

Navigating Neurobehavioral Care: Descriptions and Common Terminology

Neurobehavioral disorders are a group of conditions related to behavioral, cognitive or developmental challenges that include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette's syndrome, among others. Many of these conditions may be related to differences in brain function; however, in many cases, the exact underlying causes are complex and not able to be determined precisely.

Our neurology providers use a detailed history and a medical evaluation to arrive at the proper diagnosis and consider the most appropriate treatment options. Treatments may include a combination of pharmacological and behavioral interventions involving a multidisciplinary team of professionals. Below are common terms you may encounter frequently.

Disciplines

Child Neurologist

A child neurologist or pediatric neurologist is a medical doctor who has additional training in treating children with neurological conditions – problems that affect the brain, spinal cord and/or nerves. Many child neurologists further refine their expertise by focusing on specific neurological conditions such as epilepsy, cerebral palsy or headache.

Advanced Practice Providers (APPs)

Advanced practice providers (APPs) are nurse practitioners and physician assistants and are licensed and board-certified medical providers. They are prepared through post-graduate education and clinical training to perform many of the same duties as doctors. APPs can assess, diagnose and prescribe medications in collaboration with their supervising physician.

Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician

Developmental pediatricians are medical doctors who evaluate, counsel and treat children and their families with a wide range of developmental and behavioral difficulties.

Neuropsychologist

A neuropsychologist is a psychologist who specializes in understanding the relationship between the physical brain and behavior. Neuropsychologists usually have a PhD but are not medical doctors. Their main job is diagnostic. They offer tests to determine how well your brain is functioning.

Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who can diagnose and prescribe medication to treat mental health disorders. Child psychiatrists specialize in children and are in very high demand. While some psychiatrists also provide therapy, most see patients on an occasional basis and only

manage the medication portion of a child's treatment plan. It is recommended that a child see a therapist or psychologist for therapy in addition to their visits with a psychiatrist.

Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP)

A PMHNP is an advanced practice registered nurse who is licensed and nationally board-certified to provide psychiatric care for patients with mental illness. Their scope of practice and work setting is similar to a psychiatrist. A PMHNP can assist with crisis management, create treatment plans and prescribe medication when necessary.

Therapist

A therapist is an umbrella term for different types of mental health professionals who have a master's degree in a mental health field like social work, family therapy or mental health counseling. A therapist can help your child learn coping skills, manage anxiety or depression and help families to communicate. Although a therapist can diagnose mental health problems, they can't prescribe medications. Please note that schools may prefer a diagnosis from a psychologist for an individualized education plan (IEP).

Psychologist

A psychologist has a doctoral degree and can provide counseling like a therapist. If a child needs emotional support, a therapist or psychologist might be equally good choices. However, psychologists can conduct diagnostic tests that therapists cannot. This can be very helpful when we need more information about the child's difficulties. Psychologists are not medical doctors, which means that they cannot prescribe medication.

Evaluation Tools

Neuropsychological Testing

Neuropsychological testing involves the comprehensive evaluation of intellectual, attentional, executive, social cognition, language and motor functioning. It can be used to identify areas of strength and weakness, guide treatment and evaluate changes over time. This testing is administered by a Ph.D. specializing in neuropsychology. Our neurology providers refer out for neuropsychological testing, which is not performed in our office.

Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule

Patients may be referred to a testing center to complete an autism diagnostic observation schedule (ADOS). An ADOS is a tool administered by a trained clinician to help assess for autism. The test usually lasts about 45 minutes. During the test, the clinician observes the child's behavior during age-appropriate activities. This test alone cannot diagnose autism, but it can give your neurology provider more information about your child.

Childhood Autism Rating Scale

The childhood autism rating scale (CARS) is a clinical rating scale used by a trained clinician to rate items indicative of autism after direct observation of the child. This scale can determine symptom severity and can be completed by your neurology provider during a clinic visit or at an outside testing facility. This tool cannot make the diagnosis of autism, but it can give your neurology provider more information about your child.

Vanderbilt Assessment Scales

The NICHQ Vanderbilt Assessment Scales are used by health care professionals to help diagnose ADHD in children between the ages of 6 and 12 years.

Therapeutic Treatments

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

CBT consists of psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, relaxation training and exposure therapy. A relatively short-term therapy, patients typically begin to experience improved symptoms after 4-6 therapy sessions. On average, therapy consists of 16-20 sessions with occasional booster sessions to maintain long-term gains and prevent relapse.

Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapists (OTs) help children with social interaction, fine motor skills and classroom performance. They help with activities of daily living such as playing, dressing or feeding. OTs can also help manage sensory processing and regulation required for attention and appropriate behaviors. OTs help introduce, maintain and improve skills so people with autism can be as independent as possible.

Physical Therapy

Physical therapists (PTs) help children with strength, functional mobility and coordination. They help with body and spatial awareness to teach skills needed to participate in peer interactions and functional performance in the home and classroom.

Speech Therapy or Speech-language pathologists

Speech therapists (STs) or speech-language pathologists (SLPs) help children with communication skills, which allows them to express their emotions and explain what they want. They can also help with feeding or teach children how to use an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device when indicated.

Applied Behavior Analysis Therapy

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a therapeutic intervention used for children with autism that can improve social, communication and learning skills through reinforcement strategies. The goal is to increase behaviors that are helpful and decrease behaviors that are harmful or affect learning. It is important for ABA therapists to work together with other therapies to maximize your child's potential.

School-Based Interventions

Individualized Education Plan

Individualized education plans (IEPs) were developed to ensure that a child who has a disability receives specialized instructions and related services so he or she may be educated effectively. For a child to receive special education services, they need an IEP. Your child's IEP is created through a team effort at an ARD meeting and reviewed at least once a year.

Admission, Review and Dismissal

An admission, review and dismissal (ARD) is a meeting typically held at the school for initial special education placement or for an update on a student's special education program. Teachers and other support staff bring their expertise about education, and you bring your expertise about your child. Together you write the individualized education plan (IEP), which must be reviewed at least once a year. An ARD meeting may be held at other times as needed.

Behavior Intervention Plan

A behavior intervention plan (BIP) is a written plan to help a student who is struggling with behavior. It is designed to provide teachers and other school staff with a clear set of behavioral goals, along with strategies to help the child achieve those goals. The plan is based on the results of a functional behavioral assessment.

504 Plan

A 504 plan removes barriers to learning for students with disabilities. Students may receive accommodations that will help them achieve academic success. This is not the same as a special education plan, although some 504 plans include specialized instructions.