

Making Referrals

What to Do With Your Concerns about a Child's Development or Behavior



Child care providers and other early childhood professionals are in an ideal position to observe young children's growth and progress. A provider might be the first person, besides the parents, who suspects a child is not developing as expected for his or her age. Providers need to pay attention to their concerns because children who have developmental delays or significant behavioral challenges benefit from the earliest possible intervention.

It is very important that child care providers become familiar with programs in their communities that provide specialized services for families (the back of this tip sheet has information on finding these programs). Staff from these agencies can help you find support and provide information about resources that are available to all children and families, often free of charge. For example, every state is required by federal law to have a "child find" program to identify children's needs as early as possible. A simple screening test identifies children who need further evaluation and can often be scheduled at the child care site. Participate if you can or provide information and encourage parents to take part in community screening programs for vision, hearing, and speech. So, what do you do when you have concerns about a child's development? The process for making a referral is described below. Be sure to document each step in writing so that you can refer back to your notes at a later date, if necessary.

#1. MAKE SURE EXPECTATIONS ARE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE. A particular child's development may seem problematic simply because of a provider's limited past experience with young children or inappropriate expectations for children's development. Expectations for young children tend to fall into two categories: 1) developmental milestones such as walking and talking, and 2) social skills, such as paying attention or sitting still, which may vary depending upon the child's cultural background and developmental stage.

#2. OBSERVE AND RECORD. Recording the child's behavior for a week or two can help you decide whether what you think is happening is definitely happening. Careful observation can assure that your current concerns are accurate and forms the foundation for discussions with staff members and parents. With parent permission, you may also ask colleagues (or the child's parents) to observe the child in your program or group. Observations are most useful when you record specifically what the child says or does, not your interpretation of what the child says or does.

#3. EXPRESS YOUR CONCERNS. A critical step in referring a child for evaluation is to express your concerns to the parents and get their consent. Parents are partners in caring for their child, and it is important to work together. This can be simply done by saying, "This is what I'm seeing here. Is it something you see at home?" or "Have you noticed . . . ?" Often parents have had similar concerns or have noticed or observed similar behavior. Sometimes parents react defensively or become angry; these are, after all, sensitive issues. Be careful to use descriptions of the child's behavior, and avoid references to any perceived disability. For instance, it might be helpful to say: "Basil looks away when I ask him a question and does not answer me. What does he do when you ask him a question?" rather than: "I think Basil has a hearing loss (or is deaf)."

#4. DEVELOP A PLAN OF ACTION. Whether or not parents have similar concerns, you may want to meet together to discuss options and develop a plan of action. This step may result in outcomes that are hard for a child care provider to accept because, as an advocate for young children, you want immediate action when you think there is a need. It is important that parents be part of this process though, so it may involve waiting a period of time for family members to accept the issue at hand and be ready to take steps to seek assistance from outside professionals, if necessary.

Making It Work: A Plan of Action

As you develop a plan of action with the parent(s), remember that there are many options from which they may choose:

- ***Use what you learn from each other.** Parents may have suggestions for working with their child that you have not tried. They may say, "Oh, we just persist when Basil looks away, and he usually answers." In addition, you may have ideas about things they could do to prepare the child to participate more readily in your activities such as "these are the songs (or finger plays) we often sing at group time; could you help Basil learn them?"
- ***Do nothing.** This option may be hard when you still have concerns even after talking with parents, but if they are extremely resistant you will need to drop it for a while and continue to observe the situation. Let parents know that you want to talk again if things do not change and that you are available, if they wish to talk with you.
- ***Wait and see.** When you choose this option, the child care provider and the parent(s) both agree to watch for the targeted behaviors in preparation for getting together and comparing notes. After an agreed-upon period of time, you can talk again about what you each observed and make another plan of action, if necessary.
- ***Assessment by a qualified professional.** You can help parents locate the appropriate agency and provide support to the family as they go through an evaluation process: providing your observations of the child, helping fill out paperwork, and offering your program as a natural environment for assessment.
- ***Coordinate services.** If the assessment does indeed reflect the child's need for specialized services, you can ask for parent permission to team up with the other professionals to plan for appropriate child care services.

Obviously, the process does not always go smoothly nor does the problem always have a simple solution. Whatever the outcome, you will have done your best to provide the resources and support young children need to develop and grow at the best pace for them. And your respect and collaboration will empower parents as they make decisions that affect their family and child.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *What resources are available in Montana to support me when I have concerns about a child's development or behavior?*

ANSWER: Assuming you have parent permission to pursue assistance, your local child care resource and referral (CCR&R) program or early intervention services agency should be able to steer you in the right direction, depending on the age of the child. The following state-wide resources can provide further information and guidance in making referrals:

Montana Early Intervention Services Providers
Phone: 1-877-296-1197 (toll free)
Web: www.dphhs.state.mt.us/dsd/index.htm

Montana Preschool Special Education
Phone: (406) 444-5661
Web: www.opi.state.mt.us

Montana Inclusion Services Coordinator
Phone: 1-800-235-4122 or (406) 243-6300
Email: ccplus@umontana.edu
Web: www.ccplus.org

Parents Let's Unite for Kids (PLUK)
Phone: 1-800-222-7585
Email: plukinfo@pluk.org
Web: www.pluk.org

Montana CCR&R Network
Phone: (406) 549-1028
Web: www.montanachildcare.com

