

Finding a Specialist for Your Special Child

By Susan L. Fitzgerald

Editor's Note:

This article first appeared in the 2003 edition of *Celebrating Special Children*.

Families of children with special needs often seek help from medical and other kinds of specialists. Here are suggestions on finding and communicating with these professionals.

"Trust your gut," when looking for a specialist for your child, says Dr. Harry Gewanter of Richmond Pediatric Associates, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org). "No one makes the big decisions in life based on logic," he jokes. "Logic gets you to a certain point, but then it's something else that tells you if it feels right or not."

What feels right? One of the most important things is to make sure the specialist sees your child as a child and not a diagnosis, Gewanter suggests. Another crucial step is the interview process. You're buying a service and you shouldn't put up with inadequate care, he says. Finally, you and your family should be comfortable with a specialist's style and approach.

An immeasurable part of excellent care involves keeping communications steady and open. "Parents should look for specialists who welcome their input," advises Beverly Duvall-Riley, MS, OTR, vice president of program services for Easter Seals of D.C. Maryland (www.easter-seals.org). "It is very important for parents of children with special needs to remember that it takes a team to address the child's needs and the parent is a very integral part of the team," she says. "Parents are the experts in knowing the patterns and behaviors of their child and it is important that they share with confidence their perspective. Often specialists only see a 'snap shot' of the child and it is crucial for parents to give their input to give a full picture."

For some specific advice on finding and keeping exceptional specialists for exceptional children, CSC spoke with Judith Loseff Lavin, author of *Special Kids Need Special Parents* (www.parentingchallenges.com). Here's what she had to say:

CSC: When parents are interviewing specialists for their child with special needs, what questions should they ask?

Lavin: It depends on the specialist you are using. But, you want to get references on the person before you speak to him. If it's a surgeon, you want to ask if he or she has done this operation before and how many times he's done it. You want to know if he or she is familiar with your child's issue.



It's a good idea to find out about the anesthesiologist as well as how he or she will anesthetize your child. Understand the procedures. What will they do to him or her,

have they done it before and in general, what's involved? If there's an anesthesiologist that you like, don't be afraid to ask the doctor if he or she can use that person.

If it's a type of therapy, you want to know if the therapist has treated what your child has. Again, how many times they've dealt with the situation or condition. You want to know their success rates and how they treat the child. You can also go on your doctor's recommendation.

A good general rule is to get recommendations from either a professional you trust or friends or family. You can also ask for recommendations from the support group for your child's condition, that is, if your child has a condition. You want to make sure they know how to handle the situation you have.

CSC: Who/Where are the best sources for referrals?

Lavin: Again, it depends on what kind of a referral you need. You can use friends or family as referrals in almost all situations. In addition, if it's a psychotherapist or support group, you can ask your physician or the school, too. Even if your child isn't enrolled in your public school, public schools districts are great references for psychological support, and often for specialists, like speech therapists. If it's a physical or occupational therapist, you can get a referral from your doctor. If you need a physician, you can ask your doctor for a referral, too. And, the support groups for your child's condition can usually refer you to a specialist that's got a good reputation.

CSC: What happens if your child's pediatrician and the specialist—be it a psychologist, occupational therapist, or respiratory therapist—disagree on treatment?

Lavin: You should get at least one other opinion. You can also go with your gut reaction—what you think the problem is. We often get conflicting ideas when it comes to medicine.

