

A Pediatrician for Your Child with Special Needs: *Making a Good Match*

By James A. Blackman, M.D. and Janet H. Allaire, M.A.

Editor's Note:

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Children with autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, Down syndrome, orthopedic problems, muscular dystrophy, AD/HD or developmental delays get the same colds, croup, earaches and sore throats as all other children. Finding the best match in a pediatrician for your child with special needs, you, and your family may take some extra effort, but it will be well worth the time and energy. When your child has special health care needs and you are looking for new services, there are many things to consider.

Insurance Coverage

It's a good idea to start by checking with your insurance company. They can give you information about who can provide care for your child, where services can be provided and what procedures you must follow to secure coverage for your child's care. Staff at the insurance company can discuss the details concerning your policy and its rules. By checking with them first, you can be sure to avoid additional costs which you must pay out of your pocket.

Getting Started

There are many places where you can find guidance in selecting a pediatrician. You can start by contacting the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). This agency can provide physician referrals, health education information and much more. The Web page provides helpful links to family information about topics from immunization schedules to childhood injury prevention and will guide you via its links to membership lists or frequently asked questions and answers about

pediatricians. You can find this online at www.aap.org.

Talking to other parents in a support group or organization related to your child's disability may lead you to a pediatrician who may have a good deal of experience working with children who have needs similar to those of your own child.

Local school systems are another source of guidance about choosing a pediatrician. School personnel can be helpful, especially those who are familiar with the area and may know you and your child. In addition, health care professionals (nurses, psychologists, or counselors) in schools or day care centers are usually well aware of local pediatricians who care for children with special needs.

In the medical field, routine care includes well-child check-ups, school or camp physicals, immunizations, treatment of common colds, coughs and earaches: the medical issues most

children experience whether or not they have special needs. Most specialists, developmental pediatricians, child neurologists, or pediatric psychiatrists, or physiatrists (see "Specialists for Children with Special needs" article p.16) do not provide these types of routine care. Rather, a local medical physician or pediatrician provides the routine care, and the specialists are called as consultants when needed.

This team approach gives you and your child the opportunity to have a pediatrician/primary care physician provide regular care while having the ability to bring in the specialist when needed for specific issues or concerns or to provide necessary information about your child's development and his/her disability. Good communication between the primary care pediatrician and the pediatric specialist will insure that your child's health and special needs are met. ■

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Photo courtesy of Kluge Children's Rehabilitation Center

The Right Questions to Ask When Looking for a Pediatrician

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A Parent's Guide to Doctors, Disabilities and the Family by Susan Ripley is a thorough guide produced by the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY). Ripley acknowledges that the process of selecting a primary care physician for a child with special needs may require extra effort on the family's part. She states, "As with all selection processes, the first step is to identify your needs."

The NICHCY resource guide suggests beginning your search for a primary care doctor for your child by defining what you need. Keep these questions in mind as you look for a pediatrician:

- What is important to your family in dealing with medical needs?
- What do you expect?
- What do you think you need?
- In what ways are your child's needs different from other children's needs? How is your child unique?
- Do you need several doctors and, therefore, need each to be open to discussion with others?
- Do you need a doctor more frequently than other families and, therefore, want someone close to home?
- Do you need a wheelchair accessible office?
- Does your child have more complex medical needs than other children or is the major difficulty in the area of development and behavior?

Once you determine what is most important to you in a pediatrician for your child, it will be easier to formulate specific questions to ask each doctor that you interview. After you've come up with the names of several potential primary care pediatricians, you may want to ask the questions below, which are suggested in the NICHCY resource guide, as well as other questions based on what you've determined your needs to be, and additional questions specific to your child's disability or disabilities.

- Are children with special needs like my child's an area of interest to you?
- Do you have experience with other children in your practice who have needs similar to those of my child?
- Do you feel comfortable working in a team type situation with other specialists, our family, and the school or day care?
- Are you active on community boards or national organizations that focus on children with special needs?



*Photo courtesy of
Kluge Children's
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Center*

For more information about finding a primary care pediatrician for your child with special needs contact NICHCY to request a copy of *Parent's Guide to Doctors, Disabilities and the Family*, while quantities last, by calling 800-695-0285 or access the resource guide online at www.nichcy.org or at www.kidsource.com/NICHCY.

Or try the Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics at 804-643-6631 or online at www.virginiapediatrics.org.