

WAIT!

Before You Medicate...

Important information to help you make the best decisions for your child and family.

- ✓ **Questions Parents Should Consider Before Medicating a Child for Developmental or Mental Health Concerns**
- ✓ **Questions to Ask Your Child's Prescriber Before Starting Medication Treatment**



Dr. Nicole Beurkens, PhD

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Dr. Nicole Beurkens
3120 68th Street SE
Caledonia, MI 49316

Phone: (616) 698-0306
Fax: (616) 554-9509

E-mail: info@drbeurkens.com
Web: www.DrBeurkens.com

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Are you one of the millions of parents concerned about using medication to treat your child's developmental or mental health concerns? Maybe you've had a prescription sitting on your kitchen counter for a while now, but just can't bring yourself to fill it. Perhaps well-meaning friends, family members, and professionals have hinted that you should medicate your child, but you want to try other things first. Maybe you have tried medication for your child and it didn't lead to any improvements, didn't solve all the problems, or made things worse.

If any of these statements resonate with you, rest assured you are not alone. Many parents are in the same boat as you, trying to find solutions to their child's challenges but finding little in the way of information or support beyond medication. This can be frustrating and discouraging for everyone involved.

The good news is that there are effective non-medication solutions that help treat the root of developmental or mental health challenges. These approaches address the underlying issues that can cause problems like:

**Inattention - Hyperactivity - Learning Disorders - Aggressive Behavior
Social And Relational Difficulties - Anxiety - Depression - Mood Problems
Sensory Processing Disorders - Developmental Delays - And More**

I am a clinical psychologist, so you may be wondering why I am writing about medications. I do not prescribe medications as a clinical psychologist; however, I spend much of my time working with patients who are taking or have taken medications for their symptoms. Many of the patients at my clinic come to treatment having been on a rollercoaster of medications, and are still highly symptomatic. The resulting process of treatment requires disentangling the symptoms that are part of the person from the symptoms that have occurred as a result of being on psychiatric medications.





A common theme in my practice is that many of the issues for which these children and young adults have been prescribed medication could likely have been better addressed via other treatment approaches. At a minimum, these patients require other treatment approaches in combination with their medications. I also find that most patients and their parents do not have a thorough understanding of the medications they are taking. They do not understand why the medications were prescribed, the potential side effects, how to access information about their medication treatments, or what interventions are needed beyond medication. As a result, I spend a significant amount of time educating patients and families about medication issues, and collaborating with their prescribers to best manage their overall

treatment plans.

My experience has shown that most parents prefer to choose non-medication options as primary interventions for their children, but they do not have enough information about or access to appropriate treatment. The goal of this document is to educate parents about the issues you can investigate and the questions you can ask providers before and while considering medication treatment. My purpose is not to tell you whether or not to give your child medication, what medications should be given, or how to take them. Those are issues and questions to address with medication prescribers such as pediatricians, family practice physicians, psychiatrists, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners. I want to help you identify the root causes of your child's challenges so that you can investigate the appropriate treatment approaches. In addition, I want you to know what questions to ask providers so that you can approach medication treatment in a proactive way.

Whether you decide to use prescription psychiatric medication for your child or not, there are important questions you need answered before you can make the right choice for your child and family. In this document I share a list of questions every parent should consider before medicating a child for developmental or mental health concerns. I also provide explanations of why these questions and issues are important. You will quickly be able to determine which areas apply to your child, and be armed with information on issues that may require further investigation before using medication. This document also provides you with a set of 15 questions to ask your child's prescriber before starting medication treatment. This list, also with explanations, will help you be a more informed consumer of medications, and get the answers you need when considering medication treatment.

Questions Every Parent Should Consider Before Medicating a Child for Developmental or Mental Health Concerns

This section contains 34 questions that can help parents identify the root issues that may be causing symptoms for their child. Each of these issues can contribute to problems that negatively impact attention, learning, mood, behavior, and more. When parents and professionals understand the underlying issues, they can identify the right treatment approaches to address those issues. If the root of a child's attention problems is poor diet, for example, then the most appropriate treatment approach will include helping the child achieve better quality and quantity of food intake. Giving a child medication for attention will not solve the underlying issue of poor nutrition. Likewise, a child who is inattentive and behaving poorly in school due to auditory processing problems is going to be best served by a treatment plan that includes an appropriate evaluation, and remedial strategies that strengthen and support auditory processing at home and school. Those approaches will support attention and behavior regulation because they address the underlying reason for the symptoms.

