

How to Choose the Right Pediatrician

Take the time to select the right clinician for your family. Trust us, it's more important than picking the perfect stroller. Here are some tips to help you get started.

By Erika R. Cheng and Tracey A. Wilkinson

Published Aug. 28, 2020 Updated Sept. 1, 2020

The final months of pregnancy are marked by a flurry of preparation: setting up a nursery, packing a hospital bag and deciding on baby names. It's also the perfect time to choose your child's pediatrician.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents take their baby in for at least seven well-child visits during their first year of life, but ear infections, fevers, rashes and other unexpected baby maladies could make visits to the doctor more frequent. After that first year, pediatricians guide parents on topics ranging from potty training to tantrums to school performance and more. All of this face-time makes choosing the right doctor among the most important decisions new parents make, especially during a global pandemic when parents often turn to primary care providers with their questions. But with almost 60,000 practicing general pediatricians in the United States alone, finding the best doctor for your family can be a stressful process.

We spoke with pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists, reviewed national guidelines, and compiled the research to help you through this process. As professors of pediatrics and mothers of young children ourselves, we also relied on our own experiences when creating this guide.

What to do

- [Start your search early](#)
- [Ask others you trust](#)
- [Identify your needs and preferences](#)
- [Check your insurance](#)
- [Consider the location, hours and size of the practice](#)
- [Interview the pediatrician](#)
- [Don't be afraid to switch doctors](#)

Start your search early

While expecting parents can spend hours researching the perfect crib, stroller and high chair, they often spend less time choosing their child's doctor. As with any decision, it's best to start early. Most hospitals will ask for the name of your pediatrician when you're admitted to deliver your baby, so give yourself plenty of time, remembering that some babies arrive early.

Ask others you trust

The best options often come from personal recommendations by family, friends, relatives and colleagues who have kids. Try to ask people who share your approach to medical care and understand your needs and perspectives about parenting. If you are unsure of where to start, Bethany Stafford, M.D., a general pediatrician in Los Angeles, also suggests asking your obstetrician-gynecologist for a referral or turning to highly informed community mom groups on social media for information. "Of course, you have to take all opinions with a grain of salt, but you will quickly be able to surmise the popular local practices," Dr. Stafford said.

Identify your needs and preferences

Consider the type of doctor you want. Pediatricians — including medical doctors and doctors of osteopathic medicine — aren't the only professionals who take care of kids. Family medicine providers and pediatric nurse practitioners do as well. Whatever you prefer, verify that your choice is board-certified, meaning that they have a medical degree from a qualified school and have completed residency training and passed the appropriate state exams. You can check the certifications of pediatric medical doctors, family medicine doctors, and doctors of osteopathic medicine online. Also, if you are anticipating that your newborn might have a special medical need, you may want a doctor who has a relationship with a larger health system or pediatric hospital to facilitate communication with pediatric subspecialists.

Create a checklist of what's important to you to measure your candidates against. Make sure to include any partners as they might have different opinions about what's important. Some things to consider include:

Personal characteristics

Factors like age, gender and experience may seem superficial but they can affect your rapport with a clinician. Be honest about what you want. For example, do you prefer discussing your child's health with someone your own age? Or do you want someone who is older? It's perfectly OK to be selective. Or maybe you're not sure. Consider looking for a larger practice that's more likely to have a variety of options. "While you may have an idea of what type of doctor is the best fit for your child currently, your

wants and needs could change down the road,” says Areej Hassan, M.D., an assistant professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and an adolescent medicine specialist. “And eventually your child will become an adolescent with their own set of preferences. Choosing a clinic with a diverse panel of providers will allow you to stay within the same practice while having the option to change to a different provider if you figure out it’s not working.”

Personality and style

Pediatricians don’t just take care of kids when they are sick. They also help parents understand their child’s health, growth and development. The relationships families have with their pediatricians often span a decade or more, so developing a trusting relationship is critical. “I always tell people that you want a pediatrician who you will feel comfortable asking all the seemingly silly questions that will arise while caring for a newborn,” Dr. Stafford said. So, think about the qualities that will make you the most comfortable. Is it someone who is warm and fuzzy or more matter-of-fact? In terms of style, do you like your physician to have an authoritative or more collaborative approach? Doctors who focus on the evidence or who suggest options based on their own clinical, or personal, experience? Someone pragmatic or comprehensive? Different styles and personalities appeal to different people, so knowing what you’re looking for is key to building a successful relationship.

