medical provider for your child, there are two main types of providers: pediatricians and family physicians.

Pediatricians

Pediatricians, the most common choice among parents, are medical doctors who have three years of study or residency after medical school devoted to the care of children, birth to young adulthood. In addition, these physicians have passed a board examination administered by the American Board of Pediatrics (ABP). The ABP recommends pediatricians because their specialized knowledge of children's medicine makes them most qualified to manage a child's overall health.

Note—If your child has special health needs, he or she may require a pediatric subspecialist as a primary care provider. These pediatricians have one to three years of additional residency training dealing with diseases of the heart, lungs, kidneys, allergies, etc.

Family Physicians

Family physicians, also known as general family practitioners or general internists, undergo three-year residency training devoted to family medicine and they are certified by the American Board of Family Practice (ABFP). Their training consists of four months of pediatrics practice in addition to other areas of family practice, including internal medicine, psychiatry, and obstetrics and gynecology. Family practice physicians are able to care for all the members in a family—which may give them an advantage in dealing with developmental, behavioral or genetic problems that run in families. Also, adolescents may be more comfortable being seen by a family practitioner rather than a pediatrician.

Types of Practices

For some parents, the type of practice is equally as important as the type of practitioner when selecting a doctor for their child. To help you decide what type of practice would work best for you and your child, ask yourself if you would prefer to work with one doctor (solo practitioner) or two or more physicians (partnership or group practice).

Solo Practitioner

Some parents prefer the close one-on-one relationship that can be developed with a solo practitioner. Remember, however, that these physicians are not usually available 24 hours a day, so when choosing a solo practitioner, ask ahead of time who will be caring for your child when the doctor is not available or is away on vacation.

Partnership or Group Practice

A partnership or group practice consists of two or more doctors who work together. These practices tend to offer more coverage and longer office hours, with each physician typically covering certain hours at the practice. Usually, your child will see the same doctor each time care is required, but if your child requires medical attention at a time when his or her regular physician is unavailable, another doctor within the practice may be able to see him or her.

Evaluating and Selecting a Medical Provider

Once you have decided what type of practitioner and practice best suit your needs, evaluate potential providers carefully to find the doctor who you and your child feel most comfortable with. Begin by conducting preliminary telephone interviews with the office staff (receptionist, nurse, etc.) and consider asking questions using the *Medical Provider Evaluation Checklist* on the following pages.

If you are satisfied with the preliminary telephone interview, request a face-to-face interview with the medical provider(s) you are interested in. Be aware that you may be charged for this appointment. Your goal when meeting with any doctor will be to understand his or her philosophies as a medical practitioner and to get to know him or her better as a person. The answers, and the tone of your conversations, will help you decide if you feel comfortable with a doctor, and if you are establishing trust and rapport.

Finally, when narrowing your choices, ask for patient references and contact them with specific questions. Again, use the *Medical Provider Evaluation Checklist* on the following pages as a guide.

Medical Provider Evaluation Checklist

For your convenience, we have included this *Medical Provider Evaluation Checklist*. It provides sample questions to ask during telephone interviews with office staff; face-to-face-interviews with medical professionals; and when contacting patient references. Make multiple copies of this checklist and fill it out for each provider you are interested in. *Note*—This checklist is intended as a guideline only; adapt it to your own needs as you see fit. Remember that you alone are responsible for ensuring that the doctor you select meets your needs.

After interviewing the doctors, staff and other patients, rate your overall impressions of each doctor and practice. Do you feel positively, negatively or neutral? Use your answers to the questions below to compare the different doctors and practices. Ultimately, what matters most is that you trust the doctor you choose and consider him or her a partner in keeping your child healthy. If you are not satisfied, interview other doctors using the same guidelines.

