With autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnoses on the rise, you are more likely to treat children with these disorders in your office rather than refer them to limited specialty programs. Children with ASDs often have difficulty understanding expectations, conveying needs and tolerating even seemingly minor changes to routines, as well as typical sounds, sights, smells and textures. As such, they may experience anxiety which also results in inappropriate behavior that may be disruptive to your office. However, there are simple steps you can take to make office visits go as smoothly as possible—for patients, their families and your staff.

**Office visits**

Children with ASDs have a wide range of learning styles, as do all children. However, there are characteristic patterns to their learning styles that differ from your other patients. They have exceptional memories, and a positive first visit will impact future ones. Children with ASDs respond well to structure, systems and organization. Successful visits involve pre-planning and may include the use of strategies as well as visual and physical structure. It’s best to have a “toolbox” of options that can be customized for each child. You will be most effective when you focus on each child’s interests and motivations.

It’s best to work with the child in a way that’s most comfortable for him or her—for example, on the floor or a parent’s lap. You may also need to adjust the physical environment, if possible, such as lowering lights, marking where to sit on the exam table or removing your white lab coat.
Other steps you can take:

- Talk with parents or caregivers before an office visit to learn about the child’s strengths, limitations and previous experiences with healthcare providers. This can include sensitivities and preferred play objects, as well as simple and effective ways to reinforce good behavior.
- Develop a plan for the patient’s visit. For example:
  - Visual supports, such as checklists or schedules of activities to help the child understand the plan for the visit and any procedures.
  - Waiting often can be the most difficult part, so try to minimize or eliminate it. Consider a private area where patients can wait quietly without distractions. Having tools such as “countdown boards” or “stoplights” can be effective means of structuring otherwise unstructured time.
  - Determine which procedures need to be done and by whom. These can include measurements and blood pressure, as well as reflex, eye, ear, nose and mouth checks.
  - Use techniques that reinforce positive behavior, including a reward system that is most effective with the child. Compliment good behavior, as well as block and ignore (i.e., minimize attention to negative behavior while keeping child safe).
  - Encourage parents to bring a child’s favorite activities for “down time” or have some available.
  - Listen to the parents and follow their lead during the visit. They know their child best.

Sorting out treatments

There are a wide variety of interventions and most include a combination of behavioral methods and medicines. Most families need help sorting them out. Part of your early discussions should address a systematic approach for determining the right treatment regimen.

When evaluating treatment approaches:

- Encourage parents to focus on and prioritize the behaviors that need to change; only introducing one new treatment at a time.
- Advise that any treatment should include systematically measuring effects prior to and after implementation. In this way, they will best be able to identify which intervention has resulted in any changes.
- Inform parents that in addition to evaluating interventions, parents should also assess a number of other factors. They should understand specifically the behaviors that are targeted, length of treatment, cost and accompanying time commitment.
- Counsel parents to be cautious about any treatment that offers a “cure” or claims to improve all symptoms of autism.

For quick start resources to help you treat patients with ASDs, visit the Hands in Autism website.

For parent appropriate material on this topic visit iuhealth.org/rileyspeaks.

For more information, visit iuhealth.org/rileyspeaks/physicians.