

Encouraging Family use of the Primary Care Medical Home

Home visitors can play a very important role in encouraging the families that they serve to use their medical home, rather than the emergency room, for primary care services.

We know that the medical home is patient-centered, provides comprehensive and coordinated services that are accessible and demonstrates a commitment to quality and safety. However, we also know that families experience and/or perceive barriers to accessing their medical homes at the point where they determine medical attention is needed. For this reason we have developed some suggested strategies when dealing with common family questions or concerns regarding their primary care medical home and how to access primary care services.

Explaining the Medical Home Concept to Families

Sometimes when we use the term medical home, it is interpreted as a building, an office, a clinic, or a hospital. But that is not necessarily the case.

¹A medical home is.....

- an approach to providing health care services in a high-quality and cost-effective manner.
- a method of delivering care: families are recognized as the principal caregivers and the center of strength and support for children. The medical home acts as a mentor, offering guidance and advice to the family as to the best way to provide that support.
- another way of describing the support and additional services families should expect from their child's pediatrician or primary care provider's office.
- A medical service interprofessional team that works to provide preventive, routine, and/or crisis medical care. Medical home teams will work with the family to build a home base for the family and children. Medical homes are especially important for those families caring for children with special needs.

Encouraging Families to Use Their Medical Home

It is important to reinforce with the family (probably more than one time) why there is a need to use their medical home for primary care. The following concepts are important to discuss:

- Medical homes offer care coordination and can share important medical information with other service providers, as needed. When there is a need for sharing medical information for school, summer camp, other service providers, etc., the medical home can serve as a

¹ http://www.neserve.org/neserve/pdf/NES%20Publications/Medical_Home_Tips_for_Families_2ndEd.pdf

central repository to provide that information with appropriate legal consents. Thus, the family does not have the burden of coordinating the information sharing process with various entities.

- When a family goes to their medical home consistently for all of their health care needs, important medical information is conveniently available to the medical provider and should be maintained and up to date.
- Often a family will see one of many physicians in a practice and will be asked to repeat important medical information. Within a medical home, using care coordination, even if a family does not see the same doctor every time they have a visit, a record of all their visits and other important medical information is maintained in their medical chart. This process will allow any doctor serving them to be fully informed about the status of their health. They will not have to explain their situation each time they see a new doctor.
- Visiting different sites for health care needs can lead to errors or repeated unnecessary procedures if there is no care coordination for information sharing. It is difficult to explain the special needs of one's child, or any past procedures performed, every single time they have a new doctor.

Frequently Perceived Barriers to Accessing the Medical Home – How the Home Visitor Can Address Families' Concerns

We know that families experience and/or perceive barriers to accessing their medical homes at the point where they determine medical attention is needed. Below are some suggested strategies for home visitors when dealing with common family questions or concerns regarding their primary care medical home.

“I don't have a medical home”

Every family with a medical card has a medical home (although they may not be using that medical home). Assigned medical home and PCP information is available by calling the number on the medical card. Upon establishing who the medical home is, encourage scheduling an appointment with the medical home immediately to:

- fill out important forms
- find out important information such as after-hours care
- establish themselves/their baby as a patient
- schedule well-child visits/preventative care visits

“I rarely see my own doctor– it’s a different doctor or nurse every time”

Although many families may prefer to establish a personal relationship with a single provider, providers encourage families to establish a relationship with the medical home TEAM. Physicians Assistants (PA) and Nurse Practitioners (NP) very often lead health care delivery in a medical home. Visiting the Medical Home regularly will allow families to establish a relationship with the whole team- the nurses, medical assistants, and office staff. They may not see the same doctor all of the time, but they will frequently see the same staff.

“I went to the emergency room because my doctor didn’t have an appointment available”

In cases of life-threatening emergencies, families should ALWAYS use the emergency room. However, many families do not understand that their medical home can make arrangements to see the patient when there is no medical emergency but rather a medical need. It is helpful to the family to clarify with them that they should be aware of their medical home’s procedures for emergent but non- life-threatening care, either after hours or in the event that they cannot be accommodated for an appointment.

Questions home visitors should encourage families to ask:

- What is the after-hours number? What is the procedure for receiving after-hours care? (in our work we found out that many families did not know they could have access to medical personnel after the office has closed)
- If my/my baby’s doctor is not available that day for an appointment, would I/my baby be able to see someone else?
- If I am concerned about my baby, but it’s not a medical emergency, is there someone I can talk to or a nurse hotline I can call for advice?

“I don’t like my/my baby’s doctor because.....”

Whatever the reason may be, if the family is not satisfied with the care they are receiving from their current provider, let families know they may choose a new provider. Home visitors can reference this [website](#) when assisting families with choosing a new healthcare provider.

“After spending a long time waiting in the waiting room, the doctor doesn’t spend much time talking to me at my appointment”

Find out what the purpose was of that visit. Sick visits tend to be focused, and won’t generally take as long as a well-child visit, for example. If the family needs to spend more time with the doctor for whatever reason, let them know that they need to make that clear before the appointment. Let families know that if they prepare for the visit by bringing questions, the medical home service provider will most certainly take the time to address their questions and concerns.

“How do I prepare for an office visit?”

²There are many concrete ways that home visitors can help prepare a family for an office visit, shape the visit, and improve the care they receive. Here is some helpful messaging home visitors can share with families:

- *When you set up an appointment you can inform the receptionist about your/your child’s special needs.*
- *You can ask for the kinds of supports that you have learned make visits go well (e.g. a quiet room, an early visit time slot, or no visible needles).*
- *Try to request an appointment on a day that you know the doctor or nurse you like will be in*
- *Make the appointment for subsequent visits before leaving the office (e.g. at the two-month well-child visit, schedule your four-month well-child visit.)*
- *Bring with you (or send ahead of time) any pertinent information that you would like your child’s doctor to have, including any health history, records, consultation summaries, or school requirements and concerns.*
- *Consider identifying your top three “most important issues” for the day’s visit, and ask for help planning around these concerns. You will want enough time to offer insight into your child’s condition and needs.*
- *Know that an additional visit may be needed for staff to provide time to offer this assistance and completely address your concerns. This may also be a learning process for the doctors and their staff so try to go one step at a time. Understand that their progress in these changes may be slow as they attempt to make changes while running a busy practice.*

For additional information and resources, consult:

<http://www.medicalhomeinfo.org/>

<http://brightfutures.aap.org/>

² <http://illinoisAAP.org/wp-content/uploads/DoYouHaveAMedicalHome.pdf>