

What Is a Developmental Pediatrician?

In an ideal world, a developmental pediatrician is a board-accredited pediatrician who has also received sub-specialty training and certification in developmental-behavioral pediatrics. That person should have five years of practice experience, of which at least 50 percent focuses specifically on developmental-behavioral issues. The American Board of Pediatrics has established a whole set of subject areas in which a certified developmental pediatrician should be not only knowledgeable but also practiced.

While all of these criteria describe a "true" developmental pediatrician, you may run across some pediatricians who have vast experience with autism but have different certifications. This is, in part, because the developmental-behavioral certification is fairly new. Thus, even if a pediatrician does not have board certification in developmental pediatrics, they may have the ability to diagnose and even treat autism spectrum disorders.

The best choice is to seek someone with appropriate credentials. If that's not possible (and it's quite likely that you'll find it difficult to find someone board certified in developmental pediatrics), the second best option is to find a board-certified pediatrician with solid experience in diagnosing and treating autism spectrum disorders. The truth is, developmental pediatricians of any sort are few and far between, so focusing entirely on sub-specialty board certification as you choose a practitioner may be simply impractical.

Why Would a Person With Autism Need to See a Developmental Pediatrician?

Most pediatricians in general practice have little experience with autism spectrum disorders. As a result, they are not ideally qualified to diagnose or treat autism. Developmental pediatricians, particularly those with a subspecialty in the field, are highly trained and experienced in identifying and diagnosing a whole range of developmental and behavioral differences. If anyone can tell the difference between, say, ADHD and Asperger Syndrome -- it's likely to be a developmental pediatrician.

A developmental pediatrician should be able to look at your child's development overall, provide a diagnosis, and recommend a specific treatment plan. In my personal experience, however, while developmental pediatricians are terrific for diagnosis they are not always helpful when it comes to deciding among treatment options, therapists and educational programs. Of course, your pediatrician may be the exception to this rule.

What Does a Developmental Pediatrician Do for Children with Autism?

At the very least, a developmental pediatrician will spend at least an hour or two with you and your child. He or she is likely to spend a fair amount of that time interviewing you about your child's developmental history, habits, abilities and challenges. In addition, he or she will conduct a thorough evaluation of your child, checking height, weight, coordination, responsiveness, etc. It is unlikely that the pediatrician will conduct psychological

or speech tests, though he or she will be aware of possible issues in these areas and will observe how your child moves, interacts, speaks, plays, and so forth.

Once the pediatrician has completed the evaluation, he or she may provide you with a full report as well as a specific diagnosis such as Asperger Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), speech delays, etc. He or she may also recommend specific options for treatment, or refer you to agencies that fund and provide such treatments. Occasionally, if you are very lucky, you will find a developmental pediatrician with the time, knowledge and inclination to help you help your child by finding the right treatments, therapists and educational program.

How Can I Find a Qualified Developmental Pediatrician?

Finding a qualified developmental pediatrician is not easy. Even when you do, you're likely to be in for a multi-month wait for an appointment. At last count, there were only 13 certified developmental pediatricians in the entire state of Pennsylvania! It's obviously best to make that appointment the moment you think there might be an issue with your child: the worst that happens is you cancel the appointment.

The best places to start such a search are with your own pediatrician who is likely to have good suggestions or referrals. A next step is to contact a local children's hospital or clinic which specializes in developmental and behavioral challenges.

You can also find a certified developmental pediatrician through professional organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics' referral service (be sure to search various related specialties). As always, of course, local parent support groups and listserves are also a terrific resource.