



Back to School: Back to Problems?

How to Use Your Pediatrician as a Learning Resource

By Dr. Stuart Adams, Pediatrician, Esse Health

At this time of year children are back in school and fall activities are underway. As busy families get back into the routine of school and after-school activities, it is important not to forget the annual back-to-school appointment with your pediatrician. Your child's pediatrician can serve as a valuable resource not only for your child's health, but for his or her success in school. By working together, you and your child's pediatrician can help ensure that your child performs at his or her very best this school year.

As pediatricians, we view the back-to-school process as a crucial part of our patient's care. Trained and experienced pediatricians and pediatric nurse practitioners are uniquely situated to use a child's health history, parental concerns and school results to discover learning problems. Much like catching an infection in its early stages, it is crucial for parents, educators and pediatricians to recognize learning problems in the preschool or early elementary years. Left untreated, the problems may have consequences such as poor learning habits, poor self-esteem or school failures that are difficult to reverse. Your pediatrician understands the developmental variability between one child and another and the expected learning skills for each age group from birth through adolescence. Our training and developmental screening tools employed in your child's care allow us to recognize serious and subtle learning issues. Yearly, comprehensive Well Child appointments and an open ear to the concerns of parents and teachers are the two necessary elements for your pediatrician to help discover and potentially treat a learning disability.

So, how can you help your pediatrician screen for learning problems in your preschool or school-aged child now that the new school year has begun?

- 1) Of primary importance is to have an open mind that your child may have a learning disability that is interfering with their school performance or learning habits. No one knows a child's strengths

and weaknesses in school or learning better than his or her parents. Teachers, school counselors and other educators such as Parents as Teachers have valuable information about your child that you may mention to your pediatrician. Also, other family members and close friends may have concerns that are helpful because, like you, they have watched your child's developmental progress and schooling over the years.

- 2) Bring to your pediatrician's attention any medical problems, psychological changes or social stresses that your child is experiencing. Chronic medical conditions such as asthma, severe allergies, migraine headaches and many others can interfere with learning due to excessive missed school days and the actual symptoms of the illness. At the Well Child exam, your pediatrician will screen for most hearing and vision problems that could be a problem for your child in the classroom, but certainly alert the staff if you suspect any changes in these areas. Of course, if your child shows any signs of depression, emotional stress or drug/alcohol abuse, these factors would influence learning and should be discussed with your pediatrician immediately. It also is important to mention your child's sleep patterns, especially if they have chronic problems falling asleep (insomnia), shortened sleep hours or excessive sleep as sleep can greatly affect classroom focus and after school homework performance.
- 3) Have school reports available for the pediatrician during the Well Child appointment, especially if teachers or counselors have obtained screening tests for a learning problem or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Your pediatrician often partners with teachers and counselors in the diagnosis and treatment of some learning problems like ADHD. Many studies estimate that approximately 5 to 8 percent of school-

age children have the difficulties maintaining focus, impulsive behavior and poor school performance that are characteristic of ADHD. ADHD is a neurologic disorder of the brain that affects focus and attention in children at home and school that can often greatly improve with medications and educational resources. Your child's pediatrician and teachers screen children with behavioral observations and formal testing because untreated ADHD can impair academic performance, classroom behavior and test-taking success.

As you can see, the yearly Well Child appointments are an important opportunity for you and your pediatrician to discuss your child's learning and school performance. Childhood is a time of great physical, emotional and academic growth that can influence the rest of their adult lives. Your pediatrician is a valuable, motivated resource for you and your child's teachers to foster lifelong learning and school success.

Resources:

www.essehealth.com

www.ldanatl.org

www.aap.org



Dr. Stuart Adams is a Pediatrician
at the Esse Health O'Fallon
Pediatrics Office
9979 Winghaven Blvd., Suite 206
O'Fallon, MO 63368
Phone: (636) 561-5291