

# 3 Talking to Your Child's Pediatrician

Your child's pediatrician is often the first person you will call if you think your child has a mental health issue.

Your child's pediatrician is the main medical doctor you take your child to for healthcare. Pediatricians help to ensure that your child is healthy by providing advice and care around growth and development, illnesses, immunizations, nutrition, injuries, and physical fitness. Pediatricians will also monitor your child's behavior and emotions, including issues around his or her social and family life, schooling, and learning abilities.

This section outlines the role of pediatricians in the mental healthcare system, including how they evaluate your child's mental health and what services they offer, and provides resources for helping you find a pediatrician. The section also explains the limitations of pediatricians when it comes to mental healthcare for your child and the importance of getting referrals to mental health specialists.

**The guide uses the term "pediatrician" to refer to a child's primary healthcare provider. This is true for most children. However, for some children, their primary healthcare provider may be a family practice doctor. The information provided about pediatricians in this section and throughout the guide applies to family practice doctors as well.**

## TYPES OF PROFESSIONALS

Your child's pediatrician provides general medical care and focuses on your child's overall health. There are also pediatricians who have additional training in child development called Developmental Behavioral Pediatricians (p106).

Other medical doctors for children are specialists. Specialists focus on certain areas of the body, such as the brain, hearing, speech, or digestive system. Pediatricians refer children to specialists if they have specific conditions that require more focused evaluations and treatments. For example, a pediatrician may refer a child to a gastroenterologist (p107) if he or she has a feeding problem.

For more information on mental health specialists, turn to page 106 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

## EVALUATIONS

Pediatricians use different methods to evaluate your child's mental health. Your child's pediatrician may ask you or your child questions about his or her behavior and emotions to ensure that your child is reaching typical development milestones and is in overall good health. Sometimes the pediatrician will ask about your child's interactions with family and friends or your child's behavior at school to find out if there are any warning signs of mental health issues. The pediatrician may use screening checklists or forms with questions. These tests help to suggest or rule out possible mental health issues. The pediatrician can rule out medical conditions that sometimes have similar symptoms to mental health issues. If the pediatrician believes your child may have a mental health issue, the pediatrician will refer you to a mental health specialist for an evaluation. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH EVALUATIONS (p39)**.



## SERVICES OFFERED

Some pediatricians evaluate and diagnose mental illnesses and can prescribe medications to treat them. However, most pediatricians are not trained to be the primary source for your child's mental healthcare. After initially screening your child, most pediatricians will refer you to mental health specialists or community programs for evaluation, diagnosis, support, and treatment. For more information on mental health specialists, community programs, and other parts of the mental healthcare system, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT (p101)**.

## HOW PEDIATRICIANS WORK WITHIN THE MENTAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Your child's pediatrician plays an ongoing role in your child's mental healthcare. He or she can work with your child's mental health specialists, the school system, and community programs to ensure that your child's care and environment support overall health. If your child's mental health specialist prescribes medication, your child's pediatrician can make sure it does not interact with other medications your child may take for physical conditions. Mental health issues can also affect a child's physical health. For example, a child who is depressed or anxious may lose or gain weight, have physical symptoms (headaches or stomachaches), or be losing sleep. Pediatricians can monitor these risks and treat physical conditions if needed.

### TIP

Follow your instincts. If you know in your heart something is wrong, don't take "he'll be fine" from anyone. If you're not comfortable with a mental healthcare provider, diagnosis, or treatment, get second (or third or fourth...) opinion. Find someone who will listen to you.

## LIMITATIONS

Although some pediatricians are well trained in mental health issues, some are less familiar with mental health diagnoses or treatment. Some pediatricians may not have a wide range of knowledge about available mental health specialists or programs for referral. Also, pediatricians usually have limited time during yearly appointments to fully evaluate children's mental health issues.

Despite these limitations, a pediatrician is an important first point of contact with the mental healthcare system because of his or her familiarity with your child and your child's overall medical care. However, because of these limitations, it is important for parents to get referrals for mental health evaluations and treatment.

## RESOURCES

To find a pediatrician or family practice doctor, visit:

- **AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS:**  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- **AMERICAN ACADEMY OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS:**  
<http://familydoctor.org>





## *Cultural considerations*

Not everyone is familiar with the idea of seeking help from a mental healthcare provider for a child's mental health issues. Instead, families who have come to the United States recently may reach out to older family members, religious or community leaders, or healers. These people share the same race, speak the same language, or share the same ethnic or religious traditions.

Families may be uncomfortable with a mental healthcare system that does not seem personal or sensitive to their unique cultural experiences. While it is possible to find a mental healthcare provider who shares your ethnicity, race, or religious traditions, such providers are in limited supply.

A provider who is of a different race or ethnicity than your family may ask you questions to find out if you are comfortable with the differences. If these questions do not make sense to you, let the provider know how you feel. Ask the provider to explain why this information is helpful in working with you and your family.

A provider should understand the importance of honoring the family's belief system about how children are expected to grow up. It is important to tell the provider how parenting is done in your family and to share your views of child development. For example, some families value obedience and respect very highly and are less comfortable when children are invited to express their feelings directly to adults. Other families have strong ideas about the

differences between male and female development. Children of families that are new to this country often feel torn between what friends at school expect and what elders at home require. Sometimes this creates distress and conflict. Mental healthcare providers can help with this issue.

In many families, extended family members are very strong influences in children's lives. Remember to let the provider know about all of the people in your family who help make decisions about your children and who should speak for the family, especially if these people can't be in the meeting (for example, fathers or grandmothers).

