

What to observe

There are some signs that can indicate that a child has an impairment or condition. While conditions and impairments that are likely to seriously affect a child's development are noticed during routine health visits, slight impairments can go undetected. It is therefore useful to hone in on the following as you observe a child. Remember, however, that the role of the early years practitioner is not to diagnose and that some skills are linked to stages of development such as being able to use scissors or play with another child.

Physical development

- ◆ How controlled and co-ordinated are a child's movements?
- ◆ Does the child bump into objects or fall over frequently?
- ◆ Does the child have difficulty in holding and manipulating objects?
- ◆ Does the child have a dislike of messy play, e.g. dough, sand?
- ◆ Has the child begun to show a hand preference?
- ◆ How confident is the child at using tricycles, climbing and balancing?
- ◆ Is the child aware of his or her body in relation to the space around them?

Vision

- ◆ Does the child need to be very close to books, pictures and posters?
- ◆ Does the child ever peer or frown?
- ◆ Does the child appear to be 'accident prone'?
- ◆ Is the child sometimes frustrated when using small toys and equipment such as puzzles or farm animals?
- ◆ Is the child uninterested in watching videos and television?
- ◆ Does the child look at objects in an unusual way, e.g. holding things very closely to the eyes.

Hearing

- ◆ Is speech muffled or unclear?
- ◆ Do adults who are unfamiliar with the child have difficulty in understanding what is being said?
- ◆ Does the child mispronounce words that other children of his or her age manage easily?
- ◆ Does the child appear to stare intently at adults and other children's faces when they are talking?
- ◆ Does the child at times appear to be unsure as to what is happening, e.g. after some instructions have been given?

- ◆ Does the child look and copy what other children are doing?
- ◆ Does the child appear to be in a world of his or her own especially at story time?
- ◆ Does the child respond immediately to his or her name or to a loud sound?
- ◆ Is the child prone to runny colds?
- ◆ Does the child often 'shout' rather than talk at a normal volume without realising it?
- ◆ Does the child show aggressive or frustrated behaviour?

Speech and communication

- ◆ Does the child make eye contact with adults and other children?
- ◆ How often does the child interact with adults or children?
- ◆ Does the child have difficulty in understanding what is being said?
- ◆ Does the intonation sound monotone and flat?
- ◆ Does the child often keep repeating nonsense words or phrases?
- ◆ Are the child's responses not in keeping with what would normally be expected?
- ◆ Does the child stutter or stammer or have difficulty in pronouncing words?
- ◆ Does the child repeat words or phrases spoken by the adult in inappropriate contexts?
- ◆ Can the child follow simple instructions, e.g. put your apron on the peg?

Social and emotional development

- ◆ Is the child aware of other children, e.g. watches others, copies their play?
- ◆ To what extent does the child interact and play with other children?
- ◆ Is the child able to take turns and show some awareness of other's needs (over three years)?
- ◆ Is the child aggressive towards others for no apparent reason?
- ◆ Is the child constantly restless and finds it hard to concentrate even on self-chosen activities with adult support?
- ◆ Is the child aware of the routine of the setting?
- ◆ Does the child have great difficulties adapting to changes in routines or new members of staff?
- ◆ Is the child clingy towards adults and seeks their attention?
- ◆ Does the child play in a ritualistic way, e.g. always using the same pieces of equipment in a repetitious way?
- ◆ Does the child avoid imaginative play, e.g. dressing up, home corner?
- ◆ Does the child become distressed for no apparent reason?

Using the information gained from observations

There is little point in carrying out observations if the information gained is not effectively used. It is therefore important to spend some time analysing your information. A good starting point is to consider whether or not it is the setting that is 'disabling' the child. The child may be responding in a certain way because equipment is not accessible or the activities are not interesting.

The next step is to consider whether a developmental need has been identified. If this is the case, it is worth checking the charts of normative development to gain some kind of benchmark. If at this point, you still have concerns, it will be worth talking to the child's parents as they may wish to refer the child via their G.P. or health visitor for more specialist advice. In the early stages of identification, it is essential to avoid 'labelling' or 'diagnosing' as a child who at three years may appear to have some delay may be making adequate progress in a few months time.

Early Years Action

It is useful to look at the Code of Practice's suggestions for when a setting needs to implement Early Years Action. It is important to note that in the initial stages of identification of a child's needs, the setting must look at ways to differentiate the curriculum and remove any barriers to learning by providing equipment, resources, etc. before Early Years Action is appropriate.

The triggers for intervention through Early Years Action could be the practitioner's or parent's concern about a child who, despite receiving appropriate early education, experiences the following:

- ◆ Makes little or no progress even when teaching approaches are particularly targeted to improve the child's identified area of weakness.
- ◆ Continues working at levels significantly below those expected for children of a similar age in certain areas.
- ◆ Persistent emotional and/or behaviour difficulties, that are not ameliorated by the behaviour management techniques usually employed in the setting.
- ◆ Has sensory or physical problems, and continues to make little or no progress despite the provision of personal aids and equipment.
- ◆ Has communication and/or interaction difficulties, and requires specific individual interventions in order to access learning.

