

# How to Talk So Providers Will Listen

## Asking for Help Can Be Hard

When we need help supporting our children with mental health needs, we sometimes turn to providers - pediatricians, therapists, psychiatrists, and so on. But sometimes talking to providers can be tough - especially if we feel that we're not being taken seriously, or that our concerns are being dismissed. Here are some suggestions for talking with providers so they will listen - and for building a strong working relationship that will benefit both you and your children.

### Preparing for an Appointment

- **Keep a log** of everything notable about your child's behavior and mood - good days, bad days, specific behaviors that trouble you, any problems at school. Before your appointment, look through your log and make note of what you feel is most important to share.
- If possible, **bring documentation** to back up the concerns you want to share. Options include your log, a school progress report, a letter from another provider, and so on. Bringing written evidence also demonstrates just how prepared and well-informed you are as a parent.
- Try to **schedule appointments at the time of day when you tend to feel your best** - and allow plenty of time to get there so you're not feeling rushed before you even start.
- Make a favorable impression by **dressing professionally** - think "business casual," and avoid wearing torn or stained items. And if the appointment feels intimidating, **bring a friend or other support person with you for extra help**.



### The First Meeting with a Provider

- Come to the first meeting **prepared to talk about your child's challenges**, their background (bring the baby book if it helps you remember milestones!), and recent key stressors or events that may be impacting your child's mood.
- Talk about what concerns you most at the very beginning. **If you want the provider to focus on your priorities, make them clear from the start.**
- **Share specific goals:** for example, you'd like your child to be able to go to the grocery store with you, or you'd like to be able to leave them with a babysitter from time to time. Don't just ask a provider to help your child get better - explain what "better" would look like to you.
- **Ask about timelines** for treatment, the provider's specific goals for treatment, and how you will measure success.
- **Iron out logistics up front** - what will you be billed for? How can you reach the provider outside of appointments? How should you communicate with them about emergencies, and what kind of support can you expect in that situation?



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## During the Appointment

- **Stay cool, calm, and collected**, and try to maintain a positive attitude. Body language and tone matter. Often how you approach the conversation is as important as what you say.
- **Ask for help:** “Can you suggest ways to deal with my child's ----?” or “Can you help me plan for situations when my child ----?”
- Practice your **active listening skills** - you may hear answers to questions you haven't asked yet. **Takes notes** if it helps you stay focused or remember what the provider had to say.
- **Don't be afraid to stop the conversation to ask for clarification** if there is something you don't understand. Sometimes providers use too many medical terms - politely ask that they define any words you don't know.



## You are the expert on your child

- **Trust your own expertise.** Your child's provider may be an expert in their field, but you are the expert on your child. Don't be afraid to speak up. The provider likely sees your child for 45 min per week at best. Your feedback lets the provider know what's working and not working the rest of the time.
- **Providers may bristle if they feel like you're trying to do “their” job**, so rather than using clinical terms (“My child has been acting depressed and anxious”), share your observations instead. If you share specific details and experiences (“My child often says he can't go to school because his stomach hurts, but his pediatrician can't find a physical cause”) the provider may come to the same conclusion you did.



## If Things Get Rocky

- **If you don't agree with the provider**, try saying “Can you tell me why you think that? I have a different idea.” A good provider should be willing to have an open, collaborative conversation with you.
- **Address anything that bothers you right away.** Try to start by assuming it was a miscommunication or a road bump, and that the provider didn't mean to be hurtful. Try saying “When you said ---- I heard ----. Is that what you meant?” or “I felt dismissed when you said ----.”
- **If you don't think it's a good fit or you feel uncomfortable with the provider**, it's OK to ask for a second opinion and/or look for a different provider.

