

I'M WORRIED ABOUT THIS CHILD"~ Referring Young Children with Developmental Difficulties into Special Services

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Early childhood educators are in a unique and important position. They have the opportunity to observe a child within a group context, participating in a variety of activities and routines. As a result, they are often among the first professionals to suspect that a child may be experiencing some developmental difficulties. A dilemma arises from this position, however, as the early childhood educator must then decide what to do with his/her suspicions. This is a challenge no one wishes to face ~ to inform a parent that their child may be experiencing developmental difficulties. In most cases, the parents may already suspect a problem and will have concerns of their own. But in some cases, such as when the child is an only child or a first child, a parent may not have the experience or the basis from which to compare their child's developmental progress.

Understanding The Parent's Needs

Coming to terms with the possibility that your child may have a developmental difficulty can be a very challenging process for a family. The experience has been described as being similar to that of the loss of a loved one. In effect it is the loss of the "idealized child". The dreams and expectations parents may have had for their child now became altered. Parents often pass through the stages of grief (Kubler Ross, 1969):

- Denial - "There's nothing wrong with my child."
- Anger - "It's the doctor's fault." "It's the teacher's fault."

Shooting the messenger: the one describing that a problem exists often becomes the target of this anger.

- Bargaining - "Maybe if I do 5 hours of therapy each day or spend thousands of dollars on a specialist he will get better - it will go away."
- Depression/Withdrawal - Friendship networks become smaller and the family or individual becomes more isolated.
- Acceptance - Parents feeling comfortable and confident in their relationship with their child and feeling positive about who they are and who their child is.

Family members will pass through stages of grief at different times and in different ways. When major changes occur in a family's life such as moving to a new home, starting a new job, buying a new car, there are usually choices involved. The changes that take place for a family of a child with special needs are often out of the family member's control, so it can be a confusing and frustrating time. Parents may begin to feel helpless and powerless with decisions often being made by professionals outside of the family unit regarding what is best for their child.

As professionals who may be the first to talk to parents about their child's difficulties, early childhood educators are able to take steps to avoid having parents experiencing this loss of control. The positive communication system you have built with parents and by approaching in a proactive manner, such as informing parents of their options, assists parents in understanding their child's needs and enable them to be capable informed decision makers for their child. Debra Martell, a parent advocate (SpecialLink, Winter 1996) notes that there are two things to keep in mind when working with parents. The first is: "Always assume that the parent knows everything that there is about their child and the needs of that child". The second is: "assume that the parent knows absolutely nothing about the child and the needs of that child". The first assumption conveys respect and the second assumption ensures that parents are always given the information they need in order to make an informed decision.

Collecting Information About the Child:

Early childhood educators are trained observers and this is perhaps the most critical skill to possess. When concerns are suspected, an educator is able to make observations of the child in a variety of activities throughout the program, taking anecdotal notes whenever possible. Working as team within the program is also important, with each educator's observations and perspectives need to be noted and discussed. Concrete examples of what the child is doing (both positive achievements and challenges) are useful to have on hand during a discussion with the parents and can assist in confirming for the educator that there is indeed a problem.

Another critical skill for early childhood educators is listening. As you listen to the parents at pick-up and drop-off time, are they expressing subtle concerns about their child, such as describing a particularly frustrating morning or a sleepless night? Build a comfortable communication exchange with the parents by listening to and acknowledging their concerns. It is important for parents to trust that their child's caregiver is listening to them and genuinely cares about their child's needs. Communicate to parents about their child's day, especially if it was a difficult day. Begin the discussion with some positive accomplishments for example, "Joey and Sarah played well together today in housekeeping", and later in the conversation describe examples of the challenging behaviour, for example, "Joey had a hard time at circle today. He sat with the group for awhile, but the circle props were very tempting for him to touch. It was difficult for him to stay on his carpet square.". Discuss with the parent what was tried or modified to assist the child and ask for any ideas that have worked for them at home. Using a partnership approach allows parents to play an active role in the process and keeps them informed of what is happening with their child.

No one wants to be called to attend a meeting about a concern that has never been brought to his or her attention before. Surprises put people on the defense. An ongoing communication system such as short conversations, or telephone calls or a home and school notebook that stays in the child's bag, can assist in keeping parents informed and prepared in the event of a more formalized meeting.

