

Section 6 Supporting Parents and Professionals

Supporting All Children

This section will answer commonly asked questions from professionals, and provide some additional resources for both professionals and parents. We cannot underestimate the profound effects of parents and the home environment for the children in our care. If we want to improve a child's developmental trajectory we must engage and support the parents. The information below will give you tools and resources to support parents which will ultimately benefit the child.

Supporting Self-regulation

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Why is self-regulation so important?

Self-regulation is a learned process that is evident in every developmental domain. When we think of self-regulation we often think of emotional or cognitive self-regulation. But here is another example:

- ◆ A child gains bladder control and is able to regulate when she attends to her bathroom needs through increasing physical development. Although physical maturation is the predominant ability in bladder control, social, emotional, cognitive and language functions are also involved, so she can recognize her need and ask to go, even in an unfamiliar environment.
- ◆ The process of self-regulation is well described in an article by Blair and Diamond (2008). It is foremost a function of the pre-frontal cortex in the brain where executive functions (e.g., decision making, problem solving) are made. Self-regulation has several functions:
 - • Control of inhibitions
 - • Working memory
 - • Mental flexibility
- ◆ Control of inhibition means the child is able to resist temptations or habits, suppress disruptive emotions and control distractions. This allows the child to pay attention, control behaviour and allow positive emotions and cognitive skills such as motivation, curiosity and interest to flourish.
- ◆ Working memory allows the child to hold information in her mind while working with it. This skill can be observed in dramatic play where the child has to act in character while responding to the changes in plot.
- ◆ Mental flexibility is the ability to adjust to change.

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- ◆ It had been demonstrated that these skills are critical for learning and success in school. Success in school is not so much achieved through memorization of curricular content but through:
 - Perseverance at tasks
 - Skills to focus and sustain attention
 - Ability to hold information in mind and relate one idea to another
 - Motivation to learn and explore
 - Good self-esteem



A child who exhibits good self-regulation, receives praise more often, enjoys school more and puts more effort into her school work. At the same time, a child with poor self-regulation finds it more difficult to pay attention in school, has difficulty meeting demands and expectations, has less fun in school and puts less effort into her work. Over time, teachers expect less self-control and poorer work habits. Finally, the child sees herself as a poor student, holds a negative view of herself and has less self-confidence and lower self-esteem. These children may only exhibit a

small difference in learning readiness in the early years, but through a positive or negative feedback loop, the gap widens and their trajectories can be expected to diverge more and more each year (Blair and Diamond, 2008; Thompson, 2009).

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How I can support the family to promote self-regulation?

A child's development occurs foremost through the reciprocal interactions with a trusted adult. Usually parents set the foundation for good self-regulation by providing an environment that is warm, nurturing and encourages trust. Parents and later, service providers model the process of self-regulation and provide opportunities to discuss and practice the process. Disruptions in the parent-child relationship through stress from factors such as poverty, poor mental or physical health or maltreatment can adversely affect the development of self-regulation.

- ◆ To promote a child's self-regulation, professionals can:
 - Promote access to programs and services to support parents and caregivers who are challenged by poverty, physical or mental illness, divorce, separation or abuse

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- Promote the availability of evidence-based parenting programs, resources or strategies (e.g., Watch, Wait and Wonder www.watchwaitandwonder.com) that promote attachment, parent-child interaction and healthy child development in your community
- Promote preschool programs where children learn in a fun and age-appropriate environment
- Promote the use of resources and strategies (e.g., Tools of the Mind www.mscedu/extendedcampus/toolsofthemind/) to support the development of self-regulation in preschool and kindergarten
- Promptly address parent concerns or observations that indicate a delay in the development of the child's self-regulation.

Cultural Sensitivity

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How can I increase my understanding of the child?

Newcomers to Canada may experience tremendous stress and isolation in their attempts to adjust to a new culture, language, and environment. The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends that professionals need to “recognize the feeling of loneliness, fear, and abandonment children may feel when they are thrust into settings that isolate them from their home community and language” (1995, p. 2). Issues such as unemployment, underemployment, language barriers, or lack of a social support system may be realities for these newcomer families.