As you read through these questions, you can consider which may apply to your child. This will allow you to advocate for your child at school, with therapists, and in medical settings in order to get the appropriate issues evaluated and treated.

Is your child getting enough hours of sleep each night? Is your child getting good quality sleep?

The right amount of good quality sleep each night is essential for brain development. Lack of sleep and/or poor quality sleep can cause learning and behavior problems, as well as physical health issues. Research studies have found that when sleep problems are corrected learning and mood and behavior issues either resolve or improve significantly.

Is your child deficient in vitamins, minerals, fatty acids, or other nutrients?

Is your child eating a diet full of processed foods including artificial dyes, flavorings, sweeteners and other chemicals?



Poor nutrition status can cause a wide variety of attention, learning, mood, and behavior problems. While most children eat enough calories each day, the quality of the foods they eat may leave them deficient in essential vitamins, minerals, fatty acids and other building blocks needed to support optimal brain function. Diets

heavy in processed foods (chemicals) can cause inattention, irritability, hyperactivity, and more. Studies have shown that diet and nutrition status changes can significantly improve developmental and mental health symptoms.

Are your child's symptoms a reaction to food(s) or ingredients s/he is eating?

Are your child's symptoms a reaction to any substances in the environment?

Allergies and/or sensitivities to foods and environmental substances can be a major contributor to developmental or mental health concerns. People are often unaware that they are having **negative immune responses** to things they are eating or exposed to in the environment, as the problems manifest in a neurological rather than physical way. Some people may have skin rashes, sinus problems, breathing difficulties or other physical symptoms of allergies; others may have cognitive, mood, or behavior changes that are the direct result of allergen exposure.



Does your child have an undiagnosed, and therefore untreated, medical condition (seizures, reflux, diabetes, low blood sugar, asthma, allergies, thyroid issues, chronic headaches, etc.)?

Does your child have recurrent or chronic infections (ear infections, strep throat, thrush, etc.)?

Does your child have an imbalance of gut bacteria (taken many antibiotics, eats a poor diet, had numerous illnesses, etc.)?

The brain and the body are inseparable, so a problem in one area influences problems in other areas. This is why physical health problems can cause or exacerbate problems in the brain. Children with undiagnosed medical issues can exhibit a wide range of problems with learning and behavior, and their mood may be negatively impacted as well. Chronic

infections, and the medications used to treat them, can also cause or worsen these issues. Research has shown that **recurrent infections** such as strep throat, thrush, and ear infections can have long-standing consequences for a child's mood, behavior, and academic success. Likewise, **bacterial imbalances** in the gut (which occur when bad bacteria take over the good bacteria) can cause significant problems with mood and behavior, as well as reduce a child's level of alertness and focus for learning.

**Is your child getting enough physical activity during the day?
Does your child have ample opportunities to move
throughout the day at school?**

Physical movement is essential for physical and mental health. Children especially require ample movement opportunities for optimal development of physical, cognitive, and emotional skills. Long periods of sedentary activity during the day can exacerbate attention, learning, mood, and behavior problems.

**Does your child have untreated sensory processing problems?
Does your child have unintegrated primitive and postural reflexes?**

Reflex integration and sensory processing form the foundation for all other development in children. When reflexes that should be integrated early on in a child's development fail to progress appropriately, there can be numerous learning and behavior issues that result. Sensory processing problems can include such symptoms as over-sensitivity to textures, sounds, and smells; under-sensitivity to pain; poor spatial awareness; low frustration tolerance; becoming easily over-stimulated; having low postural tone; and many more. These issues require appropriate diagnosis and intervention so the child can develop more advanced skills on a strong foundation of integrated reflexes and appropriate sensory processing.

Does your child have vision issues? Does your child have visual processing issues?

There are two aspects of vision that can cause learning and behavior problems. **Visual acuity** is the ability to clearly see things close up and at a distance. This is what the eye doctor tests for during routine eye exams. If a child has poor visual acuity they require corrective lenses (glasses) to correct his/her vision. **Visual processing** is the ability of the brain to make sense of and work with the information coming from the eyes. A person can have 20/20 vision and still have visual processing problems, which means their brain cannot appropriately interpret or use some of the information coming from the eyes. Visual processing problems can present as reading issues, fatigue, inattention, moodiness, hyperactivity, poor behavior, and more.

Does your child have hearing issues? Does your child have auditory processing issues?