The Parent-Teacher Conference

A scheduled parent-teacher conference often becomes necessary when developmental concerns are suspected. These meetings are intimidating both for the teacher and for the parents. Prepare for the meeting with observations, anecdotal notes and collected samples of the child's work. Avoid going into the meeting with a rigid agenda, consider the meeting to be an opportunity to problem solve with the family. Open the meeting by discussing examples of some positive aspects of the child's development and interactions within the program. Ask the parents to describe what the child is doing at home such as the child's likes and dislikes and his/her independence skills such as dressing, eating, toileting, etc. Often within this discussion windows of opportunity exist for the educator to describe concrete examples of the child's performance at the child care program. Use descriptive, non-judgmental language (for example use "Joey is sometimes throwing the craft materials off the table during craft time." rather than "Joey is a behaviour problem in the classroom."). By citing concrete and simple examples parents have a clear picture of what their child is doing and have a better opportunity to respond in a constructive way. After discussing the strategies already tried by the program staff and the additional ideas and concerns relayed by the parents, it

may be necessary to suggest that the child care program would benefit from more input from an outside source regarding how to best meet the child's needs. This is an opportunity to inform parents of the available services in the community and what these services offer. When describing available services it is not necessary at this point to use terms such as "special needs" as this can be quite overwhelming for parents. It is not the early childhood educator's role to suggest a diagnosis but to simply describe their observations. Avoid jargon and keep the explanations clear and simple. Even the most educated parent can be overwhelmed when discussing their child, and may not really be hearing what is being said about him/her.

Referring a Family to Appropriate Services

Encourage parents to discuss their concerns with their family doctor. Many resources exist within the community to assist families when their child is experiencing developmental difficulties. Waiting lists often exist for many of the services so it is important to alert parents to this possibility.

- The Nova Scotia Hearing & Speech Clinic provides services for children experiencing communication, language and hearing difficulties. A parent, child care professional, or health care professional may make a direct call to the clinic to refer a child for assessment and services.
- The IMK Grace Health Centre provides a variety of out patient services that may be applicable, such as Psychology, Pediatric Mental Health Services, Developmental Clinic, Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy. Parents and early childhood educators may make a direct referral to psychology services but health care related services such as Developmental Clinic, Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy require a physician referral. When fine motor and self-care/adaptive concerns exist, it may be suggested to a parent that they discuss a possible occupational therapy referral with their physician, and a possible referral to a physiotherapist when motor skills are a concern. It is important to explain to the parent that these referrals do not necessarily mean that a child will require these services long term, but they will provide parents with an opportunity to examine their concerns further through an assessment and a discussion with a qualified professional.
- Early Intervention Programs provide support and information to families who have young children (birth to 6 years) experiencing a delay in two or more areas of development (eg. motor skills, communication, social emotional, self-care/adaptive and cognitive skills). Support is provided to families within their home through a home visit program. Consultation is also provided to early childhood educators within child care programs. A Preschool Integration Program, where available, can assist early childhood educators in problem solving through challenging situations and assist in the development of a child's individual program. The Progress Centre Preschool Outreach Program provides workshops and in-services to early childhood educators on various topics related to child development and children with special needs. Parents, early childhood educators and other professionals may make a direct referral for services.

To make referrals to all of the above services, parent permission is required. Parents need to be aware and willing to have the referral made. Involvement in all of the services is voluntary and requires parent commitment and participation.

Conclusion:

The early years are a critical time in all children's development. It is the time of most intense change and

development. Providing developmental support and intervention in the early years while the nervous system is still malleable and most responsive is critical in the prevention of developmental delays and to ensure that a child may develop to his/her own individual potential. By beginning early we may assist children and families in being full active participants within their community.

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Resources: Programs

Early Intervention Programs in Nova Scotia:

Antigonish County 863-2298

Colchester County 893-3342

Cumberland County 667-8244

Glace Bay 849-3429

Hants/Kings County 678-6111

Lunenburg County 634-8801 ext. 3149

Halifax, Dartmouth & Area 423-2686

Pictou County 752-1016

Queens County 354-5890

Sackville & Bedford 864-5251

Shelburne County 875-4067

Yarmouth County 742-3366

SpecialLink The National 1-800-840-LINK

Child Care Inclusion Network

Resources: Books and Articles

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