



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

MAY 2025
RECOGNIZING DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNS

Child protection and healthy development are deeply interconnected. Child Welfare Professionals should help safeguard children from danger as well as serve a key role in promoting conditions that support children's long-term growth and well-being.

Developmental delays may be completely normal, and the child may catch up without intervention. Delays may also be indicators of exposure to danger in the household. The role of CPS is to identify the delay as relevant and gather further information for assessment and analysis.

Normal Developmental Delays

No Underlying Cause: The delay is not linked to a specific medical condition or disability.

Minor of Temporary Delays: Parents are aware of the area where attention is needed and have a plan to track and monitor progress. Parents are aware of when to seek help if the delay continues or worsens.

Specific Area for Assessment in CPS Practice

Growth faltering, or failure to thrive

Failure to thrive is medically diagnosed. Indicators the child may be experiencing this condition when the child's weight is consistently below the 5th percentile, their weight and height fall below the 5th percentile, or they show a significant decrease in their growth trajectory.

Possible Underlying Factors

Neglect: Insufficient food, improper nutrition, or inadequate care. It is less likely, but possible, that this may also occur if the child is exposed to physical or emotional abuse.

Symptom of Poverty: Food insecurity or housing instability, which could lead to unsafe or unhealthy living conditions.

Medical, Genetic, or Psychosocial Factors: Underlying medical or neurological diagnosis.



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Sentinel Injury – If you don't cruise, you shouldn't bruise

These are typically medically mild, superficial injuries that most often occur in infants who cannot hurt themselves. The most common form of sentinel injury is bruising. Sentinel injuries are often subtle signs of potential harm.

Approaching parents and caregivers to inquire about sentinel injuries requires sensitivity. Below is a suggestion to construct the conversation.

1. Start with a Sensitive Inquiry:

- **Acknowledge the seriousness:** Use language that conveys the gravity of the situation without being accusatory. For example, "We're concerned about this injury and want to explore some potential causes."
- **Show empathy and support:** Let the parents know you understand they are likely stressed and worried. Reassure them you're asking questions to better understand the situation.
- **Explain the purpose of the inquiry:** Clearly state that the goal is to ensure the child's safety and well-being, not to pass judgement.

2. Explain the Need for Further Medical Diagnosis or Treatment:

- **Provide context:** Explain why medical follow-up is necessary, such as to rule out other potential causes for the injury or to assess the severity of the injury.
- **Be transparent about the process:** Describe the types of tests that will be performed and what they entail, using clear and understandable language.
- **Address concerns:** Acknowledge and address the parents' questions and concerns about the tests and the potential outcomes.



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Sentinel Injury – Continued

3. Explain Negative Results:

- **Explain What negative results mean:** Explain that negative results from tests (like X-rays, CT scans, etc.) do not definitively rule out abuse, but may help rule out other possible explanations for the injury.
- **Emphasize the importance of further evaluation:** Even with negative results, it's still important to carefully consider the context of the injury and the child's developmental stage.
- **Discuss the possibility of further investigation:** If necessary, explain that further investigation may be needed, such as a consultation with a child abuse pediatrician and implications for CPS safety decision making.

4. Offer of Ongoing Support:

- **Reiterate your support:** Let the parents know you are available to provide ongoing support throughout the assessment and to answer any questions they may have.
- **Connect with relevant resources:** Provide information about resources that can offer support, such as child abuse hotlines, mental health services, or parent support groups.

5. Address Concerns About the Child's Well-being:

- **Reassure the child:** If appropriate, discuss the injury with the child in a calm and reassuring way. Explain that you are there to help them and to help them feel they are safe.
- **Provide emotional support:** Let the child know that it's okay to feel sad, angry, or scared. Offer a safe space for them to express their feelings.
- **Focus on positive aspects:** Highlight the child's strengths and resilience. Help them to feel like they have control over their lives.



MAY 2025 RECOGNIZING DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNS

Reflection on Content

What have you observed in a child's development that may have differed from typical milestones and how might environment, social or emotional factors be influencing these differences?

Action Item

Engage a parent or caregiver in a structured conversation to explore their concern and/or perceptions about their child's growth and behavior.