



Brain Beats Music

Visiting a Doctor with Children

Going to see a doctor can be an anxious experience for both adults and children. Most consultations have anxiety as their core issue. By this I mean people generally make an appointment because they are worried about something, e.g. Why won't this rash go away despite me applying ointment? Could this lump be nasty? Why do I feel tired all the time, and will it ever get better? Why can't I be happy like everyone else?

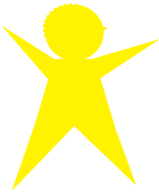
Having been a General Practitioner for 30 years, I have learnt which things can make an appointment with a child go smoothly and I would like to share several tips, so the experience doesn't have to result in a traumatic experience for the child (and usually the parent as well).

First of all, it really helps me if the child has full trust in me. If they know I'm not going to hurt them or surprise them, then they are more likely to be relaxed and settled whilst I examine them. As a doctor, I am able to get a lot more information if I am feeling a tummy that is soft (not tense from crying) and listening to the fine sounds of the heart and lungs without added child vocals.

This trust starts at home - ideally before you even need to see the doctor. If you can, try to convince your child that their doctor is a friend and a hero of sorts. Tell stories of times you went to see the doctor and the doctor made things better for you. Buy a toy doctor's kit and let the child examine you. Examine the child with the same kit so they know that nothing will hurt. In particular, practice opening your mouths wide - perhaps make it a competition to see who can open their mouth the widest so you can show the doctor. Unfortunately, when a child has a respiratory infection, we need to see the tonsils. If we don't have a co-operative child, we are often forced to restrain the child and 'gag' their mouths open with a tongue depressor. If the child can open their mouths wide enough, we can often get away with not having to use one at all and the examination will be less stressful for all concerned.

Once an appointment has been made, if the child is old enough, say to the child that the doctor is going to want to hear about what is going on. Get the child to practice what they might tell the doctor, perhaps providing words that your family feel comfortable using. I like to crouch down to the child's level and will often reflect back using the same words the child uses. At this stage I prefer the child to be sitting on the parent/caregiver's lap or seated right beside them. I also find it helpful if the child can bring with them a favourite toy or teddy.





Brain Beats Music

Visiting a Doctor with Children

After getting the history from the child and then clarifying things with the parent, I like to show the child how I'm going to examine them by examining Teddy. I'll look in Teddy's ears, or feel the tummy, or ask Teddy to open his mouth wide and perhaps make a joke about how Teddy isn't very good at opening his mouth. Basically, I'm using distraction and humour to gain the child's trust. Usually (but admittedly not always), the child is happy to be examined at this point. If there is some reluctance at this stage, I'll often use a bit more humour or distraction. I find if I keep talking while approaching them to look in their ears (perhaps saying "I'm going to see if I can see an elephant in your ears"), the child tends to keep their head still. I'll look for a non-threatening part of the body to place my stethoscope, such as their forearm (to show it doesn't hurt), before sliding it onto their chest. I tell the child I have a magic trick, then I make their finger glow by placing the light of my otoscope under the tip of their finger before saying "Now I'm going to see if I can make your ears glow. Shall we see if your tongue glows, open wide. Look Mum, Jack's tongue is glowing", etc.

Parents know I'm busy and they quickly get embarrassed when their child isn't co-operating. With the best of intentions, they try bargaining with the child, but I've rarely seen this to be successful. Typically it starts with something like "If you open your mouth wide, I'll get you an ice cream", and usually finishes after 10 minutes of continual refusal with "If you don't co-operate you're not going to be allowed your device for the next six months!". I cringe when I think of one particular consultation where the father said to the son "If you don't co-operate, the doctor is going to get a very big needle". I quickly said that I wouldn't, but I felt any trust I had with the child had instantly disappeared.

Finally, encouraging curiosity is another way parents can help us to engage with the child. Before the appointment could you both come up with a question your child can ask their doctor about how the body works or why they feel sick. This helps me to build my relationship with the child and increase their trust in me.

Brain Beats will be releasing a song about going to the doctor - aiming to further build on the trust between your child and their doctor. Keep a look out.

Dr Nick Gailer,
Director, Brain Beats Music
August 2025

