

Behavioural Concerns in Children: A Guide for Parents

Introduction

Many families seek help from paediatricians because of concerns about their child's behaviour. These challenges are common and can feel overwhelming for both children and parents. With more families reaching out for support, waiting times for specialist services are often longer than anyone would like.

This guide provides an overview of common causes of behavioural concerns, what to expect during the evaluation process, practical steps families can take while waiting for appointments, and the types of support available.

Common Causes and Conditions

There are many reasons why children may show changes in their behaviour. For some, it may be linked to conditions such as ADHD or autism spectrum disorder. Others may find things more difficult because of learning challenges, anxiety, low mood, or their natural temperament. Stress at home or school can also affect how a child feels and behaves.

Every child is different, and often more than one factor may be involved. That's why a careful and comprehensive assessment is so important before making any conclusions.

Medical Evaluation

When a child is having difficulties with their behaviour, the first step is usually a careful medical assessment with a paediatrician. Depending on the situation, this may include:

- **Checking for medical contributors** – such as iron deficiency, nutritional problems, genetic conditions, chronic illnesses, or side effects of medications.
- **Gathering information from parents, carers, and teachers** – to understand when and how the behaviours occur, possible triggers, and how things have changed over time.
- **Considering developmental and environmental factors** – such as delays, family stress, or school pressures.

This process helps guide whether further tests or referrals to other specialists are needed.

A Team-Based Approach






Supporting a child with behavioural difficulties often requires input from different professionals. While the paediatrician usually begins the assessment, other specialists may be involved, such as:

- Occupational therapists
- Psychologists
- Speech and language therapists
- Educational specialists
- Child psychiatrists (if mental health concerns are significant)

Not every child will need all of these supports, and availability can vary. However, a team approach helps ensure every aspect of a child's development is considered.

What You Can Do While Waiting for a Paediatrician Appointment

We understand that waiting for an appointment can be difficult, but there are positive steps you and your GP can take in the meantime:

-  **Hearing and vision checks** – Important to rule out problems that might affect learning or behaviour.
 -  **Baseline blood tests** – To check for nutritional or medical issues, such as iron deficiency, which can affect mood and concentration.
 -  **Behaviour checklists** – Standardised questionnaires can help identify patterns and guide early supports.
 -  **Early supports** – Accessing psychologists or occupational therapists in the community for strategies, even before a diagnosis.
 -  **Parenting programs** – Courses such as the *Triple P Positive Parenting Program* offer practical tools to build resilience and confidence.
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Management Strategies

The best approach depends on each child's needs, but most children benefit from a mix of therapies and supports, which may include:

- **Behavioural therapies** – Help children build new skills and give parents tools to manage challenges.
- **Medication** – Sometimes used (for example, in ADHD, anxiety, or autism) alongside therapy to reduce symptoms and make learning easier.
- **Psychiatric support** – If emotional or mental health needs are ongoing, a child psychiatrist may provide further advice and treatment.

Tip for parents: Keeping a simple *behaviour diary* (noting triggers, responses, and outcomes) can be a helpful way to track patterns and share insights with professionals.

Navigating Different Systems

Access to services varies depending on where you live. Some hospitals offer many services in one place, while in other areas families may need to find community-based therapists or clinics.

The process can sometimes feel slow, but the long-term benefit of a team-based, step-by-step approach is that it builds a complete picture of your child's needs and ensures strategies are tailored to help them thrive.

Final Thoughts

Parenting a child with behavioural concerns can be challenging, but you are not alone. With the right support, patience, and persistence, families can find strategies that make a meaningful difference. This journey is a partnership between families and healthcare professionals, working together to help every child reach their full potential.

Disclaimer

This handout provides a general overview of behavioural concerns in children. It is not a substitute for medical advice. Your doctor will guide you on the most appropriate course of action for your child. There is often more than one way to manage behavioural challenges, and different clinicians may take different approaches.