

Questions for a Mental Health Agency



A Resource for Families Who Have Children with Special Health Care Needs

❖ Getting Started

This fact sheet will help families who have a child with mental health or behavioral health challenges as they look for therapy or counseling services for their child. After working with your child's primary care doctor to get a list of potential agencies, use the questions below to help find the right provider for your child. If you need help finding providers contact Wisconsin First Step at **1-800-642-7837**.

When you call a provider agency, you should be prepared to answer a number of *intake* questions. This will include telling them about your child's current diagnoses and behaviors. Then you can ask the following:

❖ What services does your agency provide?

Agencies offer a range of services which may include: individual therapy, family therapy, group therapy or specialized therapy. Some agencies offer cognitive/behavioral therapy, like Applied Behavioral Analysis or ABA. They may also have support groups or other informal programs.

❖ Are there any age limits for services?

Some programs serve only adults so make sure you check that the agency serves your child's age group.

❖ I have ____ insurance; does your agency accept that?

This is a **critically important question** to ask before your first appointment! You do not want to wait for a visit only to find out that the provider does not accept your insurance or is not in your provider network. If your child is covered by Medicaid it is VERY important that you make sure the agency accepts Medicaid.

If your child has both private insurance and Medicaid, you should let the agency know. In most cases private insurance will be billed first and Medicaid will cover the cost of your co-pays or other costs not covered by private insurance.

❖ Do I need a referral from my child's doctor to be seen?

A **referral** is an order from a primary care doctor to see a specialist or get certain medical services. If a referral is not in place the health plan may not cover the cost of the visit. To learn about other coverage questions see the fact sheet ["Questions for My Health Plan or Insurance Company"](http://www.familyvoicesofwisconsin.com/resources/affordable-care-act/family-voices-fact-sheets/) at [familyvoicesofwisconsin.com/resources/affordable-care-act/family-voices-fact-sheets/](http://www.familyvoicesofwisconsin.com/resources/affordable-care-act/family-voices-fact-sheets/)

❖ Is there a wait list?

The reality is that there aren't enough mental health providers to serve everyone who could benefit from services. There may be a long wait before an initial visit will be scheduled or before ongoing therapy can be provided. **This is where a family's advocacy skills and persistence can really help!**

What can I do if I am on a wait list?

- Ask the agency if you can be put on a cancellation list
- Call back weekly to see where your child is on the wait list
- Ask about other options or group sessions if individual therapy is full
- Contact your child's doctor or school staff to see if they will call and advocate for your child.
- While you are waiting, consider informal supports available in your community such as support groups and school-based or faith-based programs.

If your child is in crisis or is facing out-of-home placement his or her doctor can refer you to treatment services where your child can be served immediately.

❖ What happens when my child starts being seen?

Most agencies will set up a meeting with you and your child and conduct an assessment. In addition, you may be asked to fill out intake paperwork and sign a "Release of Information" form so that they can share information with your child's doctor. Together with the therapist, you will come up with a care plan, including how long your child will be seen, and decide on goals.

After the first few therapy appointments, if you don't feel comfortable with the provider or are not sure he or she is a good fit for your child, you can ask to meet with one of the other providers at the same agency.

❖ When and where will my child be seen?

Make sure the agency is in a place that is convenient for your family. Keep in mind that you may be going often. Some agencies have multiple locations so find the one that works best. Consider parking, public transportation and other factors that may make it easier or harder to get to appointments. Ask what days and times of day appointments are available. For example, some providers may offer evening appointments.

If you have questions or need help finding services contact the following agencies:

- **Regional Centers for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs**, a network of 5 centers dedicated to supporting families who have children with special needs at dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/regionalcenters.htm
- **Wisconsin First Step**, a statewide information and referral hotline, can assist families with finding mental health providers and other supports at **1-800-642-STEP (7837)** or www.mch-hotlines.org/wisconsin-first-step