Source: 4:21 SEN Code of Practice 2001

Using charts of normative development

Normative development charts show what 'most' children are able to do at various ages, although it is essential to remember that there is no such thing as a 'normal' child, as all children develop at their own pace. This means that charts can only be used as a guide. They are, however, helpful as they show the sequences

Data Protection Act

While it is good practice for all records to be 'open' so that parents feel part of the process, you should also be aware that any written personal information that you hold will be subject to the Data Protection Act whether or not it has been processed on computer or by hand. The Act is designed to protect everyone's right to know what has been written about them and to safeguard information being given out without consent.

SEEING THEORY IN PRACTICE

- ◆ Check that your setting has registered with the Data Protection Commission.
- ◆ Make sure that your records are secure as well as being accurate, relevant and relevant.
- ◆ Invite parents to check written information as part of 'open communication'.

Communicating with parents

There are no magic 'tricks' that are needed to work with parents. You will however need to be a good listener, be supportive and create environments and situations that help parents to feel at ease. You will also need to show empathy for parents. Note that empathy is not sympathy, but reflects concern, care and warmth towards another person.

"There were times when I couldn't help but cry because the emotions inside me were building up, but they made me feel that I was no longer alone."

Parent

Listening to parents

Many parents comment that some practitioners do not listen to them. This perception is more likely to occur when parents feel that they are being hurried or that the environment in which conversations are taking place is hectic or noisy. ^{to be hurried} In these conditions, a practitioner's attention might be divided or time may be so short that instead of listening to a parent's perspective, the practitioner concentrates only on what he or she wishes to say. It is therefore essential to find quiet areas and times in which to talk to parents.

It is also important to show parents that you are actively trying to understand their viewpoint and are listening to their messages. There are many ways in which we can do this. First, show through your body language that you are keen to listen. Take the time to sit down with the parent, nod and make eye contact. Remember to avoid interrupting what a parent is saying. Good listeners also check that they are receiving the message by clarifying points, for example, 'So if I have understood you correctly, you are finding that Jo points rather than uses



Early years practitioners should show good listening skills when talking to parents

words at home.' As well as checking that you are receiving the message well, you can show parents that you really are listening to them by reflecting back their words, for example, 'So Jo was very frustrated yesterday.' This can help parents to keep talking as they feel that they are being listened to.

“ He just needed stimulating in a different way; it felt like the whole education system didn't listen to me. ”

Parent

Talking to parents

It is easy to forget that our words can be very powerful. They can destroy the trust and confidence that a parent has in a setting or a person. Words can also make parents feel guilty and defensive or make them feel that their child is 'not good enough'. This means that while you are talking to parents, you will need to be aware of the effect of your words and notice their body language and responses. It also means that you should prepare for meetings carefully. Look again at the child. Notice the strengths of the child. Consider what this child can bring to the setting. It can also be a good idea to think about what the child now needs from the adults in the setting. In this way, you are more likely to show that you care and have the child's best interests at heart.

REFLECT ON YOUR OWN PRACTICE 

- ◆ Do not focus on what the child can or cannot do. Focus on what adults need to do to help the child.
- ◆ Monitor parents' body language as you talk; consider the effects of your words.
- ◆ Make sure that you talk about the child in positive ways.

Understanding that parents may have strong emotions

Many parents will have strong emotions when they talk about their children. This is perfectly natural as the emotional bond between parent and child is after all what makes parents parents! Understanding this is essential, and allowing parents to express their emotions without feeling embarrassed will be a cornerstone in a good relationship.

"I have to work quite hard to come across as strong and sensible, almost as if I have to deny who I am. I dare not cry or show any emotion, otherwise they will think that I am just some silly neurotic mother."

Parent

KEY ISSUE: COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

- ◆ Find a quiet and private space for conversations so that parents can really get an opportunity to talk. Consider using a 'do not disturb' sign on the door.
- ◆ Always remember that you are talking about a child, not a 'problem' or a 'syndrome'. Make sure that this is reflected in your tone of voice and language.
- ◆ Make sure that you are really listening to parents. Check that you have understood what they are saying by asking them if you can summarise it and invite them to correct you.
- ◆ Do not show embarrassment or surprise if a parent openly cries; have tissues to hand and make sure that the parent does not feel rushed.
- ◆ Some parents may need to be reassured that their emotions and feelings are normal and that this does not make them 'silly' or 'neurotic'.
- ◆ Consider whether a parent's anger is based on frustration; have you really been listening and acknowledging his or her viewpoint?
- ◆ Consider whether you would benefit from some basic counselling training as this should teach you how to listen effectively.