

BIRTH TO 5: WATCH ME THRIVE!

A Child Welfare Caseworker's Guide for Developmental and Behavioral Screening

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Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!

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As a child welfare caseworker, you are on the front lines of watching children. As a trusted provider and partner, it is important that you talk to families and caregivers about their child's development and coordinate with other service providers to meet the child's needs. Because children and youth with developmental challenges are over-represented in the foster care system, it is especially important that child welfare workers are informed about and involved with the process of developmental and behavioral screening. If developmental concerns are caught early, you can help ensure that children receive the extra support they need and are linked to appropriate services while in the care of the child welfare system. Partnering with families and specialists to *Learn the Signs and Act Early* will ensure that children have the best possible start to a bright future

That is why we are providing you with the information you need to best support the children and families in your care. Accompanying this guide is a list of standardized developmental and behavioral screening tools and the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#), which includes information about healthy development, developmental concerns, where to go for help, how to talk to families, and tips on how to best support all children. If you are part of a network, we encourage you to work with your agency or network director to implement universal developmental and behavioral screening that will reach every child. We hope this guide, together with the tool list and the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#), will support your work with families in helping children develop and reach their full potential.

What influences child development and behavior?

Starting at birth and continuing throughout childhood, children reach milestones in how they play, learn, speak, act, and move. Skills such as taking a first step, smiling for the first time, and waving "bye-bye" are called developmental milestones. Children develop at their own pace, so it can be difficult to tell exactly when a child will learn a given skill. However, the developmental milestones give a general idea of the changes to expect as a child gets older. Developmental and behavioral screening plays an important role in early detection and appropriate supports for children who may be experiencing delays for any number of reasons.

Many factors can influence child development, including biology and early experiences with caregivers and peers. Factors like warm and secure relationships, enriching learning opportunities, and proper nutrition, exercise, and rest can make a big difference in healthy child development. On the other hand, poverty, unstable housing, parental stress and adverse events such as household dysfunction, maltreatment, abuse, neglect, exposure to alcohol or substance abuse, violence, and/or trauma can have serious negative impacts on child development and behavior. To learn more about the effects of adverse early childhood experiences, check out the [Early Childhood Trauma](#) and [Identifying and Providing Services to Young Children Who Have Been Exposed to Trauma](#) resources in the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#).

What is developmental and behavioral screening?

Developmental and behavioral screening is a first line check of a child's development using a developmental and behavioral screening tool. A developmental and behavioral screening tool is a formal research-based instruments that asks questions about a child's development, including language, motor, cognitive, social and emotional development. A screening does **not** provide a diagnosis, rather, it indicates if a child is on track developmentally and if a closer look by a specialist is needed. All children should receive a screening, especially if you are concerned about their development. The results of a screening can help you plan how to best support the development of the children in your care.

Connecting families to a doctor or specialist is an important next step to determine if a child needs a formal evaluation. A formal evaluation is a much more in depth look at a child's development, usually done by a trained specialist like a developmental pediatrician, child psychologist, or speech language pathologist, and may involve child observation, standardized tests, and parent interviews or questionnaires. The results of formal evaluations are used to determine if a child has a disability and is eligible for early intervention, or special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

What is developmental monitoring?

Developmental monitoring is a flexible and repeated observation of children's developmental milestones over time, usually using a brief checklist. It is different from screening in that it is less formal and it is done on a regular basis. You probably observe children's development closely by watching how they play and grow day after day. Developmental monitoring can help you track your daily observations. Monitoring can help you decide if a child should receive a formal developmental screen or see their healthcare provider sooner than expected. As a child welfare caseworker, you probably don't see each child every day. For this reason, it is especially important to engage families (birth families, foster families, kinship caregivers, etc.) in the process of developmental monitoring. Encouraging families and caregivers to use developmental monitoring checklists can help clarify what behaviors they should be observing in their children.

How often should children be monitored and screened?