- ◆ First of all, becoming culturally aware involves the ability to stand back and become aware of one's own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions (Quappe and Cantatore, 2005). Other components of cultural sensitivity include:
 - Valuing and recognizing the importance of one's own culture
 - Valuing diversity
 - Being willing to learn about the traditions and characteristics of other cultures (Stafford et al. as cited in Mavropoulos, 2008)



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Here are some strategies that will increase your understanding of the family and child and increase your efforts to support her development:

- ♦ Establish a solid rapport with families from the outset, so that there is a strong level of trust between families and the service providers.
- ♦ Invite participation and involvement from all members of an extended family, including grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc.
- ♦ Show respect for the family's culture at all times. Staff in daycares or kindergarten classrooms can post pictures or display items representing different cultures. In this way, families may feel more welcomed upon entry into this setting.
- ♦ Use translators or multilingual staff for meetings or conferences with the family. If possible, have important resources translated into the family's home language.
- ♦ Try to learn a few words in the language spoken by the family to help make a connection with them. For professionals working in daycare centres or kindergarten classrooms, teach the children in your classroom a few words in the family's home language.
- ♦ When possible, ask parents to explain cultural practices that are observed and that may not be understood.
- ♦ Respect differences in personal interactions or body language (e.g., lack of eye contact is a sign of respect in certain cultures).
- ♦ If possible, enroll staff in cultural sensitivity training sessions.

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How can I discuss cultural concerns with the family?

Parenting and feeding practices, sleeping arrangements, and attitudes towards education, play, or work may differ from the accepted norms here in Canada or your own beliefs. Sometimes cultural practices may even conflict with Canadian law (e.g., female genital mutilation), and may require direct consultation with child protection services (see section 5 Maltreatment). Many practices do no harm and may in fact benefit the child.

Here are some strategies to address cultural practices:

- ♦ Ask non-judgemental questions that will help you understand the cultural practice in context
- ♦ Ask yourself what your own beliefs and practices are and if the practice contradicts these
- ♦ Ask yourself the following questions:
 - ♦ Does the practice follow or contradict current evidence?
 - ♦ Does the practice promote the child's well-being?
 - ♦ Does the practice put the child at risk?
- ♦ Can you provide evidence-based information to the family to support your point of view?
- ♦ Always support cultural practices that do not put the child at risk, and promote evidence-informed practices in a non-judgemental way.

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Observation, Screening and Assessment

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How I can learn about a child's development?

Of all the tools currently available to learn more about a child, observation is the most developmentally appropriate one to use with young children. Children can be observed in brief snapshots which may yield only a limited amount of information. The information provided by the caregiver can give a professional a more complete picture. A better picture of the child can be captured by observing her in play over time. This is the approach most often used by early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers.

Benefits of Play Observation

- ◆ All areas of a child's development can be assessed, as play can provide a unique window into a child's developmental abilities.
- ◆ When play is observed in a natural environment, such as a classroom or playground, children are relaxed and spontaneous. Their behaviours and abilities can be observed repeatedly without their awareness that they are being evaluated.
- ◆ Observation can provide early years professionals and parents with a rich, accurate, and comprehensive source of information, as patterns or trends in children's development emerge over time.
- ◆ Observation is an inclusive way to assess all children.

Today, one of the most widely used play assessments used is the Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment (TPBA2), revised by Toni Linder in 2008. This resource is especially helpful when there are concerns about a child and a team of professionals is involved. It includes tips and guidelines on how to observe a child's play with a parent. Four areas of development are assessed - sensorimotor, social/emotional, language/communication, and cognition. If sessions are videotaped, they can then be analyzed by the child's parents and a team of professionals. If available, this may include an occupational or physical therapist, speech/language pathologist, educator, social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist, and vision specialist. From there, the team offers suggestions and recommendations based on the child's observed play behaviours, and a plan for next steps is created.



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What is screening?

Screening is usually a non-invasive procedure done with groups of people or a population. Screening is the process of identifying characteristics known to be associated with a certain populations or age groups. In children 0 - 6 years old, the purpose of screening is to identify those who may need further support or assessment to verify the presence of developmental or health risks. It is important to ensure that the child or family who is identified by a positive screen is followed up with further assessment to confirm or exclude the suspected delay or condition. Further assessment will also specify the sources of difficulty and lead to appropriate support and intervention (Snow & Van Hemel, 2008).

Section 8 offers a number of screening tools that are used either throughout Ontario or in some areas of Ontario. The most common tool is the Nipissing District Developmental Screen (NDDS) which can be used by parents and professionals working with children. When indicated, a child needs to be referred to the appropriate professionals and programs for further screening and assessment.



