

Opinion: Clear communication can make doctor visits successful for children with autism

February 3 2017, by Sheena Rice

Doctor visits can be a challenge for patients with autism, their families and health care providers. Kristin Sohl, associate professor of child health at the University of Missouri, offers several steps providers and families can take to make medical visits more successful. She says that all of them require good communication between the provider and parent before, during and after medical visits.

Before a Visit

"Parents or caregivers should call ahead to the provider's office to discuss individual accommodations that the patient might need during the visit, such as a comfort item or a distraction toy," Sohl said. "Tell the office staff if there have been prior negative experiences—or successful ones—so the office can provide a supportive environment and avoid triggering anxiety in the patient."

During a Visit

"Doctors need to use simple, direct communication when talking to a child with [autism](#)," Sohl said. "They can be confused by idioms or turns of phrase that might have a different literal meaning. Providers should explain what they're doing before they do it to reduce anxiety and encourage the patient's understanding of the procedures."

Providers should know the goals of the visit and prioritize necessary objectives, such as lab work, to make appointments run smoothly. If the care team observes increasing agitation or aggression in a patient with autism, they should consider whether the results of any procedure are routine, urgent, or critical in nature and discuss with the family whether to proceed.

To get the most out of a visit, Sohl suggests use of rewards and reinforcements to move through routine procedures, such as vitals checks or blood draws. She also says that parents and providers should discuss a backup plan at the start of the appointment to determine when to stop a procedure or when to call in more assistance.

After a Visit

Communication remains important once the appointment is over. Parents should follow up with the doctor's office with a phone call or email to let them know what helped and if there are things that can be improved during the next visit.

Sohl is a pediatrician who specializes in children with autism and other developmental concerns. She also serves as the site Principle Investigator for the Autism Treatment Network, Director of ECHO Autism, and is the former Medical Director of the MU Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, a national leader in confronting the challenges of autism and other developmental conditions through its collaborative research, training and service programs.

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Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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