Children's development should be monitored on an ongoing basis, in the home, child care settings, and anywhere else children spend their time. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends developmental and behavioral screening with a standardized developmental screening tool when a child is 9, 18, and 24 or 30 months of age. These screenings may be done in early childhood settings, schools, community based intervention programs, or in the child's medical home, the model of comprehensive children's care recommended by the AAP. Although there are specific ages that screening is recommended, screening should be done at any age if you and/or the family or caregivers are concerned about a child's development.

Some children may already be screened routinely by other professionals, such as a pediatrician in their medical home. Many other children may not have a medical home and have not, but need to receive a screening. Make sure to ask families whether their children have been screened before, in accordance with the recommended ages. When a child comes into the care of the child welfare system, it is important to find out whether they have been screened and to either learn about the results of the screening or make sure that screening takes place. This will help to ensure that the child gets any individualized support and services needed.

A team approach

Developmental and behavioral screening and support is a team effort. There are many different professionals that interact with children and families. Parents, caregivers, and other family members are at the center of children's support teams. Other important members of the team include early care and education providers, medical providers, early intervention service providers, home visitors, and behavioral health specialists, among others. For example, when a child is involved in the child welfare system, the team may include child welfare professionals, along with the birth family, foster family, kinship caregiver, guardians ad litem, , therapist, court appointed special advocates , etc. As a member of the team, you should encourage and remind families to communicate developmental or behavioral concerns, screening results, and support plans to all members of the team. With everyone on the same page, children can get the support they need in *every* setting.

It's important to recognize that a child may have already been screened, evaluated, and given specialized services, like speech or occupational therapy. Be sure to ask the family if they are aware of other screening, and if so, ask for a copy of the results of those screenings, as well as any action or intervention already in place.

A developmental and behavioral screening passport, similar to an immunization card, is a tool to help parents keep track of their children's screening records. It can be used to inform all members of the team of the child's screening record. A passport is included in this [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#). Encourage families to use it and share it with all of the professionals on the child's team. The passport can be helpful if a child is moving to a new home or school or experiencing other transitions related to coming into the child welfare system. Be sure that any sharing of information about the child is done in accordance with agency protocols and guidelines around confidentiality.

When should I talk to families about development and screening?

You should discuss healthy development with all families on a regular basis. Celebrating developmental milestones together can help assure that children's development is being monitored and that children are progressing in their development. In addition, you can encourage families to talk to their primary healthcare provider at their medical home about their child's development at every well child visit. You should also talk to all families about developmental and behavioral screening and make sure to explain that it is a normal screen that all children go through, like hearing or vision screens.

You should have a more in-depth conversation about screening if you have concerns about a child's development. As soon as you notice that a child is not developing at quite the same rate as other children, it is important to talk to the family and/or determine appropriate next steps. Remember, all children are different and we do not expect them all to develop at the same pace, but over time, if you notice a child is behind his peers socially, emotionally, or in any other way, you should speak up.

Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive! Passport



One tool for helping parents to monitor developmental progress is the use of a screening passport, which is similar to an immunization card or booklet. This tool can help parents keep track of their child's screening records and share screening information with providers. A passport is included in this *Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive Toolkit* and can be shared with parents.

Before conducting any screening, make sure you have the family's permission and/or that you are following agency protocols in terms of required consent and confidentiality. Once you have the first conversation, engage families every step of the way, from explaining what developmental and behavioral screening is to linking them to people and services that can help. Be sure to encourage families to talk to their child's health care provider and share the results of the screen. You can even help them come up with questions they could ask their doctor as a result of the screen.

How do I engage families in the screening process?