Provider Name: _____

Preliminary Questions to Ask Office Staff via the Telephone

1. Is the doctor accepting new patients? No Yes
2. What type of insurance does the doctor accept? _____
3. Is the doctor board-certified by the American Board of Pediatrics (ABP) or the American Board of Family Practice (ABFP)? (The answer to this question can provide you with information about the doctor's credentials.) _____

4. How many doctors are in the practice? _____

5. Are they all board-certified? (It is important to know who you will work with if your doctor is unavailable.)

6. How long has the doctor been practicing? _____

7. What are the office hours? (Early morning and evening hours may be absolutely necessary if you or your partner work from 9–5.) Is there an after-hours answering service? Are there holiday or weekend hours?

8. How far in advance must appointments typically be made? _____

9. Is there a cancellation fee for appointments canceled within a specific period of time before a scheduled appointment? No Yes If so, what is the fee? _____

10. What are the on-call policies (who will be answering calls when the doctor is away from the office)? How available is the doctor for emergencies? _____

11. How available is the doctor for telephone consultations? Are there set times for callbacks? When is the best time to call for minor questions? _____

12. Who will answer questions if the doctor is unavailable? _____

13. If my child is sick, do I need to call or come to the office on a first-come, first-served basis? _____

14. Will I have access to my child's medical records? Is there a fee for requesting copies of any medical records? _____

15. Will my child's medical records and private information be kept confidential?
No Yes
16. Is payment due in full at the time of the visit? No Yes
17. Are payment schedules available? No Yes
18. How are the bills handled? How are insurance claims handled, and who processes the claims?

19. Which hospitals, specialists and special services is the physician affiliated with? _____

20. What type of medical equipment is on the premises (e.g., lab for blood work, X-ray machine, etc.)? _____

Questions to Ask the Doctor

1. What is your pediatric background? Subspecialty? Do you have an area of pediatric interest? _____

2. Are you a developmental specialist or are you suited to care for a particular kind of special need? _____

3. What are your attitudes toward breastfeeding, circumcision, readiness to use antibiotics, immunizations, etc.? (Ask about any issue you feel strongly about.) _____

4. Will you conduct newborn exams at a hospital? Do you have privileges at the hospital where I will be delivering my baby so you can see my child from birth? No Yes
Explain: _____

5. Will you personally discuss developmental, behavioral and emotional questions with me? No Yes Explain: _____

6. Do the different providers in your group practice (if applicable) have a wide variety of specialties (i.e., adolescence, developmental delays, newborns, etc.)? No Yes
Explain: _____

7. How do you stay up to date with the latest advances in pediatric medicine? _____

8. Are you flexible or conservative in approving referrals to other services? _____

Questions to Ask Yourself After the Visit

1. When you arrived at the office, what were your feelings about the surroundings? Was the office clean and safe? _____

2. Were there separate waiting areas for sick and well children? No Yes

Explain: _____

3. Did the doctor seem rushed during the visit, or content to spend as much time with you as needed? _____

4. Did the doctor answer your questions carefully, thoroughly and clearly? No Yes

Explain: _____

5. Did the doctor listen to your questions and concerns? No Yes

Explain: _____

6. Did you feel comfortable with the doctor? No Yes

Explain: _____

7. Did you feel confident in the doctor? No Yes

Explain: _____

8. Do you feel your child would respond well to the doctor? No Yes

Explain: _____

9. Did the doctor seem genuinely interested in children? No Yes

Explain: _____

Questions to Ask Other Patients

1. Does the doctor encourage you or your child to share your concerns? Does he or she respect your opinions? No Yes Explain: _____

2. Does the doctor express concern for your child when he or she is sick? No Yes
Explain: _____

3. Does the doctor make an effort to establish a relationship with you? No Yes
Explain: _____

4. How would you describe the doctor's personality? _____

5. When there are office waits, does the doctor express concern about your time?
No Yes Explain: _____

6. Do you get all your questions answered by the physician and office staff? No Yes
Explain: _____

7. Are the office staff members unhurried and patient? No Yes Explain: _____

8. Does the staff seem to understand your needs? No Yes Explain: _____

9. Is there anything else you can think of that would be relevant for me to know about the doctor or his or her practice? No Yes Explain: _____

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