



Phone Link Ups

Early Identification of Children with Additional Needs

The significance of the early years for a child's learning and development is well documented. Also well documented is the importance of early identification and early intervention for children with diagnosed disabilities and/or developmental delays and those who are at risk of disability or delay.

In some situations determining that a child has a disability is straight forward, such as identifying that a child has Downs Syndrome. In many cases though, the process of identification is not so straightforward. For this reason, it is important that children's service professionals working with young children and their families have a clear understanding of the meaning of identification and the many factors that need to be taken into consideration when making a decision as to whether concerns are valid or reasonable (Johnston, C and Dixon, R, 2005).

An important first step is to remember that our role in early identification is not to make a diagnosis or even to determine the cause or severity of a disability or delay. Rather, it is to determine that there are reasonable grounds to be concerned about a child's development. It is vital therefore that when working with young children and their families we have the following:

- A sound knowledge of typical child development;
- An acknowledgement that all children develop differently;
- An acknowledgement that there are various ways of knowing and understanding children other than through a developmental lens.
- Skills in knowing how to observe children and record their observations;
- An ability to interpret and make sense of the information gained;
- A commitment to building meaningful relationships and positive partnerships with families; and
- Skills in sharing information and raising concerns with families.

In considering "typical" child development, we need to be mindful that "each child's developmental path has to be understood (and valued) on its own terms" (Taffe, 2005, p66). While development generally follows a reasonable predictable sequence, all children learn and develop in different ways and at their own pace (Croll and Shields, 2005). There is a wide range of what is considered "typical" development and a number of factors that influence a child's learning and development. This includes the child's temperament and personality, their learning style and capacity, their health and well-being, and their life experiences (Croll and Shields, 2005). In considering a child's life experiences, their cultural background also needs special consideration. Not all cultures place the same emphasis on the attainment of particular developmental skills or "milestones" as other cultures, for example dominant Western cultures value the development of independence amongst young children, typically from the age of three, where some Eastern cultures value and develop interdependence skills between the child and adult and see independence as a trait to be challenged. As children's service professionals, we need to be aware of our own bias (as a result of our own culture and life experiences) in making decisions about what is a concern and what is not.

It is our role then to determine when a child's development is a result of their individual differences and any current concern is something that they will catch up without intervention, or because there is a concern that warrants additional and specific resources and support (Croll and Shields, 2005).

Recording our observations of children is vital in order to make an informed decision about whether the child's development is a concern and warrants raising with their family. It is not helpful to raise a concern with the child's family if we are acting on a hunch or feeling that something is not quite right. While our instincts may be right it needs to be validated by carefully recorded observations of the child before taking any further action.

Observations need to be more than a "one-off". They should be taken over a substantial period of time, at different times of the day, seeing the child in a range of contexts, interacting with peers, adults, materials and the environment. Observations should aim to record as much information as possible, including what the child is doing, and how they are doing it, in what situations and conditions, motivational factors, and so on (Croll and Shields, 2005). It is important to have an appreciation of the various ways observations can be taken, whilst appreciating the many critiques of some forms of observations, including developmental checklists, given their limited reference to diversity and cultural specificity.

In making observations it is also important to maintain a holistic view of the child rather than reducing them to a collection of developmental skills. Further, we need to observe all areas of the child's development rather than focusing on one or two. This means paying attention to the child's strengths, capacities and interests as well as looking at potential areas of need. This is also valuable information that should be shared and celebrated with families, and used to inform curriculum planning.

In attempting to make sense of what we have recorded, it can be helpful to consider other perspectives by sharing our observations with others. This includes discussions with our colleagues as well as the child's parents, who are the experts on their child and have a wealth of information to offer. When multiple perspectives are considered and examined, a more complete picture of the child is possible. "Where families are partners in observing their child's process, identification is more likely to result from shared awareness and issues around raising concerns mitigated" (Campbell and Johnston, 2005, p127).

While there may be times when a family approaches us relating to their own concerns about their child's development, it is also likely there will be times when we have concerns before the family does. Although raising concerns may seem difficult, in considering whether to raise the issue now or later, it is important to keep the child visible in all our decisions. Taking this perspective can help us to make a decision to raise our concerns now rather than later.

At this stage too, we need to be mindful that in raising concerns with families we are doing so in order to exchange information and make sense of what we have found. This means not going in as the expert, because in doing so we may disregard or ignore the family's expertise. Further, and as mentioned previously, it means not making a diagnosis or even attempting to identify the cause of the problem. It does mean using our observations as a starting point for working with the family to more accurately determine the child's strengths and capacities, as well as areas of concern, and to support the family to make informed decisions and choices about their child.

Before raising concerns (or any other "difficult" issues) with families, we should have already invested considerable time in building meaningful and collaborative relationships with them, relationships based on mutual respect, complementary expertise and open communication. This means that we have engaged families in numerous conversations previously (about a range of issues) and are able to use this shared history as the foundation upon which to raise our current concern.

When a meeting is proposed to discuss a concern, it is important that the family be given as much information as possible so that they can take an active role in the planning of the meeting and can come prepared to engage in a meaningful discussion. Other family needs that should be considered at this time include "...possible needs for support (for example, through involving another family member),

privacy, time, backup information, and where appropriate, an interpreter" (Treloar, 2005, p140). It is also recommended that the person involved in the meeting is the most suitable for the task and as experienced as possible.

When raising concerns with families, in some ways we are asking them to reconsider their image of their child and potentially, their dreams and vision for the future. Some families may be relieved as they had the same concerns themselves but were afraid to raise them. Others may deny our concerns and refuse to accept the information given. Others may still take what is said as a personal criticism. Whatever their response, even when they decide not to act at this time, it is important to acknowledge their right to make decision for their child and to keep the lines of communication open.

As children's service professionals working with children we have a shared responsibility with families to ensure we work together to maximise opportunities for children to make the most of their potential. This requires an understanding of "typical" developmental progression and developmental difference, as well as knowledge of when further intervention may be required. It also requires a commitment to building powerful and positive partnerships with families, and where necessary, skills in raising our concerns. This discussion paper is intended as a starting point to discussing and exploring what can be a sensitive and sometimes difficult issue.

Critical Questions

- What are my own biases and how might they influence the way in which I see children and interpret their development/behaviours?
- Have I considered the child's context and other relevant factors in deciding whether or not my concerns are valid?
- How do I ensure the methods I use to gain information about a child are appropriate, relevant and uphold the child's rights?
- How do I consider multiple perspectives in order to create a complete picture of a child?
- How have I invested time in developing positive partnerships with families?
- How do I keep the child visible in making decisions about raising concerns with families now or later?
- How do I combine the family's anecdotal knowledge of their child with my more 'systematic' knowledge, so that neither is privileged or discredited?
- How do I ensure that I am adequately prepared before raising my concerns about a child?
- Have I taken time to critically reflect on my own practice in relation to this issue?
- How will I continue to develop my knowledge, skills and confidence in relation to this issue?

Reference and Further Reading

Does This Child Need Help? Identification and Early Childhood Intervention (Second Edition); Salter, G, Johnston, C and Lunn, H (Eds) 2005; Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter); Sydney

Prepared by Lorraine Madden, Manager Training Research and Innovation, Semann & Slattery for Contact Inc on behalf of Children's Services Central - June 2007



Program for Isolated Children, Families and Communities