

Commissioner's Corner

Developmental Screening of Infants and Toddlers

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D Pediatricians need to juggle many tasks at each well baby visit, such as trying to elicit information from the parent about the child's overall development, being attentive to parental concerns, and making observations of the child and of the parent-child interactions.

Using these visits to impart anticipatory guidelines to the parents, and working with parents to identify how well the child is progressing in normal growth and development, sets the tone in establishing ongoing dialogue with the parent to identify specific concerns. This is especially the case with new parents who will look to the pediatrician to be the ultimate expert in their child's overall well-being, especially during the child's first five years of life. Using routine developmental screening methods, these first five years of life are the most opportune time for early identification of children with developmental delays.

Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, legislation was passed in New York State in 1993 that mandated primary referral sources to refer children suspected of having developmental delays. This legislation created what is known as the Early Intervention Program, which serves children from birth to age two. In Westchester County, the Early Intervention Program operates under the auspices of the Westchester County Department of Health's Children with Special Needs division.

Most pediatricians are already identifying children with developmental delays at an early age and referring these children to the Early Intervention Program. The following is offered as a reminder of the referral guidelines.

As defined by New York State, a developmental delay means that a child has not attained developmental milestones expected for the child's age, after adjustment for prematurity, in one or more of the following areas of development: cognitive, physical (including vision and hearing), communication, social-emotional, or adaptive development.

To be eligible for the New York State Early Intervention Program, a developmental delay must be a delay that has been measured by qualified personnel using informed clinical opinion, appropriate diagnostic procedures, and/or instruments, and documented as:

- a 12 month delay in one functional area; or

- a 33 percent delay in one functional area; or
- a 25 percent delay in each of two areas; or
- if appropriate, standardized instruments are individually administered in the evaluation, a score of at least 2.0 standard deviations below the mean in one functional area or a score of at least 1.5 standard deviations below the mean in each of two functional areas.

Feeding and sleeping issues are not primarily good reasons for referral to Early Intervention unless there is an underlying oral motor or neurological concern after consultation with other qualified personnel. Newly adopted children from other countries do not automatically meet the criteria for referral to Early Intervention unless they have a pre-existing condition identified by a qualified and knowledgeable professional. These children, given a transition period, may be able to reach their typical age-appropriate milestones. With routine developmental screening and parental input, pediatricians will be able to identify developmental delays, if they are present, in these children.

A pediatrician or other health care provider in Westchester County may refer a child to the Early Intervention Program by calling (914) 813-5094 or by faxing a referral form to (914) 813-5093. Once this occurs, an Initial Service Coordinator is assigned to the child's family to assist them in identifying an Early Intervention agency that will conduct an evaluation. If the child is found eligible, an Individualized Family Service Plan meeting will occur within 45 days and services will be implemented. If the child is not found eligible, families are given assistance in gaining access to community resources and support.

If the child is between three to five years of age, the parent can go directly to the child's school district to register for the 4410 Preschool Program. The school district will assist the family in choosing an evaluation agency and, if found eligible, the district will hold a Committee on Preschool Special Education meeting with the family and mandated representatives.

Pediatricians are in key critical positions to identify, at the earliest possible time, children that can benefit from Early Intervention services. Routine developmental screening can be an important means to identify children who are not within the range of age appropriate developmental milestones. The Westchester County Health Department offers the following suggestions to help healthcare providers serving young children make this identification.

- ◆ Work with parents and carefully listen to their concerns while observing the child during all encounters.
- ◆ Recognize parent-child interaction issues through review of history or by observations.
- ◆ Assist parents in accessing community resources, such as early childhood programs.
- ◆ Facilitate routine hearing and vision screenings.
- ◆ Use culturally sensitive, family centered approaches.

For more information, we recommend that healthcare providers visit our website at <http://www.westchestergov.com/health/ServicesforChildrenwithSpecialNeeds.htm> or call us at (914) 813-5000.