

Early Intervention

How to Get a Diagnosis

Remember that you know your child best, better than any doctor or in-law or teacher or neighbor or sibling or self-appointed expert. If your instincts are telling you something's not right, no matter what anybody else says, get it checked out. Pursue the truth. You can often make a real difference for your child by starting therapies and treatments at the youngest possible age. "Wait and see" may sound good to some, but it's not a strategy made for worriers.

Step 1- Take Notes

Become the foremost researcher on your child, examining your subject in a variety of different environments and documenting all irregularities. If your child has recurring odd actions that alarm you, keep a diary of what, when and how long. If your child has emotional breakdowns or explosions, keep a chart to see if you can identify what sets them off. You want to be able to specifically document your concerns so that doctors have the most accurate idea of what's going on and can make the most assured steps toward a diagnosis.

Step 2- Talk to Your Pediatrician

Chances are, your health insurer will require you to go through your pediatrician before tests and specialist visits anyway. But it's just as well, because your child's regular doctor will likely have useful insights and advice to give you. While you're the ultimate expert in your child, the pediatrician is probably the medical professional who knows your child best -- certainly better than the specialists who will pop in for a short time, look at one aspect of your child's life, and see you again in a year. A good pediatrician with whom you have a comfortable rapport is a helpful person to have filtering all those reports and test results and guiding you as to what to do about them.

Step 3- Do Your Research

If your pediatrician shares your concerns, you may be referred on to a specialist for further questioning, examining, and testing. You'll want to do that immediately, but the specialist's schedule may not cooperate; months-long waits are not uncommon. Fill the time by doing some research about your own and your pediatrician's suspicions. You may have done a little research before, but now instead of looking for general possibilities, you'll want to look into the specific diagnosis or diagnoses being investigated. This flurry of fact-digging has two good effects: It makes you more prepared to speak to the specialist, and it passes all that interminable time.

Step 4- Consult With Specialists

You've talked with the pediatrician. You've taken your notes and done your research, and now you're meeting with the big kahuna who can actually give you answers as to what's going on with your child. That's what you hope for, anyway. Specialists may do detailed examinations, order extensive and expensive tests, and present you with a diagnosis and a prognosis. Or they may give your child a cursory look, make some vague pronouncements, and send you scurrying to the next intimidating professional. If you're prepared -- with research and questions and specific observations about your child -- you may be able to get enough of an answer to run with, even if a specific diagnosis is elusive.

Step 5- Keep Seeking Answers

A diagnosis is in many ways the start of the story. It may get fine-tuned as your child grows and develops. It may turn out to be inexact or flat-out inaccurate. Doctors may wind up re-classifying children like yours, eliminating one diagnosis or moving a block of children over to another one. Seek a diagnosis now, but don't stop seeking information. With your focus on one child and one disability, you may be able to keep up on current research and practices better than your doctor. Read the news, surf the Net, network with other parents, and collaborate with the professionals in your child's life. Be your own specialist.

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