

Autism: Visiting the Pediatrician

Tips to help you prepare your child before, during and after an appointment. By Jasna Cowan, MS, CCC-SLP

Taking your child to the pediatrician can prove to be a challenging task for most parents. Having a child with sensory processing disorders, anxiety, ASD, and/or speech delays can make going to the doctor's office an excruciating experience. As a pediatric assessment speech-language pathologist (SLP) who works with a variety of children, I have experienced firsthand the fear that a child may have when seeing a professional. Here are some strategies to consider before, during and after the visit to create a more pleasurable doctor's visit.

BEFORE THE APPOINTMENT

- Make sure your doctor is aware of your child's fears and any diagnosis to allow the staff to prepare. This information might be stated in the file, but a reminder to the receptionist is always a good idea.
- Invest in a toy doctor's kit. You can pretend to be the doctor and allow your child to manipulate toys that look like the doctor's tools. A child with sensory issues or anxiety has to be able to experience and touch objects to see that they are not so scary.
- Read or make your own book about visiting the doctor. Search online for "children's doctor's visit books" to find a book appropriate for your child's age and level. I have also guided parents to create their own story that includes a picture of the hospital or doctor's office, the doctor's face, and the tools they use -- which can really help your child understand what is going to happen. Looking at the book you have created while your child is calm and relaxed will hopefully reduce the tension if your child is sensitive to new people and new places.
- Prepare a special "doctor's visit bag" that contains fun, novel toys, markers/paper, snacks, a bottle/pacifier (if age appropriate) and any comfort toys. This bag should only be introduced when you arrive at the doctor's office. These objects will provide a distraction and help occupy your child while you wait.



JEFF LESSER

DURING THE APPOINTMENT

There are also some strategies to help during the visit. The whole idea is to be proactive at keeping your child calm. Once the crying and fear has started, it is very difficult to repair, even with the most intriguing toys and objects.

- Offer objects from the "special bag" prior to the fear or panic/crying beginning to maintain calmness and to distract.
- Remain calm yourself. I have worked with thousands of families, and I have experienced the child's unbelievable ability to evaluate their parent's stress level. Be aware of your facial expressions; talk in a cool, calm voice; do your best to act as you would if you were at home.
- As a last resort, you can use an iPad or other electronic device to distract. Although I am not a huge fan of electronic devices for young children, this might be a great exception to the rule.
- If your child starts to escalate and cry, don't hesitate to request a break or move to another location that might be less stressful.
- Have your child sit with you or sit on the doctor's bed together playing with something

from the "special bag." Sometimes a closed door or having to sit on the doctor's table without the comfort of a parent's lap may be enough to create alarm.

AFTER THE APPOINTMENT

Starting a new routine when heading to the doctor's is extremely important, and included in this is the post-appointment routine. Celebrating a successful, or even not-so-successful, doctor's visit can help your child associate excitement with a visit. Consider going somewhere special after to create a new habit. Going to the park or the zoo, getting ice cream, or obtaining a new toy could be the ticket to success.

There is no way to avoid the doctor, as your child's health is of the utmost importance. But, there are ways to create new positive habits so that doctor's visits can be more tolerable and may even become a positive family routine.

Jasna Cowan is a bilingual speech-language pathologist on a multidisciplinary team at Golden Gate Regional Center, San Mateo, Calif.

DISCLAIMER: This handout is a general guide only, intended for distribution to patients. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your healthcare provider. ©2014 MERION MATTERS

