

## On Our Minds

### At Risk and Special Needs Interest Forum

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**At Risk and Special Needs Interest Forum** cofacilitator Cindy Croft, director of the Center for Inclusive Child Care at Concordia University—Saint Paul and College of Education faculty member, wrote this column. [croft@csp.edu](mailto:croft@csp.edu). The column is available in an online archive at [www.naeyc.org/yc/columns](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/columns).

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# Talking to Families of Infants and Toddlers about Developmental Delays

**INFANTS AND TODDLERS** with developmental delays can make significant gains through early intervention when they receive services while they are very young (Nelson 2009). Caregivers and teachers are in a unique position to observe infants and toddlers in these early stages of development. They know the developmental milestones and have the opportunity to take notes on the development of all the children in their programs. Their observations, notes, and assessments are important tools for identifying possible development concerns that might arise in the course of a young child's early life. Sharing these concerns with families is a first step in the referral process toward early intervention.

## Important and sometimes difficult conversations

For an infant/toddler caregiver or teacher concerned about a child's development, it is very important to prepare supporting information and to share concerns with families in a thoughtful way. Some families may raise their own concerns with you, but others may not for a number of reasons. In some cases, families may have observed delays but are not emotionally ready to address them. Other families may lack information about typical development (see "How to Raise Concerns with Families").

We all want the best possible outcomes for the children in our care. Early intervention is one important way to help infants and toddlers with delays reach their full potential. Even though having an initial conversation with families about concerns may be difficult, initiating the conversation

means that you care about this family and their child's development and learning.

Conversations can be difficult for a number of reasons. Some infant/toddler teachers say they fear that the family may take their child to another program if they bring up developmental concerns. This is one reaction families may have when they first learn about their child possibly having delays. If such a reaction occurs, keep

## How to Raise Concerns with Families

### Before the meeting

- Choose a time, other than drop-off or pickup, when everyone can be relaxed and have time to talk.
- Meet in a private, comfortable setting.
- Prepare documentation that is objective and nonjudgmental.
- Have development information available for families. For a downloadable brochure for families, visit [www.aap.org/family/2004PAFBrochure.pdf](http://www.aap.org/family/2004PAFBrochure.pdf). Refer families to the section "Learn the Signs/Act Early" at [www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html).
- Make a copy of all materials so families can look at them during the meeting and later at home. Include your notes about their child, information about typical development, and a list of organizations and names of contact persons, including phone numbers, to call for early intervention evaluations.

in mind that it is not personal but all a part of the family's journey toward learning about their child's unique development.

### **Ongoing relationships**

The relationship between teacher-caregiver and family is key from the child's first day in the program. When there is mutual trust, good communication, and respect, families feel comfortable talking about their concerns and are open to hearing those of their child's teacher. With good communication in place, families feel strengthened by the support, knowledge, and continuing updates the teacher shares about their child's development and progress and will listen eagerly when concerns are expressed.

### **During the meeting**

- Arrange for someone to translate, if a family speaks a language other than English.
- Be respectful at all times.
- Take into account cultural differences.
- Let the family know that your program has processes and policies in place to honor confidentiality and privacy.
- Make it a conversation.
- Give families a chance to talk and let them ask questions. (One family of a child with a special need said, "Be human! Think how you would feel.")
- Offer to call the early intervention services with families, if they want.

### **After the meeting**

- Support families whether they go forward with early intervention or not.
- Continue to encourage families and their child's development in a non-judgmental manner.

### **Carefully recorded observations**

When talking with a family about a developmental concern, it is important to provide observation details, as documented and recorded by teacher-caregivers. Sharing this information and discussing and comparing it with typical development benchmarks helps the family reflect on behaviors they too may have observed. A teacher must quantify the comparison rather than just tell a family, "I've noticed your child's speech seems to be slower than that of his peers."

Teachers who regularly observe, take notes on, and record the behaviors of infants and toddlers in their care find that these data give them the needed documentation should they develop concerns about a child in the program (see "Tips on Observing and Recording Children's Development"). For example, if a toddler in your care is not communicating verbally, you can refer back to earlier, specific notes about the child's attempts to communicate. You may have noted the child's reverting to babbling or his inability to use words he used in the past. With this information, you can move immediately to setting up a meeting with the family to share your concerns.