What happens after screening?

Screening is only a first step in identifying “red flags” and informing whether a more thorough assessment is advisable. Screening helps ensure that children and families who need a full assessment receive one, and if necessary, are referred to skilled professionals who are best able to provide service and/or intervention. A list of resources associated with specific areas of development is accessible in section 7 of this guide.

It is also intended, regardless of the results of screening, that children and families are assisted in accessing appropriate community supports, resources and education.



What screening tests are used in Ontario?

A number of screening tools are used in Ontario. Some are tools for parents, some are tools for professionals. Some are used universally; others are used in specific situation. Screening tools assist in early identification, but no screening tool can substitute for the full assessment by a qualified professional. A list of commonly used screening tools in Ontario is provided in Section 8.

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Sharing Sensitive News

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How can I share sensitive news with parents?

As a professional working with children from 0 - 6, effective communication with families is essential. If a child consistently fails to meet specific milestones or does not follow the expected developmental sequence, or if other at-risk indicators in a child's development are noticed, parents need to be informed about these concerns so that positive next steps can be taken. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to relay these types of concerns to parents. Here are a few tips for talking to families about observed delays in a child's normal development:



- ◆ Show genuine caring and compassion when talking with families. The news that is shared with them may cause considerable anxiety and fear.
- ◆ Remind parents that they know their child best, and are their child's first and most important teacher.
- ◆ Invite parents to share anything that they've noticed in their child's development that they may have some questions about.
- ◆ Begin by sharing some of the child's strengths and positive behaviours.
- ◆ Present your concerns in a professional manner.
- ◆ Explain to parents that through observation of their child, certain patterns of development have been noted that may need to be investigated further. Cite some specific factual examples from your observation notes.
- ◆ Highlight the expected milestones for the child's particular age for comparison. Professionals may wish to share with parents the printed Children's Development by Age section of this guide, the NDDS or other relevant resources.
- ◆ Explain the range of possibilities for supporting the child (e.g., referral, assessment, treatment), and how each of these positive steps can help address the child's challenge(s).
- ◆ Explain the consequences of non-action, and how a "wait and see" approach

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can lead to more serious outcomes for their child.

- ◆ Enlist the support of parents to plan a course of action for their child, and set concrete next steps. Remind parents that the final decision rests with them, and that your role is to provide information, support, and guidance.
- ◆ Provide the family with time to share their thoughts and feelings, if they are ready. Listen with patience and understanding.
- ◆ Thank parents for their support, and reassure them that you or other staff are available for any additional assistance that may be needed.
- ◆ Provide parents with available resources, brochures, website addresses, or contact numbers, so that they can do some additional investigation on their own. (TeKolste, 2009; First Signs, 2009)

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How can I handle and support difficult, angry or upset parents?

First of all, it is important to share sensitive news with parents in private and without making the parents feel rushed. There must be time for parents to ask questions and express their feelings. Here are a few other tips that can de-escalate a difficult situation:

- ◆ Find a space that provides privacy
- ◆ Stay calm
- ◆ Focus on the positive
- ◆ Acknowledge that the parents are upset or angry
- ◆ Ask the parents what they are feeling and if they have questions
- ◆ Listen actively to what they have to say
- ◆ Offer a second meeting to allow parents to calm down and think about what you have said
- ◆ Help parents feel involved in the solution to the problem

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What can I do if parents do not want to follow up on my recommendations?

There are many reasons why parents may not follow your recommendations. They may not trust your advice or may just simply lack transportation, time or money to carry out your recommendations. Don't take it personally, but explore the situation. Whenever possible, give parents more than one option. If the child has delays in several areas, or if you think she would benefit from multiple interventions, ask the parents what interventions they think are more critical. Parents may feel overwhelmed if they have been given a list of many recommendations.

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- ◆ Here are some steps that may help to engage parents:
 - Explain the situation
 - Explain why an intervention may be warranted
 - Explain what services are available
 - Ask the parents how they see the situation and what they are able to do
 - Make a plan together with the parents or provide them with a written list of options
 - Offer to have a follow-up meeting to assess progress

Suspecting Child Maltreatment

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When do I need to call child protection services?



As professionals working with children and families, you have a legal responsibility and duty to report, if you have “reasonable grounds to suspect” any type of child maltreatment. This can include physical harm, neglect, emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, including pornography (Child and Family Services Act, 1990). Please call your local Child Protection Services immediately if you have a concern and need further direction or information with these types of situations. To find your local child protection agency check the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies at www.oacas.org. Once contacted, the child protection agency will make a risk assessment, while other involved professionals continue to support the child and family.

Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect: It’s Your Duty

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Children's Programs and Services

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Where can I send this child for stimulation and further assessment?

Professionals working with children should make families aware of the range of both universal and targeted programs that are available to them. Universal child development programs are open to all families in Ontario and support developmental stimulation for all children. Targeted programs are designed for families with children who are at risk or have specific specialized needs.



- ◆ Some universal programs and services include:
 - Kindergarten
 - Licensed child care
 - Play groups
 - Prenatal or parenting programs
 - Healthy Babies Healthy Children
 - Ontario Early Year's Centres
 - Family Resource Centres
- ◆ Targeted programs and services can include:
 - Paediatric services
 - Children's treatment centres
 - Children's mental health centres
 - Preschool speech and language programs
 - Infant hearing program
 - Blind - low vision early intervention program
 - Nutrition programs
 - Resource consultants
 - Infant development programs

(Expert Panel on the 18-Month Well Baby Visit, 2005).

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Children in Special Situations

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How can I encourage and include a child with special needs?

Here are ways to support the integration of children with special needs. Some of these strategies include:

- ◆ Adapt the environment or schedule to meet the child's needs. This may include: the use of picture symbols or cues for directions; larger spaces at activity centres to accommodate wheelchairs or other assistive devices; materials placed on low shelving for easy access, etc.
- ◆ Incorporate various assistive techniques to support children's play (e.g., model how to use play materials; provide physical assistance such as steadying a child's hand while a toy is being used; use peers as a support, etc.).
- ◆ Teach other children in the setting how to communicate using some basic sign language, so that children with hearing impairments can play with other children.
- ◆ Talk to other professionals (e.g., physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech/language pathologist, etc.) who can help plan the play environment and play activities for children with special needs or provide that information to parents.
- ◆ There is a wide range of materials that can support the play activities of children with special needs. Some of these materials include:
 - Therapy balls
 - Play materials with textured handles or non-slip surfaces to facilitate a more secure grip
 - Beeping or ringing balls
 - Large toy pieces or handles for an easier grasp
 - Different textured materials or play materials with lights, sounds, or vibrations to promote sensory stimulation
 - Adaptive bicycles, swings, or rockers for outdoor play
 - Game boards or books with raised, textured surfaces
 - Assistive technology and devices
 - Switches and controls manoeuvred by the head, hand, or eyebrow, and much more.

By incorporating some of these suggestions, early years professionals can ensure that children of all ages and abilities can engage in play and other activities to promote learning and development.

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How can I support children with emotional or mental health problems?

Children with emotional and mental health problems benefit from early interventions. There are many programs that promote healthy emotional development and address early problems. They usually involve the parent(s), the child and a facilitator in individual or group settings. Some of these are:

Healthy Babies Healthy Children Family Home Visitor program

- ◆ Parenting programs that have shown some good results such as:
 - Make the Connection www.firstthreeyears.org
 - Watch, Wait and Wonder www.watchwaitandwonder.com
 - For Goodness Sake www.ascy.ca/fgs_intro.htm
 - Triple P Parenting www.triplep.net
- ◆ Programs that enhance preschool or school curriculum such as:
 - Seeds of Empathy www.seedsofempathy.org
 - Roots of Empathy www.rootsofempathy.org
 - Tools of the Mind www.mscd.edu/extendedcampus/toolsofthemind

Children's mental health centres are available in many communities across Ontario. Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) goal is to improve the mental health and well-being of children, youth and their families in Ontario. You can find the closest centre through the website at: www.kidsmentalhealth.ca. Some programs require a referral from the child's physician; others may take self-referrals.

Children, who may have experienced trauma (e.g., death, divorce, family violence, abuse, war), can benefit from Rainbows Canada programs and camps www.rainbows.ca.

If a child is showing difficulties in coping, the services provided by a play therapist may be beneficial. For more information check www.cacpt.com. Through play, the therapist provides a safe environment for children to express their feelings and work through their problems. The therapist plays with the child using a variety of play materials such as blocks, modeling dough, figurines, sand, board games, dolls, and puppets. Over time, the therapist works with the child to resolve issues in this natural, healing process.

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How can I support the transition to school for a child with special needs or difficulties?

