

Communicating with Doctors and Other Medical Providers

Working with your child's doctor to ensure good health is not always easy. It is not uncommon to have difficulty developing relationships with medical providers, especially when your child has complex medical needs and sees multiple specialists. Even with a good working relationship, appointments may be rushed, medical information can be hard to understand, and the path forward may not be clear.

Clear communication is important to ensure the best care for your child. The **SMART** approach described below may help you prepare for conversations with doctors, nurses, pharmacists, therapists, and other medical professionals. **S**peak up. **M**ake a plan. **A**sk questions. **R**esearch. **T**ake notes.

Speak up.

The doctor may have medical knowledge, but you are the expert on your child. You should be an equal partner in the conversation. Here are some ways to make sure your voice is heard.

- Be brief. Doctors don't have much time at appointments, so **make a plan** and stick to it.
- If you need accommodations such as information in another language or an interpreter, let your doctor's office know before the visit, if possible.
- Look confident, even if you don't feel it! Stand up straight and make eye contact. Speak clearly and listen carefully.
- It is okay to disagree with your doctor. Try these steps to resolve conflict:
 - Stay calm. Try to keep your emotions out of the discussion.
 - Define the problem by focusing on the child's needs.
 - Find a common goal.
 - Make a plan listing specific steps, responsibilities, and a time line.
- If you want a second opinion or don't agree with your child's medical provider, it is okay to make a change.

Make a plan.

Make the most of your appointments by being prepared. Make a plan with these steps:

- Bring your **notes**.
- Bring all medicines or a list of all medications with you.
- Make a list of current health concerns.
- Make a list of **questions**.
- Bring distractions, such as a "busy bag" filled with interesting activities, for your child so that you can stay focused.

The website www.wellvisitplanner.org offers an interactive online tool that uses a step-by-step process to help you create your own personalized plan for well visits. With a little extra work, the plan can also be adapted for specialist appointments.

Ask questions.

You may have lots of questions. Here's how to get the answers you need.

- Make a list of questions before each visit.
- If you don't know what to ask, "Ask Me 3" recommends three simple questions:
 - 1) What is the main problem?
 - 2) What do I need to do?
 - 3) Why is it important for me to do this?

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information,
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- Don't be afraid to repeat a question or ask for more information. You might say, "This is new to me. Will you explain that one more time?"
- At the end of the appointment, make a list of next steps, or "action items."
 - Who is responsible for each item?
 - When should each one be completed?
- You may have urgent questions or concerns between appointments. Ask how to contact your doctor outside of regular office hours (nurse hotline, answering service, electronic patient portal, etc.).
- For a medical emergency, call 911 or go to the emergency room.

Research.

Knowledge is power. Learn all you can about your child's condition, your insurance plan, and your child's rights as a patient.

- Gather information about your child's condition.
 - Contact a national, state, or local organization that is diagnosis-specific and request materials.
 - Talk to other parents of children with the same diagnosis. If the condition is rare, you may try online groups for support and facts.
 - When searching online, make sure that the information is from a credible source. The online tool www.trustortrash.org can help you check the quality of health information you find.
- Know your insurance plan and how to use it.
 - Be familiar with the basics of your plan including deductibles, co-pays, what is (and is not) covered, provider networks, and more.
 - Know whom to contact when you have questions. Contact information should be on your insurance card.
 - If you receive a bill for a medical expense that you believe should be covered, contact the insurance company. You may need to appeal.
 - Call Family Voices at 1-844-323-4636 for help with insurance issues.

Take notes.

Keeping good records is an important part of communicating with providers. But remembering the details of your child's medical history, medications, treatment plans, current health issues, and more can be overwhelming.

Create a care notebook to help you stay organized. Use a notebook, folder, phone app, electronic storage device, or online medical summary tool and include the items below:

- Notes from appointments. Take notes at every visit, or ask if it's okay to make an audio recording so you can listen again later and write notes.
- Health history, including all diagnoses, surgeries and procedures, drug allergies, family history, and more.
- Current medications including doses, frequency, and dosing instructions.
- Questions you have for your child's health care professionals.
- Test results.
- Communication log, including date, time, and type of communication (phone, fax, email); names and titles of persons you contact; a summary of the discussion, "action items" and assignments; and follow-up details.

Programs and systems change often. It is important to ensure that you are using the most current information. This fact sheet was updated August 2021. Please check http://fvindiana.org/fact_sheets for the most recent edition.

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