Communicating with Families about Developmental Screening Results
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Direct Service Skills
• screening and Assessment
Systems Expertise
• service delivery systems

Routine universal screening of young children with a validated tool promotes a better understanding of each child’s development. Early identification of potential delays allows for timely access to appropriate supports and services promoting optimal development for every child. (WECCP, 2014). Screening for developmental concerns is a way to open the door to conversations with families about health issues and developmental and behavioral aspects. Parents often have questions beyond health concerns and screening helps to identify and validate their concerns. Documentation of service notes and assessments are important tools for identifying possible concerns and helps us with the task of sharing screening results with families –which is a first step in the referral process toward early intervention. The New Mexico Home Visiting Program Standards (CYFD, 2016) outlines specific screenings and assessments that must be completed.

Home visitors are in a unique position to observe young children in early stages of development. We know developmental milestones and have the opportunity to observe the child and family on a monthly basis. We may be the first to notice potential challenges, delays and risks. We can talk with parents about screens and child development at each visit and find opportunities to build meaningful relationships that honors the principle that parents are the experts on their child (Brazelton, 2011). Messaging and communication with families about developmental screening and results should be clear, consistent, and direct. How we say the message to families is as important as what we say.

When sharing screening results, it is important to prepare written information and share information with families in a thoughtful way. (CDC, 2016) Home visitors do not diagnose yet; we can be supportive. We all want the best possible outcomes and
although having a conversation with families about concerns may be challenging, initiating the conversation means that you care about this family and their child’s development and learning (NAEYC, 2010).

**Sharing screening results**
Describe the results beyond the numerical score. For example, you might say, “These results may show a need for more support,” or “This screening tool helps us see the need for further assessment,” or, “The screening gives more information about __________, something that you have been wondering about.” An at-risk result means the child should be evaluated more thoroughly by a primary health care professional, or early intervention program.

Here are some considerations when presenting results in a thoughtful manner:
- Share results with parents as soon as possible
- Share results in person
- Prepare written documentation (copies of results, referral information, etc.)
- Highlight the child’s strengths and positive growth in development
- Keep the conversation positive, be honest, caring and objective
- Listen and respond carefully to parents’ questions and concerns
- Share results with parents in a clear, culturally sensitive, and blameless manner
- Avoid using terms like “pass,” “fail,” and “test”
- Schedule a follow-up visit with the family
- Affirm the family’s parenting skills and share that the results are not a reflection of parenting skills

**“Demystify” the referral process**
Once you share screening results let families know what may happen next. Be prepared to help families take the next steps by reassuring families you will walk alongside them as they navigate through the referral process. Developing a written plan can help the family with organizing appointments and paperwork and can include the referral agency, contact information and any follow up. Offer to call a local referral resource with the family. Offer to develop a list of questions the family may have for the referral agency. The written plan can also support family goals, such as activities that families can do at-home to support the child’s growth and development.

**Respect family culture**
If there is a concern about a screening result and the parent decides not to pursue a formal referral, it is important to respect their decision. Explore with the family other opportunities for support and offer to re-screen and continue to offer other resources. Health and wellness beliefs and values vary from family to family. Cultural considerations that may affect the family’s response. Provide ongoing support to family regardless of their decision to follow up with referral information.
Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- What meaning are parents making of their child’s behavior? How can you explore this meaning making with parents within the context of screening?
- How will you share screening results with parents in a culturally sensitive and thoughtful manner?
- What strategies have you used in the past that work well?
- Think about how you can strengthen other strategies where you need more support
- What can you say to encourage parents to ask questions?

References/Additional Resources