Check the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) for the soon-to-be-released learning module "Talking to Families about Developmental Screening," to guide you in talking to families. Here are a few helpful tips to get you started in the meantime:

Talk to families *before* screening:

- When talking to families, it is best to use the language that they use at home. (Avoid using clinical jargon.)
- Start off by pointing out something positive. Name a skill or behavior the child is doing well and express how excited you are to see their progress.
- If you are concerned about a child's development, point out the specific behavior the child is struggling with and ask if they observe the same behaviors at home. It is ok to say "I may be overly concerned, but I just want to make sure".
- Use the [Learn the Signs. Act Early](#) developmental factsheets to support your observations on the child's strengths and challenges. This will assure families you are basing your comments on facts.
- Explain what developmental and behavioral monitoring and screening is. Make sure you note that it is a normal process that children go through to make sure they are on track in their development.
- Stress that a screening does **not** provide a diagnosis.
- Ask if they know whether their child has been screened in the past. If so, talk about the results in a confidential environment. Ask the parent/caregiver what that experience was like for them.
- If the child has not been screened in the past, ask the family for permission to perform a screening using a standardized tool.
- Provide birth families, foster families, and caregivers with informative materials and places they can go to learn more.
- Try to make it a discussion. Give the birth family, foster family, and/or caregiver time to listen, reflect, and provide input. Show the birth family respect for their knowledge about their own child. The birth parent(s) may be able to share additional information and offer another perspective on their child's behavior that can be helpful in this process.
- Remind them that you do your job because you love and care for children and that you are their partner on their child's developmental journey.

Walking families through the screening process:

- If a family informs you that their child has not been screened in the past or they have concerns about their child, ask the family for permission to perform a screening using a standardized tool and explain the survey will take about 5 minutes. Feel free to let the parent or caregiver know that the American

Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be screened for general development at 9, 18, and 24 or 30 months of age or whenever a parent or provider has a concern.

- If the family gives written consent, find a confidential space to conduct a developmental and behavioral screening using a tool that is appropriate for the families you serve. Most tools are surveys about children’s development that parents can fill out themselves or have read to them.
- Score the developmental and behavioral screening in accordance with the instructions in the tool’s manual.
- If you do not feel comfortable going through the screening process with the parent yourself and would prefer to refer the parent elsewhere for the screening, the *Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit* can help in finding appropriate places to refer, including the child's medical home or an early intervention specialist.

Talk to families after an “at risk” screening result:

- Remind them that this is **not** a diagnosis. An “at risk” screen simply means the child should be evaluated more thoroughly by their primary health care professional, medical home, or another specialist. Even if you are not concerned, an “at risk” result indicates further evaluation is needed. Standardized screening tools detect many delays before delays are overtly apparent.
- Connect the family to the right specialist, like a pediatrician, a developmental specialist. You may also wish to refer the parent to an early intervention service program, which conduct its own review and do a more in depth evaluation, if warranted, to determine if the child may be eligible for early intervention services. The [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit*](#) can help you find local resources and specialists.
- Work together to create a list of questions to ask their pediatrician or developmental specialist as a result of the screen.
- Suggest activities that families can practice with their children to help in their development. The tips and learning modules in the [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit*](#) offer many ideas for activities. For example, if a child is in foster care, the foster parent(s) can practice these activities with children in the home, and birth families can be supported in using the activities during parent-child visits.
- Use the information in this [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit*](#) to learn more about development and screening so that you can answer families’ questions as best you can. If you do not know the answer to a question, it is ok to say you are not sure but will find out.

Talk to families after a “low risk” or “no risk” screening result:

- Discuss the results with the family and ask them to share results with the child’s primary health care provider or medical home. Remind them that *monitoring* children’s development should be ongoing in the home, child care settings, and elsewhere.
- Give them materials that describe their child’s next developmental level. The *Learn the Signs. Act Early Milestones Moments* booklets included in the [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit*](#) can serve this purpose.
- All children have strengths and challenges. Use the screening results to talk about them. The [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit*](#) offers ideas for activities that families can do with their children to help in their development.

If you are still concerned about a child’s development after a “low risk” or “no risk” screen, speak with the family and ask them to share your concerns with their child’s primary health care provider who may administer another test or refer the child to a specialist who can do a more thorough evaluation.

