Understanding the Well-Child Visit

Every day, “healthy” children are brought to doctors and nurse practitioners for well-child visits. Leading pediatric authorities recommend routine visits, ideally beginning with a prenatal visit and continuing throughout infancy, childhood, and adolescence. The purpose of these visits is to help families keep children healthy as well as to pick up early signs of potential problems. These visits are so important to a child’s health that both private and public insurance companies pay for them. This is because childhood is a unique period of time to lay the foundation for a person’s health throughout life.

Yet a funny thing sometimes happens during these visits. The most important part of the visit gets overlooked. Many parents don't even realize that both they and their healthcare provider are forgetting to talk about the biggest threats to their child’s well-being.

Many things happen during these visits. Many of the activities are very visible, like weighing a child and providing him or her with necessary immunizations. But sometimes, the most important part of the visit, the part that is not so easy to see, gets forgotten. That is the part of the visit that should be spent talking to your doctor or nurse practitioner about how your child is growing emotionally and mentally and the important role that behavior plays in keeping your child healthy.

Unlike 100 years ago, the greatest threats faced by children in this country today are not infection and physical illnesses. The Surgeon General and others have often called attention to the real risks to children's health today. Children’s health today is threatened most by behaviors—their own behaviors, the behaviors of their families and friends, or sometimes the behavior of strangers. Many children and adolescents die from accidents and injuries, from homicide, and suicide. One in four has a mental health disorder and many more have behavior problems that interfere with their family relationships, their friendships, and their performance in school. Mental health problems appear in families of all social classes and backgrounds. Child mental health problems often continue into adulthood and worsen if untreated. Yet, more is known today than ever before about how to recognize early mental health problems in children and how to help them during the critical childhood years. It is most important that you talk to your healthcare provider about your child’s emotions and behaviors on a regular basis and share your concerns.

There is nothing to be ashamed of if your child has an emotional or behavior problem. The sooner you share your concerns with your child’s doctor or nurse practitioner, the faster your child can be helped.

Please turn the page over to view a list of steps you can take to keep your child healthy.
Parents: Did you remember to talk to your doctor/nurse practitioner today about your child’s behavior and emotions?

Remember:

*Both parents and healthcare providers have a role to play in keeping children mentally and physically healthy.*

How Can Parents Assure This Happens

1. Expect your pediatric healthcare provider to talk to you routinely about your child’s behavior and emotions. Many doctors and nurse practitioners will use screening tools at every visit to help recognize when children are having more difficulties than usual.

2. Call or make an appointment to talk to your healthcare provider when you have concerns or worries about your child’s behavior or emotions.

3. Some concerns can be dealt with in a single visit, but most will require follow-up calls or appointments. Following up is most important.

4. Some pediatric healthcare providers have more experience in behavior/mental health management than others. After taking a careful history, some providers may suggest that you be referred to a mental health clinician. Yet others will talk to you about some short-term interventions they may be able to provide, such as:
   
   a. Formal screening for mental health problems and strengths
   b. Discussions to help you and your child better understand the problem
   c. Brief solution-focused counseling sessions that help you and your child manage the problem
   d. Participation in group sessions with other parents or children

5. If the problem is not getting better or seems to be getting worse, do not hesitate to ask your healthcare provider for a referral to someone with expertise in the mental healthcare of children.

6. When your healthcare provider suggests certain treatments to deal with the problem, ask him or her for the evidence behind what is being recommended.

7. Keep your pediatric provider informed about your child’s progress even after referral to a specialist. Your pediatric primary care provider has an important role to play in helping you to advocate for your child’s continued mental and physical health.

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