

Visiting the Doctor

Introduction

Visiting the doctor or dentist can be a very stressful experience for a child. Many children have difficulty with the unpredictability that comes with seeing a doctor. Unpleasant memories of being poked and prodded, having to interact with a number of strangers, long waits and other such factors can make a child fearful of visiting the doctor. There are a few things you can do to make your child's visit to the doctor more manageable. We look at some common triggers for stress, and review ideas on how you can make your child more comfortable during a medical checkup.

Common Triggers for Stress

Here are some of the most common triggers for stress during a visit to the doctor.

- **Unfamiliar environment and people** – Being in a room full of strangers and meeting nurses and doctors that may or may not be known to your child.
- **Unpredictability** – Being unsure of what is going to happen, and what the doctor may do during a visit.
- **Lights and sounds** – Bright lights and sounds can be distracting for a child with autism, especially sounds such as other children crying or coughing. This is particularly true for a dental visit, where a child will hear the sound of a drill or other machinery, and having to sit under a bright light during an exam.
- **Quick transitions** from the car to the waiting room, and then to the examination room may also contribute to a child's stress.
- If a check-up is painful or feels intrusive to your child, or if your child has been through a **painful procedure** in the past, the memory of that procedure could cause stress when visiting the doctor. Being touched, even by family members, may be uncomfortable for your child, so being touched by strangers may be particularly uncomfortable.
- Each child is different, so there may be other factors that also bother your child, such as the **sensation** of the paper cover on an examination table, or **having to undress** in the examination room.
- **Unfamiliar Smells** - Medical offices may have a medicinal smell that most people can tolerate but might be off-putting or uncomfortable to a child with high sensory needs.

Ideas for Reducing a Child's Stress

There are several things that you can do to prepare your child for a visit to the doctor's office, though it is practically impossible to eliminate every source of discomfort. Try and observe your child during a visit to see what factors bother him or her the most. Focusing your efforts on reducing your child's stress around two or three key factors might make it a lot easier for your child to visit the doctor.

Before you Go

There are a few things you can do to prepare your child BEFORE an actual visit to the doctor. Consider some of the following:

- **Are you seeing the right pediatrician?** If you frequently have to wait for a very long time in the waiting room, feel disrespected by your child's physician or office staff, feel that the level of care you receive is inconsistent, or believe that the examine room or waiting room is not ideal for your child, you may want to consider moving to a different practice if your insurance allows you other options. Some parents find that being part of a very large practice where you are unsure about which doctor you will be seeing can be difficult for their child. Having to establish rapport with a new doctor at every visit can be challenging for a child. You may want to consider a smaller practice with only a few doctors. There are also doctors and dentists who specialize in working with children with disabilities. You can ask your child's therapists, teachers, or peers' families for suggestions on whom to see.
- **Initiating a first meeting** – If you are visiting a doctor for the first time, you may be able to schedule a visit for your child to get to know the doctor and the office, without having an actual exam. This will allow your child to become familiar with the office environment, and also get to know the nurses and the doctors. This may be especially useful before a dental check-up.
- **Role Playing** – You can use an inexpensive doctor's play set to role play a doctor's visit. You can show them what each instrument is for and pretend to examine them. This will get them used to the various tools that doctors use. You can also show your child how they may be expected to recline during a dental visit, as sometimes that can trigger a child's anxiety.
- **Visual Schedules and Social Stories** – You can use a visual schedule such as the one shown to create a step by step pictorial representation of what to expect at the doctor's office. If you review this before and during your visit, you can use it to reduce your child's anxiety around not knowing what to expect. Social stories are also a great tool to talk to your child about what will happen at the doctor's office. You can add personal details such as "At Dr. Gupta's office, you will change into blue clothes with penguins on them." Reading the social story will also eliminate some of the unknowns for your child.
- **Toys and snacks** – Take along your child's favorite toys and snacks. This will make wait times feel shorter. You can also think of a reinforcer for good behavior, such as stickers, and use these after your child allows the nurse or doctor to examine them.
- **Visual supports** – To assist your child with communication, you can create and take along visual supports to use during your child's checkup. These can be simple pictures of body parts, or pictures of symptoms, such as a picture of a child holding their stomach and looking unhappy, to show a stomachache. These types of visual supports will allow your child

some independence in communicating with a doctor. If your child does not communicate vocally, but uses augmentative and alternative communication devices, take them along to aid with communication.

- **Videos** – You can watch videos of children's medical checkups with your child to explain what is going to happen at the doctor's office. Many popular children's shows have episodes about visiting the doctor or dentist, and other videos are readily available by searching online.
- **Books** – You can read stories with your child about going to the doctor or the dentist. This will give them a chance to ask you questions and understand what may happen during a visit.
- **Pre-order materials** - Dentists use toothpastes and other solutions during a dental cleaning and check-up, and you may be able to talk with your child's dentist to pre-order preferred flavors for your child. You could also review other issues such as lighting and seating.

If your child is working with a therapist, they may be able to work on preparing your child for medical visits.

During the Visit

Once you are at the doctor's office, you can try some of the following tips to make the visit go more smoothly.

- Ask to be seated in the examination room. If you call ahead, or ask at the front desk, you may be able to have your child wait in the examination room. Fewer transitions mean less stress for your child.
- Use distractors such as squeeze balls, chewing toys, relaxing music or other toys to distract your child while they are having basic procedures performed, such as when they are having their blood pressure checked. You can also use a timer to indicate when the exam will be over.
- Let your child's doctor know as soon as possible if there are triggers that may bother your child. For example, they may be able to use a less bright light if bright lights are an issue, or warm a stethoscope before touching it to your child's chest. These small adjustments can make a big difference for your child.
- If you are bringing visual schedules, use them at each step so your child knows what will happen next. For example, you can create a visual schedule with pictures to show the waiting room, the nurse's exam and then the doctor's exam. You can also show a visual for a reinforcer at the end.
- Use the reinforcers you brought with a "First...then" approach. Tell your child something like, "First the doctor will check your throat, then you can have a sticker."

- Talk to your child's nurse or doctor about ideas to make the visit easier for your child. Doctors often have methods they use to build rapport with children.
- The sounds and smells at a dentist's office can often bother children with autism. Be patient, as it may take more than one visit for your child to successfully complete a dental visit. You may want to begin by taking your child to your own appointments, so they can become familiar with a dental exam without actually having to go through one. During the first couple of visits during their own exam, your child may only go as far as reclining in the chair and getting to know their dentist. You can also request the dentist to dim the lights and allow your child to touch and feel some of the dental instruments before they are examined. It may take you a few visits to find a dentist who is willing to take the time to get to know your child, and make them comfortable. And if going to a dentist is just too stressful, you may want to consider a dental practice that uses sedation dentistry.

Conclusion

We hope you have found these tips and ideas useful. Visiting a doctor or a dentist can be challenging, but the key is to find a provider that you are comfortable with and one that is flexible wherever possible. A good provider can make a huge difference, and it is worth your time to speak with them over the phone to assess whether they may be a good fit for you. You can also ask them about how much experience they have in working with children with autism. If you are comfortable with your child's provider, over time, hopefully your child will also learn to trust them.