

## How to Identify and Refer Children Who May Have Special Needs

*“Something’s not quite right, but I’m not sure what it is. What should I do?”*

Probably every child care provider or teacher of young children has said these words. Other times, the concern is more obvious to the provider, for example, when a child’s speech is hard to understand.

According to the U.S. Maternal Child and Health Bureau, 16% of children have disabilities and only half are identified before entrance into elementary school. Research shows that the children with disabilities who receive early intervention services make greater gains than those who do not receive intervention services. In fact, some children may not even need later special education if they receive special services when they are less than



five years old. This is why it is important that child care providers know how to support and advise parents about their child’s development and where to refer children for assessment and special services when there are concerns.

Here are some simple steps that child care providers can take to ensure that a young child with disabilities is identified early and receives the intervention service(s) for which he/she is eligible.

- 1) **Build a positive relationship with the child’s family.** Positive relationships are the foundation of successful collaboration. Children benefit most when families, child care providers, and early intervention/special education personnel work in collaboration.
- 2) **Observe the child at different times throughout the day** while they are involved in different types of activities. Jot down a list of what the child is able to do well, skills the child is learning, and what the child is not able to do. When possible, collect samples of the child’s drawings and other work or take photographs of his/her work. If you do not routinely screen children using a developmental checklist, you may want to compare your observations with such a list. A simple developmental checklist can be found at <http://209.183.228.233/> on “thearc.org” Website.
- 3) **Share your observations with the child’s family** and ask them if their child does the same or different things at home. Ask if they have concerns about their child’s development. Discuss your concerns in a supportive manner. Avoid making statements such as, “There is something wrong with your child.” Instead, simply describe your observations in an objective manner.

- 4) Let the child's family know that they can request to have their child's development assessed for free and that their child may qualify for special services and support. To have a child assessed contact:
  - a) **Early Start Program at Tri-Counties Regional Center** at 1-800-266-9071 in Santa Maria or 1-800-322-6994 in Santa Barbara if the child is birth to 3 years old.
  - b) **Santa Barbara County Education Office, Special Education Support Services** at 805-922-0334 in North County or 805-964-4711 in South County if the child is 3 to 5 years old.
  - c) **The child's teacher** if the child is school age. Let the teacher know that they are concerned with their child's academic progress and would like to have their child referred for assessment. Families may also request an assessment for their child in writing through the special education office in their **school district**.

If you would like more information on how to work together with families of children with disabilities and other special needs, contact the Family First Program at the Alpha Resource Center in the north county at 805-347-2775 and in the south county at 805-683-2145.