

Families Share Their Thoughts on Effective Communication

“Primary care physicians are the first place that a family ends up asking questions.”

Parent – Monument, Colo.

Families greatly value their relationships with their pediatrician. He or she is their first point of contact with the medical profession when their child is born and the trusted professional they turn to with concerns about the health and well-being of their child.

Early and effective communication between pediatricians and families promises to lead to the early identification of mental health conditions. Yet, all too often this does not happen—leading to unnecessary delays in linking children and their families with services and supports.

NAMI set out to learn from families about their recommendations on effective communication in primary care related to mental health issues. Through a national survey, families shared the following suggestions on effective communication for primary care physicians and staff:

DO learn more about early onset mental illness and the local resources available for families to help ensure comfortable conversations with families on these issues.

“When the physician is not well-equipped to handle the situation it makes it that much more frightening for everyone involved.”

Parent – Apple Valley, Calif.

DO have mental health screening tools, including checklists and questionnaires, available for parents and youth to fill out before, during or after appointments to initiate a conversation about mental health issues and to identify youth who may need services.

“Screening for mental health conditions should be just as important as screening for all other physical health conditions that impact children.”

Parent – Duncan, S.C.



DO make questions about mental health a routine part of well-child visits and physical exams. Discussing mental health—even when there are no immediate concerns—opens the lines of communication for if and when an issue arises. Families suggest starting the conversation with, “At this age, certain health issues can emerge, so I would like to ask a few general questions like...”

- Do you have any concerns about your child’s mental health?
- How is your child behaving in school, at home and with peers?
- Do you feel you need any extra support for your child’s behavior?
- How are your child’s moods? Are there any emotions that concern you?
- Is your child sleeping and eating well?
- Do you have a family history of mental illness?

“Just ask. Most of us are silent because of the stigma and because we don’t know that help is out there.”

Parent – Sacramento, Calif.

DO emphasize that mental health is a critical part of a child’s overall health and is important to their development. This will encourage parents to open up.

“You can help destigmatize mental illness by taking a few minutes to talk about it with every family you see. You have the power to normalize conversation about this often taboo topic.”

Parent – Rockford, Ill.

DO share personal stories if possible and connections you may have to mental illness.

“When we met our primary care professional and told him our son had a mental health condition, he said my son has some challenges too, so I know how important it is to understand what is going on so we can support him. My son immediately felt at ease and shared a lot of information with the doctor including information that he had not shared with us. What an ice-breaker!”

Parent - Glenwood, Md.

DO understand that how you react to mental illness will impact how families and youth feel about it. Listen, respect and validate concerns and avoid judgment. Be hopeful, encouraging and positive. Families shared the following statements that pediatricians may wish to use:

- **There is always hope.** We will do whatever it takes to help your child.
- **You are not alone.** This is more common than you may realize. Here is contact information for a local support group to meet other families that are going through the same thing.
- **It is not your fault.** There is a lot you can do to help your child, your family and yourself to get through this.

“Offering hope goes a long way. Never take away a parent’s hope. You can tell parents the truth without taking away their hope.”

Parent - Ellicott City, Md.

“It took a lot for me to work up the nerve to ask that first question, but the physician’s response shut me down for a period of time after that.”

Parent - Homestead, Iowa

DO show empathy, compassion and understanding when there is a mental health condition. Here are some positive messages that families suggested pediatricians use in talking with families.

- I know this is a difficult time for your family, how can I help?
- You will get through this. Here are some local resources to help you get through this challenging time.
- If you continue to have concerns about your child, please contact me. I am here to help.

“The best thing in the world a doctor could say would be, ‘It’s tough work raising a child, but it’s especially daunting

when a child has emotional or behavioral challenges. Mental health conditions are relatively common in children. The good news is that there is help. I would like to help.’”

Parent - Portland, Ore.

DO focus on the child and family’s strengths. Consider starting a conversation by saying, “Your child is wonderful and here are some examples of how your child is special ...” and then sharing positive characteristics.

“They saw beyond the illness and said they see a very bright, together young woman in my daughter and that was definitely a positive that helped to get us through this.”

Parent - Belvidere, Ill.

DO share information about mental illness and refer youth and families to local resources. Follow up with referrals to be sure families connect with services. Be realistic about the availability of mental health services and supports. Make the following information easily accessible to families.

- List of mental health providers and other specialists (e.g., psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors/therapists, neurologists, sleep disorder specialists and other local experts). The list should include private, public and low-cost providers.
- Contacts for community-based supports (e.g., support groups, family education programs and family advocacy organizations).
- Information about mental illness (early warning signs, behaviors and symptoms) and effective treatment options.

“Medications are not the only answer. Share information with families about psychotherapy, counseling, family education and other services and supports in your community. Do not just write a prescription for medication.”

Parent - Arvada, Colo.

Effective communication is essential between families and primary care physicians and staff. It promises to increase the likelihood of detecting ongoing mental health conditions early and intervening with services and supports. This will certainly go a long way toward improving the lives of children and families.

The information in this tip sheet came directly from a national survey the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) conducted of families’ experiences in primary care. To review the complete survey report and additional primary care resources, visit www.nami.org/primarycare.