

What to Tell Your Child About Their Assessment

A guide for parents and carers · Child Psychiatry Consultancy Ltd

This guide offers age-appropriate suggestions for how to talk to your child about their upcoming assessment. Every child is different — use these as a starting point and adapt to suit your child's personality, maturity, and needs.

Should I tell my child?

Yes — almost always. Surprising a child with an assessment, especially on the day, can cause anxiety and distrust, and may affect how they present during the appointment. Most children cope much better when they have been told in advance, given simple and honest information, and had a chance to ask questions.

You do not need to tell your child every detail. The goal is to prepare them, not overwhelm them.

General principles

- Be calm and matter-of-fact — if you seem anxious or worried, your child will pick this up
- Be honest — children often sense when they are not being told the full story
- Keep it simple — use language appropriate to their age and developmental level
- Focus on the positive — this is about getting help and understanding, not about something being wrong
- Give them time to ask questions — and answer honestly
- Let them know their feelings are valid — it is fine to feel nervous
- Remind them there are no right or wrong answers

Ages 4-6: very young children

Very young children need only the simplest explanation, focused on what will actually happen.

Suggested words

'We're going to have a video call on the computer with a special doctor. She talks to children and asks questions about the things they like and find tricky. You might do some activities or play some games. It won't hurt at all and Mummy/Daddy will be there.'

- Do not tell them more than a day or two in advance — young children can become anxious if they wait too long

- Keep your tone light and reassuring
- Focus on the fact that you will be with them

Ages 7-10: primary school age

Children this age can understand a little more and may have questions.

Suggested words

'We're going to talk to a doctor who is an expert in how children's brains work. She talks to lots of children about things they find easy and things they find harder. She wants to understand how you think and learn, so we can figure out the best ways to help you. There are no right or wrong answers — she just wants to get to know you.'

- If they ask 'why are we doing this?', be honest: 'We want to understand why some things feel harder for you, so we can get you the right help'
- If they seem worried about being 'different', reassure them: 'Lots of children see doctors like this. It's just about understanding how your brain works'
- Avoid telling them they are being assessed for a specific condition unless they ask directly — in which case be honest

Ages 11-14: younger teenagers

Older children and younger teenagers usually want — and deserve — more honest information.

Suggested words

'We're going to see a specialist doctor who works with children and teenagers to understand how they think, learn, and feel. She's going to ask us both questions about your experiences at home and school, and she might spend some time talking to you as well. The aim is to understand what's been going on for you and to figure out if there are ways we can help. You don't have to have all the answers — just be yourself.'

- Be open about what the assessment is for if they ask — trying to hide it can damage trust
- Acknowledge any concerns they have and take them seriously
- Involve them — ask what they would want the doctor to know about their experience
- Let them know that getting support is a sign of strength, not weakness

Ages 15-18: older teenagers

Older teenagers should be involved as partners in the assessment process. They have a right to information about their own health and care.

Suggested words

'I've arranged for us to see a specialist who assesses young people for conditions like ADHD and autism. I think it would help us understand some of the things you've been finding difficult. The assessment involves some questionnaires, a conversation with the psychiatrist, and for an autism assessment, some activities. You'll have a chance to share your own experience and perspective — in fact, that's a really important part of it. We'll discuss everything together.'

- Be honest about why you sought an assessment
- Acknowledge their feelings, including if they are reluctant — don't force the conversation
- If they are anxious about what a diagnosis might mean, talk about it openly
- Emphasise that a diagnosis is a tool for understanding and support — not a label that limits them

If your child asks 'what's wrong with me?'

Nothing is wrong with you. Your brain works differently from some other people's brains — and that means some things are harder, but it also means you have qualities that other people don't. We're seeing this doctor to understand your brain better so we can help you more.

If your child is anxious about the assessment

- Remind them you will be there with them
- Let them know they can stop or take a break at any time
- Practise using Zoom together beforehand so the technology feels familiar
- For autistic children, consider making a social story about the assessment process
- Allow extra time on the day so there is no rush
- Plan something enjoyable for after the appointment