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Some tips to consider when choosing a pediatrician

I recently encountered a salesman who, upon learning that I was a pediatrician, proudly produced photos of his twins and began to extol the virtues of his family's pediatrician. He described her as informative and pleasant, but firm and inflexible with her recommendations. He stated that he and his wife needed that kind advice to ensure good parenting.

The description brought back vivid memories; when, as a medical student, I referred a neighbor to a pediatrician known for his supportive, nurturing, and flexible approach to parenting. After her first visit, she crisply informed me that she wanted a doctor who "knew what he was talking about." She said that he had praised her maternal instincts and encouraged her to continue making independent decisions based on family priorities. She, however, had expected to be given specific guidelines regarding feeding and sleep schedules, including precise times for each feeding and the requisite number of spoonfuls to be consumed at each meal.

I learned a valuable lesson from her comments:

Each pediatrician has a unique personality and approach to patients.

Each parent and patient has his/her own perception of quality medical care.

To be effective, a pediatrician must learn to recognize and appropriately address the distinctive needs of each family in their practice.

If you are in search of a pediatrician, here are some suggestions to keep in mind:

Compile a list of names of possible candidates for pediatrician by speaking with others — friends, family, or coworkers, whose judgment you respect, or physicians with whom you already have a relationship.

Call nearby hospitals for recommendations. Most have physician referral services.

Check the Mass. Board of Registration in Medicine Web site for pediatricians practicing near you (www.massmedboard.org).

Check the American Academy of Pediatrics Web site (www.AAP.org) for a list of board certified pediatricians who are members of the AAP.

Make an appointment to visit the doctor's office. Most pediatricians' offices are happy to schedule a complementary visit to meet and greet a potential new patient. While there, look around the office. Are you comfortable with the environment? Is it clean and inviting? Meet the staff. Are they responsive, pleasant, and personable? Meet with the doctor. Is he/she knowledgeable, communicative, and assuring? Do you and your child like her? What is the doctor's background and training and does he/she have any specific areas of interest?

Ask basic questions about office operations: Are services accessible? How long does it take to schedule a routine check up? Are same day sick and weekend appointments available? What are office hours? Where does the doctor see patients after office hours?

Is the doctor an enrolled provider with your insurance company? If not will he/she join and will it enroll him?

Where does the doctor admit patients requiring inpatient care? Is the hospital convenient for you and known for rendering pediatric, family-centered quality care?

Does the doctor have established relationships with pediatric specialists? Children are not small adults; they have unique needs based on their size, and physical and emotional development. When they are ill, it is especially important that someone trained in the care of children with special health care needs is readily available.

Is the pediatrician board certified? Pediatric training involves four years of medical school, followed by a minimum of three years of specialty training. Once that training is complete, the doctor is required to pass an exam, before being granted board certified status. Board certification qualifies the pediatrician for membership in the American Academy of Pediatrics. Fully board certified pediatricians often place the abbreviation FAAP (Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics) after their names.

Since doctors cannot be available to their patients 24 hours a day, it is important to ask who shares coverage with the doctor, and do they have the same level of training and experience?

All care is not the same; patient satisfaction and quality vary from office to office and doctor to doctor. Parents must be active participants, not passive recipients, in their children's medical care. An ideal time to choose a new pediatrician is before your child is due for a well-child visit (check-up) or becomes ill, so as not to lose an opportunity to make a well-informed decision. Once you have made the choice, if you are not happy, do not hesitate to rethink your decision and begin your search again.

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