There are two aspects of hearing that can cause learning and behavior problems. **Hearing** refers to the ability of the ears to register sound, and is what is tested during routine hearing screening tests. If a child has poor hearing, s/he may require hearing aids or other interventions to allow them to hear sounds. **Auditory processing** is the ability of the brain to make sense of and work with the



information coming from the ears. A person can have perfect hearing and still have auditory processing problems, which means their brain cannot appropriately interpret or use some of the information coming from the ears. Auditory processing problems can present as communication problems, inattention, low frustration tolerance, poor behavior, moodiness, clumsiness, reading problems, and more.

Does your child have at least one area of competence (opportunities to feel successful) in his/her life?

When children are experiencing problems in one of more areas of their lives it is easy for everyone to focus on the negatives. Kids can develop a sense of themselves as “bad,” “stupid,” “incompetent,” etc. It is essential that every child have at least one area of their lives where they can shine! Lack of opportunities to feel competent and successful can exacerbate anxiety, attention, mood, and behavior problems.

Has your child experienced a concussion or head injury (diagnosed or undiagnosed)?

Many children experience a bump to the head at some point in their growing up years. Concussions can occur without losing consciousness, and are often overlooked and undiagnosed. Even head injuries that seem small or insignificant at the time can cause major anxiety, attention, mood, or behavior challenges over the short and long term.

Does your child have an undiagnosed learning disability or learning challenge?

Learning disabilities (problems with learning reading, writing, and/or math despite having an appropriate level of cognitive ability) can show up as attention problems, poor frustration tolerance, resistant behavior, low motivation, and other emotional and behavioral issues. Ruling out learning challenges is critical for proper diagnosis and treatment.

Does your child have physical coordination problems? Does your child have fine motor challenges?

Gross motor (large body movements such as running and jumping) and **fine motor** (small body movements such as writing, stringing beads, and shoe tying) deficits can cause or exacerbate attention, learning, mood, and behavior problems. Children who lack coordination in large and/or small motor movements may demonstrate low frustration tolerance, poor emotional or behavioral regulation, moodiness, resistant behavior, and learning problems at home and in the classroom.

Is your child experiencing too much stress in one or more areas of life?

Excessive stress can cause problems with learning, mood, and/or behavior. When children are exposed to chronically stressful home or school environments, it impacts their development in many negative ways. Likewise, over scheduling during the day can cause chronic stress that reduces their ability to function well.



Has your child experienced any significant emotional trauma that has not been addressed?

Traumas are extremely disturbing events or experiences that significantly impact a person's functioning. Children can be traumatized by experiences with parents, teachers, or other caregivers; by events they witness that don't directly involve them; by the death or loss of an important person in their lives; and more. Unresolved trauma can present as developmental, anxiety, attention, mood, or behavior challenges. These traumas require therapy for healing to occur, and symptoms to resolve.

Are the educators working with your child consistently using appropriate strategies to support his/her learning and behavior at school?

Supportive school (and daycare) environments are necessary for children to thrive. While the child's intrinsic developmental and mental health problems can cause problems in the classroom, the environment around the child serves to either improve or worsen these problems. When staff members are not implementing supportive strategies, the child can appear to have more frequent and significant problems. Children who feel unsupported may give up, act out, or react in other negative ways that make their overall symptoms worse due to the unsupportive environment.

Have you as parents received instruction in appropriate strategies to support your child at home?

Are you consistently implementing strategies to support your child's behavior and learning at home?

Children don't come with instruction manuals, and parents can experience numerous challenges when attempting to deal with negative behaviors, anxiety, or mood problems in their children. The ways parents respond to these issues can either reduce or increase the frequency and intensity of negative behaviors. Parents should be given the opportunity to learn appropriate behavior management strategies and supports to help their child improve anxiety, attention, mood, development, and behavior in the home environment. Once parents have learned these skills, consistent implementation is critical for symptom improvement.

Do the adults in your child's life have developmentally appropriate expectations for your child?

When the expectations of adults are higher than what a child can manage, behavior and motivation problems can increase. Having high expectations is important for children to learn, but those expectations have to be reasonable in comparison to the child's ability level. If children are in situations where they cannot possibly meet the learning or behavior expectations due to their developmental challenges, the intensity and severity of behavior problems generally rises.

Does your child spend an excessive amount of time in front of screens/electronics?