Shared views

If you have strong feelings about certain issues that could affect your experience with a clinician who disagrees, such as breastfeeding or circumcision, then it’s probably best to find someone who respects your preferences.

Check your insurance

Some insurance plans require parents to select a provider within their network. But determining this isn’t always easy, and just because a provider or clinic accepts your insurance doesn’t mean that they are covered by your specific plan. Start by looking on your health plan’s website, which should have a list of covered providers and clinics. Since websites are not always up-to-date, verify your choice with a quick call to your health plan’s member services department.

Consider the location, hours and size of the practice

For many working parents, choosing a clinic with extended hours, including evening and weekend options, is key. Other parents prioritize location — close to home, close to school or close to the office. Pick whatever you think will work best for you.

Also keep in mind that young kids get sick unexpectedly. A lot. Accidents happen. Of course, emergency rooms exist for imminent, life-threatening issues, but for everything else, same-day sick visits offer the opportunity for immediate care in a familiar atmosphere. Evidence suggests that they also reduce wait time and increase patient satisfaction. Keep in mind that when children fall ill, many day cares and schools require antibiotics or documented physical clearance before they can return, so if having the opportunity for a same-day appointment is important to you, then put it high on your list.

Is it important for you to have a way to communicate with your provider during evenings and weekends? If so, look for a clinic with an online portal, where you can email your child's provider, request appointments, review lab results, and access physical forms and vaccination records that might be required for day care and school entry.

Another thing to consider is the size of the practice. You might prefer a smaller group practice that makes it easier to build rapport with a single doctor, but a larger group might make it easier to get an appointment.

Finally, it's vital to choose a practice that approaches minimizing risk for Covid-19 exposure in ways that meet your expectations and comfort level. For example, some practices are offering telehealth options; separating "sick" and "well" visits by time or space within the clinic; or designating specific doors or visit times for newborns and other immunocompromised children.

Interview the pediatrician

The A.A.P. recommends a prenatal visit with a pediatrician for all expectant families, and particularly for first-time parents, single parents, families who are new to the area, and for women with high-risk or multiple gestation pregnancies who might anticipate needing specific services for their child's health and developmental needs. Although these visits are not 100 percent necessary or always feasible, meeting your child's pediatrician face-to-face before your first appointment can give you a chance to see whether you are comfortable with the doctor's approach and philosophy of care.

Dr. Tony GiaQuinta, M.D., the president of the Indiana chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, suggests narrowing your search to about two or three doctors and calling their offices to ask whether they are accepting new patients, and if they are willing to schedule an in-person interview. "Building a trusting and respectful relationship can take time, so the more time we spend each other, the more you realize that I want nothing more than for your child to grow up strong and healthy," Dr. GiaQuinta said. "Meeting before your baby's arrival gives the chance to jump-start our relationship."

If you're pregnant, the A.A.P. recommends scheduling this appointment at the beginning of the third trimester, or around 28 to 30 weeks.

And ultimately, go with your gut. Select the provider who takes your insurance, is accepting new patients, and best meets your family's needs and priorities.

Don't be afraid to switch doctors

Finding a competent health care provider is necessary, but not always sufficient. It's important to find someone who you can trust, communicate with, and whose approach to care mirrors your expectations. After all, says Jaime Moy, D.O., a primary care pediatrician in the Los Angeles area, "it's the partnership between parent and pediatrician that ensures a child's healthy growth and development into adulthood."

Dr. Moy continued: "If that relationship does not form, parents should feel empowered to find another provider who they can make that connection with." Remember, this is your child's primary health care provider, and someone you will rely on not only for anticipated growth milestones, but also during those unexpected moments that inevitably arise.

Erika R. Cheng, Ph.D., and Tracey A. Wilkinson, M.D., are assistant professors of pediatrics at the Indiana University School of Medicine.