



## **How to Choose a Pediatrician**

### **By Tracy Hall, MD**

Welcoming a child into your family is a wonderful and exciting time! Whether through birth, adoption, or fostering, the addition of a child to your household requires some preparation and planning, and finding a pediatrician is probably on your “to do” list. There are other times a new pediatrician may be needed as well, such as after a move to a new town or with a change in insurance coverage.

Children’s health needs differ from adults, which is why it is so important to find a provider who is trained in and experienced with the management and prevention of health problems in infants, children, and adolescents. It is important to establish care with a pediatrician as soon as a child enters your family by scheduling a well visit (routine check-up) for your child so your doctor can learn about your child’s health history, family history, and complete a physical exam.

The best way to select a pediatrician is to meet several of them first. Ideally, a family should start looking for a pediatrician two to three months before the arrival of a child. Begin your search for a pediatrician by compiling a list of qualified candidates to interview. To get your list started, ask your friends, neighbors, family members, and co-workers for the names of pediatricians they trust. Contact your insurance company to determine which of these providers are part of your plan. This information may be listed on a website for your insurance plan.

If you are looking for more names to expand your list, contact your local hospital, OBGYN, or family physician for suggestions. Keep in mind that some physicians may not be adding new patients to their practices, so retain a list of several candidates with whom to meet.

The next step in the process is to gather information about your candidates. This might be done by calling the provider’s office or by looking at information on the physician’s website or your insurance company’s website. Information that you will want to gather includes the doctor’s office hours, the type of insurance the office accepts, and whether or not the practice does lab tests in the office. If not, where does the practice send patients for labs? Also look for what specialty services the office provides, such as lactation, asthma, and mental health services.

Think about what is important to you, your family, and your child. For instance, is the location of the clinic important? Are you comfortable with a small office or do you want a larger practice? How do they handle “after hours” questions or problems? With which hospitals is the practice affiliated?

One of the most important things to remember when selecting a pediatrician is that many of your child's health issues will be urgent. Make sure that your future pediatrician is able to offer same day appointments to accommodate the acute nature of many pediatric health concerns. Clinics with extended hours will also help keep you away from emergency rooms and urgent care centers.

After you have gathered this information, narrow down your list to three or four candidates who seem like the best fit for you and your family. Plan to meet with these candidates in person. Many pediatricians offer free interviews for families, although some may charge for this preliminary visit. If there is a fee, ask if it can be applied to a future office visit since insurance typically does not cover this charge.

In preparation for your in-office consultation with a prospective pediatrician, put together a list of questions to ask the provider. It will be important to listen to the provider's responses, as well as the manner in which these responses are delivered, and how you feel in your interactions with the pediatrician, nurses, and office staff.

Topics to cover in your face-to-face consultation with the pediatrician include credentials, availability, types of staff in the office, access to specialists and intensive care, and what in-office services are available. Explore the doctor's attitude about topics that are important to you such as alternative health methods or traditional health practices, and any important cultural, religious, or moral beliefs related to your child's healthcare.

It is useful to go to the visit with your spouse or partner in order that you may both get a sense of the pediatrician and the office staff. If you are interviewing pediatricians and you already have a child, you may want to bring your child along to see how he or she interacts with the doctor. Communications between the pediatrician, parents, and child are key factors to consider. After the interview, ask yourself how well the provider listened to you. Did the doctor treat you as a partner in the care of your child? Did you feel a sense of trust in the doctor? Did the pediatrician ask you important information about your child, family, and home? Did the provider answer questions in a straight forward and understandable manner?

Once you have selected a pediatrician for your child, you will be able to share this information with the hospital where your child is born so that the hospital can notify the pediatrician of your new baby's arrival. If you already have a child, it will be a good time to schedule a check-up with your new doctor. Pediatricians, their nurses, and office staff are devoted to promoting and maintaining the health of all children, and lifelong, nurturing relationships are often developed between a family and pediatrician.