Children who spend a significant amount of their day on “screen time” are at risk for problems with learning, emotional regulation, behavioral regulation, mood problems, and more. **Screen time** includes time spent on the computer, tablets, smart phones, video games, and any other electronic stimulation-including TV! While children may enjoy these activities, they are not benefitting from real-world experiences when they are absorbed in these passive

activities. Some children's brains are easily over simulated by these devices, and may exhibit significant behavior problems as a result.

Has your child been taught and had opportunities to practice age-appropriate coping strategies?

When children are struggling with emotional or behavioral regulation, they need to learn appropriate coping skills to manage the challenges they encounter throughout the day. Often these children have very poor problem solving skills and simply break down in the face of even small obstacles, rather than coming up with a plan to persevere. Teaching children how to recognize the things causing them distress, stay calm, and think through solutions is critical to improve anxiety, mood, and behavior issues.

Does your child have a positive and supportive peer group?

Is your child being bullied or experiencing significant peer problems/stress?

Supportive peer relationships are an important support for children with developmental or mental health concerns. Having the support of others they can count on goes a long way in helping children navigate their difficulties. Conversely, being ostracized or bullied by peers can have a significant negative impact on functioning. Sometimes adults are unaware of inappropriate behavior happening between children, and special attention needs to be paid to ensure that these negative interactions are handled appropriately. All children need opportunities for supportive peer engagement at a developmentally appropriate level.



Does your child have consistent structure at home? Does your child have consistent structure at school?

Children do best when they have a good amount of predictable structure in their lives. When activities such as sleeping and waking, meals, school, play time, etc. happen at consistent times each day, they learn how to anticipate what is coming and transition between activities better. Consistency also allows their bodies to get in a productive routine. Certainly there is plenty of room for flexibility – everything does not need to happen at the same exact time each day! However, when children are experiencing a high amount of chaos or lack of predictability in their daily routines, it can be very unsettling for them. Inconsistency at home and/or school can lead to symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, difficulty transitioning, emotional and behavioral outbursts, and more. Too much uncertainty is definitely not a good thing for children.

Do you have any other concerns, questions, or issues about your child that professionals have not addressed to your satisfaction?

Parents know their child best, and often have nagging concerns or questions that go unanswered by professionals. Keep seeking out professionals who will listen to you and spend time responding to your questions and concerns. You should never make any decision about treatment if you feel unsatisfied with the options and answers you have been provided.



Questions to Ask Your Child's Prescriber Before Starting Medication Treatment

This section covers 15 key questions to ask your child's prescriber before using medications. Having answers to these questions will allow you to be a better observer of your child's response to medications, and will help you participate as a more informed partner on the medical treatment team. This information can also help you select a prescriber who is a good fit for your goals and desires regarding medication for your child.

What are the specific symptoms you are aiming to treat with this medication?

Medications are designed to treat symptoms, not diagnoses, so it is important to understand which specific symptoms are being targeted with each medication.

What resources can we access to learn more about this medication?

Your prescriber's office should provide you with written information, websites, and other resources where you can learn details such as side effects, recommended dosing, contraindications, problems associated with the medication, and more.

What are the common and uncommon side effects associated with this medication?

It is very important for parents to understand the side effects that have occurred with the medications being prescribed. Often **side effects** are described in categories such as “common” or “rare” and “mild” or “serious”. Not only do you need to know what to watch out for if you start the medication, you also should be



fully aware of the potential for problems before initiating treatment. Make sure you carefully read information about the medication in addition to the verbal information provided by the prescriber.

How long does my child need to be on this medication before we know if it is benefitting him/her?

Some medications have the potential for immediate change, while others can take many weeks to build up in the system. Parents need to be clear about the timeline for expected change. A stimulant medication, for example, starts working right away and you can tell very quickly if there are going to be problems or benefits. Medications commonly used to treat depression, on the other hand, can take longer to build up in the system and demonstrate problems or benefits.

How will we know if this medication is working? What should we see in our child as far as improvements?

Be clear from the start about what you can potentially expect from medication treatment. While there is no way to know for sure how each person will respond, it is fair to ask the prescriber for details about what they hope to gain from starting the medication. You should be clear about the differences you can expect in daily life with your child if the medication is helping.

What should we do if we notice negative side effects (physical problems, behavior or mood problems, etc.)?

Make sure the prescriber clearly articulates the plan to follow if negative side effects occur. There will likely be a variety of instructions depending on the severity of the side effect. Parents should be provided with information on who to contact, how to reach them, etc., should side effects develop over the course of treatment.

How do we stop this medication if we decide to discontinue?