**Remember to follow your program's procedures for talking to a family about their child's development. Some programs require teachers to meet with the administrator beforehand. This also gives you the opportunity to collect your thoughts about how to best approach your discussion with the parents.**

When you have concerns about a child's development but have not recorded observations all along, valuable time is lost in seeking potentially needed intervention. Teachers can use a variety of methods for observing and gathering informa-

### **Tips on Observing and Recording Children's Development**

- Choose a format that works for you.
- Observe each child in a variety of activities.
- Observe each child over an extended period of time.
- Record the time of day, day of the week, and activity the child is engaged in during observation.
- Make some objective notes about any challenges you believe the child is having.
- Be specific about what you have been observing, and write it down.

tion about each child (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova 2004). Some teachers keep file folders for each child that include a development checklist with specific notes about each milestone (Learning Zone Xpress 2001). Others jot down observations on Post-it notes and place them on a clipboard for each child and later write up the notes in a more permanent form.

It may work best to observe one or two children per day, depending on how many are enrolled, so at least a biweekly or monthly picture of each child's development emerges.

For instance, as children play in the block area, a teacher can observe and record whether one child is able to stack a particular number of blocks. She might also record notes about the social interactions and communication between the two children. It is important to observe children across all developmental domains, including fine and gross motor, language, cognitive, social, and emotional (Copple & Bredekamp 2009) and also to observe each child frequently enough so that development can be seen in progression.

### **Teachers can use a variety of methods for observing and gathering information about each child.**

## What is typical development?

Babies and toddlers develop at their own pace, but there are developmental milestones that give us a general idea of when children usually smile, roll over, sit unsupported, say their first word, and take their first step. What might indicate a developmental delay?

For information about typical development for infants and toddlers and behaviors that might indicate a delay, refer to the developmental resources in the box below.

## Referring families to local resources

Before meeting with a family to discuss a concern about a child's development, be ready with a list of local resources, Web sites, and contact

information. Gather needed contact information and phone numbers about early intervention services in your area. Some sources for information include the following:

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- Child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&R) for identifying local early intervention services; find the nearest referral agency at [www.naccrra.org](http://www.naccrra.org).
- State special education offices; contact numbers available from the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC) at [www.nectac.org](http://www.nectac.org)
- Local school district offices or Web sites
- Local community offices on special education

## Conclusion

If you raise concerns and families do not follow through and contact the resources provided, the teacher-parent relationship can be difficult. Whether a family decides to pursue intervention services or not, you can support each

family by continuing to offer developmentally appropriate activities and an appropriate learning environment for each child and to give families updates on their child's development,

**NAEYC's At Risk and Special Needs Interest Forum** promotes communication and networking to provide a positive approach for working with families to support the development of young children who are at risk or who have special needs.

For more information, contact cofacilitators Mary N. Wonderlick at [wonderlick.ecsepro@sbcglobal.net](mailto:wonderlick.ecsepro@sbcglobal.net) and Cindy Croft at [croft@csp.edu](mailto:croft@csp.edu).

with encouragement, when appropriate, to begin intervention. You may need to adapt activities to meet individual learning needs. For example, to communicate with a toddler who has difficulty with receptive language, you may need to use pictures or cues along with your own words.

As a teacher you are not a therapist or early intervention specialist, but you are an early childhood educator who uses developmentally appropriate practices and supports learning and social and emotional growth for all infants and toddlers in your care. Continue to build relationships with families with the hope of helping families seek screening or assessment services if needed in the future.

## Developmental Resources Online for Families and Teacher-Caregivers

**BabyCenter**—[www.babycenter.com/baby-milestones](http://www.babycenter.com/baby-milestones)

**Center for Inclusive Child Care**—[www.inclusivechildcare.org](http://www.inclusivechildcare.org)

**Child Development, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**—[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child)

**Child & Family WebGuide, Tufts University**—[www.cfw.tufts.edu](http://www.cfw.tufts.edu)

**Developmental and Social-Emotional Screening of Young Children in Minnesota**—[www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mch/devscrn](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mch/devscrn)

**Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Program (CDC)**—[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/ehdi/FAQ/questionscreening.htm#screened](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/ehdi/FAQ/questionscreening.htm#screened)

**First Signs**—[www.firstsigns.org](http://www.firstsigns.org)

**Kid's Health for Parents**—[www.kidshealth.org/parent/growth/index.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/growth/index.html)

**Learn the Signs. Act Early (CDC)**—<http://cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>

## References

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