

EARLY SCREENING FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY AND DISABILITY

BY BONNIE IVERS, M.A., PSY.D.

All babies are individuals, learning and growing at their own rate. Some will reach certain developmental milestones before others. Sometimes, pediatricians attempting to allay an anxious parent's concerns will tell parents not to worry too much about the pace of a child's development.

While that makes sense in many cases, sometimes it can result in a child with a developmental delay, needlessly falling further behind. So, how can a parent know how early to seek a developmental screening?

EARLIER IS BETTER THAN LATER

Among the reasons early intervention is so effective in helping a child narrow and often close developmental gaps is that a child's brain is most adaptable in the first three years of life. That's why early intervention programs in the U.S. are generally offered to those birth to age three. Because so much development takes place in this brief period of time, and various developmental categories exert influence on one another, most experts agree that when a parent isn't sure if their child is on track, it's almost never too early to seek a developmental screening.

CONDITIONS THAT PUT A CHILD AT RISK FOR DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY

Any child can experience developmental delays, which are thought to be the result of a complex mix of factors. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports an estimated one in six, or about 17 percent of children aged 3 through 17, has one or more developmental disabilities. Some conditions that are known to increase a child's risk, include fetal alcohol syndrome, as well as genetic conditions such as: Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, and Prader-Willi syndrome, among others.

In addition, it's been established that numerous other factors in combination, can put a child at greater

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risk. Your pediatrician will likely be on the look-out for these, and recommend early intervention services right away. Just a few examples include: premature birth of less than 32 weeks gestation and/or low birth weight of less than 1,500 grams (3.3 pounds); assisted ventilation for 48 hours or longer during the first 28 days of life; neonatal seizures or non-fever-related seizures during the first three years of life; insufficient oxygen before, during or directly after birth with a five-minute Apgar score of 0-5; and one or both parents with a developmental disability.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT A DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING

A well-structured developmental screening will involve expert professionals who assess the child's functioning in key developmental areas. This will include cognitive development, involving memory and imitative behavior, as well as physical development, which refers to gross motor and fine motor skills, along with vision and hearing. It will also cover communication, including both receptive language (understanding others) and expressive language (age-appropriate talking and other expression), social/emotional development which covers things like infant-caregiver attachment, and adaptive skills such as feeding.

At the conclusion of the screening, the parent is provided with a "score" indicating how their child is doing in each category. In California, the child will be eligible for early intervention services if the screening uncovers a delay of 25 percent or more in any of these categories.

STEPS TO TAKE AFTER SCREENING

If your child's developmental screening was performed at a community screening event, such as those that Regional Center of Orange County hosts regularly, it's likely the organizer will be prepared to provide referrals to appropriate local resources to get help. In California, families access early intervention services (through the Early Start program) through local regional centers like RCOC. However, these services and supports are funded by the federal government and are available in every U.S. state and territory, and are provided free or at reduced cost.

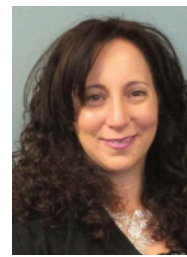
Here is a link to the Centers for Disease Control website page, where you can locate the early intervention contact in your state or territory: www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/parents/states.html#textlinks.

If you are unable to connect with an early intervention contact, another great place to start would be a local Family Resource Center (FRC). Throughout the

United States and in many other countries, FRCs are typically funded by state or national governments, and help to connect families to local social services, public benefits and other support services they may be eligible to receive.

Remember, if it's determined your child has any delay, it's important to get help, as soon as possible. Early intervention is known to be phenomenally successful in helping children narrow and sometimes even close the developmental gap, which can have a huge and positive impact on the child's ability to learn and succeed in school and in life. •

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Orange County residents with developmental disabilities and their families. The Regional Center is the first stop for those seeking to obtain local services and supports to help them live safely and with dignity in the community. Developmental disabilities include intellectual disabilities, autism, epilepsy and cerebral palsy.

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