While some medications can be stopped quickly, many psychiatric medications must be weaned more slowly. Parents should have information at the start of treatment regarding what to do if they want to stop medication treatment, including understanding that discontinuing medication may take time and require the attention of the prescriber to do so appropriately. Inappropriately stopping medication can cause problems, and parents should receive information about what can happen if they are not compliant with the discontinuation process.

Can we periodically stop the medication to determine if our child still needs it?

How and when would we do this?

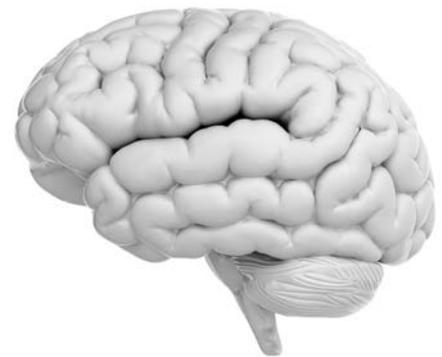
Sometimes parents may wish to temporarily stop medication treatment to see how the child functions without it, or they may wish to stop medicating their child's attention problems during the summer when school is not in session. Parents should ask the prescriber about the details of how and when to do a trial period without medication.

What other treatments and strategies do you recommend we try BEFORE using medication?

Medication should almost never be the first line of treatment for learning, mood or behavior symptoms. **Interventions** such as parenting strategies, counseling, school supports, behavior modification, etc., should be consistently implemented before medication is recommended. Parents should clearly understand what methods and interventions should be attempted before medication treatment is explored or initiated.

What other treatments and strategies do you recommend we try WHILE using medication?

In almost all cases, more than medication is needed to treat developmental and mental health concerns effectively. Parents should ask prescribers what other treatment(s) are beneficial for symptom reduction. Be wary if the prescriber states that medication alone, without any other form of treatment, is the best approach or only intervention needed.



How often will you be seeing our child to monitor this medication and his/her response to it?

What kinds of physical issues will you be monitoring (weight, blood pressure, levels of medication in the blood, etc.)?

A clear schedule for monitoring response to medication and side effects should be discussed at the start of treatment. Some medications require more frequent monitoring of blood pressure, weight, and other physical indicators. Parents should have a clear understanding of what physical issues need to be monitored, how often, and why.

If this medication does not improve symptoms what would you recommend next?

Providers should outline the expected course of treatment and options that are available if the first medication does not improve symptoms.

What is your philosophy/approach with medication?

Do you try one at a time?

Do you tend to have children on multiple medications at once?



Understanding the prescriber's approach to medication treatment is of utmost importance. Some prescribers are more conservative than others when it comes to treating children with medication. It is generally best to choose a prescriber who takes the approach that medication is not a first resort for symptom improvement, and who is willing to slowly and carefully try medication to determine the best

fit for the child. The goal should be to have the child on the fewest medications and the lowest doses possible to attain consistent symptom improvement.

What is your process for determining the proper dose for a child?

It is important to understand that many medications used to treat anxiety, attention, mood, or behavior challenges in children have not been extensively studied in children, and may not even be officially approved for use with children. Prescribers generally use adult dosing as a guideline when determining how much to give children. When initiating medication treatment for children the concept of **“start low and go slow”** is often used. This means that, in general, the lowest dose is used as a starting point and increased slowly over time. Children can have very sensitive systems, and starting with higher doses or increasing too quickly can cause problems. Starting low and going slow also allows for quicker removal of the medication if negative side effects occur. The goal should be to have the child on the lowest dose necessary to improve symptoms.

Would you be supportive of us trying non-prescription options to treat these symptoms while on medication (ex: nutritional supplements, neurofeedback, counseling, acupuncture, diet changes, etc.)?

Many parents desire to use other treatment approaches in addition to medication. If this is the case, choosing a prescriber who is open to using multiple approaches is important. Parents must also have information on any safety issues that are relevant when combining treatments.

I hope that you find this information helpful as you consider how best to support your child with developmental or mental health concerns. Thoroughly investigating the underlying issues that cause symptoms is essential to selecting treatment approaches that will provide the most benefit. Medication can be an appropriate part of the treatment plan for some individuals, and inappropriate or unnecessary for others. Regardless of the decisions you make about medication for your child, this information will help you be a more informed advocate for your child.



If you found this information valuable, you will want to go to my website, www.DrBeurkens.com, where you can access many more articles, videos, and resources to support you and your child. I'd also like to welcome you to join me on social media.

-Dr. Nicole Beurkens

