



# Speaking for Children

What's best for our youngest children is best for everyone!

## What to do when you observe a child with a developmental delay

From time to time, parents, teachers or caregivers encounter a child who seems to be functioning at a younger age than those of his or her peers. Or a child has one area that is noticeably behind. It could be a physical issue, a lack of language or communication skills, a social or emotional issue or some other things that set the child apart. A simple screening can help determine the degree of the delay and what the next steps might be. Screenings are available from the child's medical care provider or for free from the Watch Me Grow program. For more information call (707)591-0170 or visit the web site: [www.earlylearninginstitute.com](http://www.earlylearninginstitute.com). Service options will depend upon the age of the child and the type and severity of the delay. Free referral help is available to families, should they need it.

When a child is very young, it is tempting to adopt a "wait and see" attitude, but since most developmental delays can be improved or reversed through early intervention, it is important to do something sooner than later. Parents must initiate the process but sometimes help and encouragement from a teacher or caregiver are needed to convince parents that a screening is necessary. Here are some tips to keep in mind when talking to parents about potential delays in their children's development:

- **Document everything and stick to the facts.** This is why developmental checklists are so important. Before you approach a parent with an issue, make sure you have hard evidence in hand. Use facts, not interpretations or vague judgments. Try to avoid offering a diagnostic opinion such as "this looks like autism."
- **Always stay positive.** Don't act as though a potential delay is cause for sorrow. All children are different. Encourage one step at a time - parents can make service decisions once they know what they are dealing with. Focus on the initial screening.
- **Be sensitive.** Many parents may instinctively blame themselves or become defensive. Do not use phrases like "your child is not normal" or "when my child was this age."
- **Be prepared.** Before approaching parents, understand they may react emotionally. Role play with your supervisor or a colleague in order to plan the words and tone of voice you will use.
- **Caregivers and parents are partners.** Emphasize this and work together to help the child. There is no reason to feel shame or hopelessness.
- **Have resources on hand for parents.** Let them know where to find developmental screenings and resources.

For more information on *First 5 Sonoma County* and its programs, please call (707) 565-6680 or visit [www.first5sonomacounty.org](http://www.first5sonomacounty.org)