How do I refer families to the right specialist after screening?

There are people in and around your community who can help children with developmental concerns. Many children have a regular primary health care provider or medical home that can look at developmental concerns more closely. Ask families/caregivers to take the results of their screen or a milestones checklist to their child's primary health care provider or medical home.

Whether or not the child has a medical home, if a child under 3 years of age has an "at risk" screening result, connect the family to a local early intervention service program. Early intervention service programs under Part

Find the Right Screening Tool

- ✓ **Ages:** What age groups do I serve and what screening tools are made for those ages?
- ✓ **Time:** How much time does it take to use this screening tool? Which tool is practical within a child care or Head Start program?
- ✓ **Cost:** What is the cost for the screening tool and its ongoing use within early care and education programs?
- ✓ **Training:** Is there training required to use this screening tool? How much training is required? What type of training is recommended?
- ✓ **Languages:** Does the screening tool need to be available in different languages to fit the needs of the families I serve?
- ✓ **Culture:** Is it culturally appropriate?

C of the IDEA are available in every state and territory of the United States and offer child evaluations free of charge if a child is suspected of having a disability to determine if a child is eligible for services under IDEA. The *Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit* accompanying this guide provides a description of the early intervention system and a state by state directory of early intervention coordinators, often called "Part C coordinators". If the child is age 3 or older, you can help connect the family to their neighborhood public school, which can provide information on evaluation under Part B of IDEA, even if the child is not in kindergarten yet.

If you are interested in helping the family locate a pediatric health care professional for the child, contact your state Maternal and Child Health Hotline. The *Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit* provides information on how to get connected. You also can connect all families to parent training information centers or family to family health information centers. Information on these family support centers is also available in the [*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit*](#).

States are required to develop a plan for ongoing oversight and coordination of health care services for any child in foster care placement. Developmental and behavioral screening (and services as appropriate) can be included as a part of the plan child.

How do I select the right screening tool to fit my needs?

The compendium of screening tools that accompanies this Guide may help you learn more about the tool your agency is currently using or help you find a new screening tool to fit your needs. This list describes the evidence base behind certain standardized screening tools. Information is included on the cost, time to administer, training requirements, ease of use, and other factors that can help you find the right tool. Agencies should not interpret this list as recommending or requiring the use of a particular tool. Rather, it should be used to learn about a selection of screening tools that are supported by research and help you make informed decisions about the best fit for the program.

Many early intervention service programs and medical homes have adopted their own standardized developmental screening tools. When choosing a screening tool, it may be helpful to align with local referral and child service agencies to support developmental screening activities recommended by the early intervention service provider or medical home. It is also important to learn about whether or not the screening tool in use measures what it is supposed to measure with accuracy. Read about the tool in the compendium of screeners that accompanies this Guide to make sure the tool is of high quality and accurate in tracking development.

How do I use this list of screening tools?

The list of screening tools that accompanies this document is made up of two sections: a section of summary tables and a section of individual profiles. If you are looking for a new tool, start at the summary tables as they provide an overview of many different tools. The tables may help you narrow the range of tools to consider. Once you narrow down the screening tools that may fit your needs, you might choose a smaller set of tools to read about in more detail in the individual profile section. If your program already uses one of these tools, you can go straight to the profile section to read more about it.

Making a difference

Research indicates that the first five years of a child's life are critical to brain development, academic achievement, and later life outcomes. The short time it takes to conduct a developmental and behavioral screen can change the trajectory of a child's life forever. By incorporating a system of regular developmental and behavioral screening, YOU can play an important role in making sure all children thrive. We hope you find this User Guide, Screening Compendium, and the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) useful in supporting young children and their families on their developmental journey. Visit www.hhs.gov/watchmethrive for a complete set of resources.



Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!

Celebrating Developmental Milestones • Implementing Universal Screening • Improving Early Detection • Enhancing Developmental Supports