



CHILD MENTAL HEALTH FOR PRIMARY CARE

Talking with Parents About Developmental Concerns in the Early Years

Issue

Developmental concerns in young children can elicit a variety of challenges for pediatric providers. Parents can feel a range of emotions around these potential concerns, from guilt to denial to anxiety and these emotional responses can impact the trajectory of treatment seeking. Parents may not be aware of the typical developmental milestones of where their child should be at a particular age, for example, vocabulary or temperament versus gross motor skills. However, it is these early years in ages 0 to 5, that early identification and intervention of developmental delays are critical to foster positive outcomes.

Strategies

- Everyone benefits, especially the child, when parents and providers can be on the same page. Reflective listening is a simple way to ensure that you understand the parents/caregivers' point of view.
- When parents are particularly anxious, remember to listen first to the parent/caregiver and reflect back on their concerns. Choose a few sentence starters to familiarize yourself with and then simply repeat back what you are hearing from the caregiver. See below for examples:
 - Caregiver: "I am so worried about my son's walking, he just doesn't seem to get it. He seems content to just sit there and play with whatever is around him. He doesn't seem motivated or ready to engage."
 - Provider: "I hear you saying you are so very concerned about your son's lack of motivation to walk" OR
 - "It sounds to me like you would like to explore what is keeping your son from wanting to walk."
- While talking with a parent about a concern with their child's development can be difficult, because of the impact of early intervention it is best not to take a wait-and-see approach. Referring a parent to an early intervention specialist can only serve as a benefit to that parent and child.
- Make sure to schedule sufficient time for the appointment when possible so that neither you nor the caregiver feels rushed.

Strategies Continued

- Once the caregiver has had an opportunity to share their observations, utilizing objective developmental checklists or sheets to facilitate a conversation about your concerns can help the parent have a tangible item to take with them and think about.
- If the parent is not ready to take action immediately, validate that this may be a lot of information to take in, and then schedule a follow-up appointment within a week or two. During this follow-up visit you can re-visit a potential treatment plan or appropriate referrals for a full evaluation.
- When talking with a parent, try and avoid acronyms or words that might not be familiar.
- Let the caregiver know how much you care about their child and that you will be a fully-engaged part of the treatment team should the need to pursue intervention arise.

Resources and References

[North Carolina Infant-Toddler Program \(NC ITP\)](#)

[TEACCH Autism Program](#)

[Zero to Three Homepage](#)

[Baby Navigator](#)

[CDC Resource Homepage for Birth through 5 Years](#)

[Developmental Milestone Checklists for Parents](#)

[CDC Free Act Early Handout with Resources - English](#)

[CDC Free Act Early Handout with Resources - Spanish](#)



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