If a child has been diagnosed with a delay or disability, whenever possible, it is helpful for the school to know before the child starts kindergarten or school. The school has a responsibility to adapt to the child's identified needs and to put resources in place to help the child adjust to school and learn alongside her peers.

- ◆ When getting ready to register the child for school the parent or primary caregiver should:
 - Collect all information about the student including any reports and assessment from professionals and child care and early learning settings.
 - Provide copies of these when registering the child for school.

A written diagnosis and request from a physician, registered therapist or psychologist is necessary for the school to allocate the necessary resources. In the case of physical impairments, adjustments may have to be made to the physical layout of the classroom. If a learning disability has been identified, strategies to help the child learn within the context of her disability will be made available to the teacher. A teacher's assistant may be required to assist the child.

- ◆ The school should:
 - Follow internal Board procedures to assess what support the child will require.
 - Call a case conference prior to the child starting school. The case conference could be set up by the school or the preschool the child is currently attending.
 - The case conference should include:
 - The parents or primary caregivers
 - The class room or resource teacher
 - The child's primary health care provider
 - The child's preschool or child care provider.
- ◆ Having a plan is key to a good transition for the child. The plan should provide:
 - An opportunity for a school and classroom visit
 - A meeting with other agencies, parents and school board staff
 - Parents can provide the teacher with a booklet "All About Me" in which they describe the child and provide any helpful information.

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- Information about the school at the child's level that can be reviewed at home with the child in preparation for her first day at school.

Special Needs

www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/specialneeds/index.aspx

Providing Support While Waiting



How can I support the family while the child is waiting for assessment and treatment?

Unfortunately, as waiting lists seem to be a reality in many communities, parents may need some additional ideas for ways to enhance specific areas of their child's development. There are many ways to stimulate the development of the child as a whole or focus on one or more domains. Most communities have some initiatives to benefit children and their parents:

- ◆ Early infant/child intervention programs through child care settings
- ◆ Healthy Babies Healthy Children is a universal program in Ontario that can provide intervention or link families to the appropriate early intervention assessment and services
- ◆ Libraries with children's programs and books
- ◆ Toy-lending libraries
- ◆ Parks, outdoor green spaces
- ◆ Play groups
- ◆ Informal drop-in programs
- ◆ Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs)
- ◆ Parenting and Family Literacy Centres
- ◆ Best Start Hubs
- ◆ Local community centres - public swimming pools, team sports, clubs, crafts, special events - programs at local community centres may also be subsidized for families with low income
- ◆ Camps - some offer subsidized fees
- ◆ Family Resource Centres
- ◆ Music, art or drama programs



In addition, the Nipissing District Developmental Screens provide parents with a number of

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activities they can do with their child. Many of the websites listed throughout this guide also offer tips and activities for parents.



How can I find credible information about developmental delays or difficulties?

There is a wealth of information for early childhood professionals listed online. However, sources of information found online can potentially be dated, incomplete, or incorrect. Anyone searching for further information should critically evaluate the source of that information to ensure that they are receiving the most accurate content available on a particular topic. Whether searching websites linked directly from this document or through independent searching, users should be vigilant. The following questions are important considerations when critically evaluating online resources:

1. Authorship/Source

- ◆ Is the author of the particular content clear?
 - A clearly stated author creates a degree of accountability for the content in a particular content area. Authorship can also provide the user with an idea of the author's credentials (i.e. academic, professional, etc.?)
- ◆ What is the source of the information?
 - Does the site represent an organization, academic institution, government body, etc.? Information from these sources tends to be more carefully monitored and the user can link back to the organization's main website. TIP: look for an "About Us" or "History" section in an effort to establish the source's authority and credibility.

2. Accurate/Current

- ◆ Can the facts listed by this site be verified elsewhere?
 - Are the site's sources of information peer-reviewed? Cross-referencing information from various distinct sources can increase the likelihood that this information is accurate.
- ◆ Is the information current?
 - Many websites list when a page was last updated, in addition to the date on which it was created. Check the website's links - sites with links that successfully direct the user to current sites tend to be current themselves.

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3. Objectivity

- ◆ Does the website appear to accentuate a particular viewpoint or bias?
 - This can be difficult to detect at first glance, but can be detected by the use of provocative or inflammatory language, frequent statement of opinion rather than fact, etc.

Adapted from Greenwood & Steyn (2009) and UC Berkeley Library (2009).