



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

MARCH 2025 ASSESSING CHILDREN WITH LIMITED COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Often, we come in with an idea of what communication should look like. That can be a barrier if we don't balance information we know regarding developmental milestones in conjunction with parental capacities and environmental factors. The brain's ability to learn communication is through a combination of observing and imitating adults, starting with basic cries to express needs, then gradually progressing to babblings, single words, and eventually forming sentences. Children birth to age five learn language used around them by parents and caregivers and their surroundings.

What Are We Looking for During Observation

Child Protection can learn to make observations and use listening skills to understand crying and what the baby is trying to communicate. There are many resources available as to the length of cries associated with age and the pitch of the cry.

There may be heightened concern about the amount of time the baby is crying which may be an indicator of distress if one or more of the following factors are also noted:

Appearing ill; facial body discoloration, sudden and/or persistent inconsolability, unexplained poor growth, developmental delay, history of previous neurological symptoms or suspicious injuries, high-pitched cry, other signs of abuse or neglect.

How We Assess Parental Protective Capacities with Infants That Cry

The National Institutes of Health back in 2012 studied infants with abusive head trauma, or shaken baby syndrome, and reported crying was the biggest trigger for the abuse; 63% of cases reported crying as the stimulus.

Child Protective Services should engage parents/caregivers in conversations to ascertain what (if any) measures parents have knowledge and/or skills around so crying does not become dangerous.

There's also the ability to discuss prevention through education and support planning (use of informal supports).



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After Crying There Are Words

The Child Welfare professional can assess toddler to age 5 observing non-verbal and verbal cues. Based on level of communication, the CW professional can use age-appropriate language to ask simple questions and play interactive games. At this age the professional is most heavily relying on the caregiver interviews to understand the child's receptive and expressive communication abilities. This includes questions such as:

With whom does your child spend most of his/her time?

What words do you use to describe _____ in your home?

What words do you use to explain certain objects or feelings?

The more information gathered from questions such as this, the easier time the professional may have trying to communicate with the child one-on-one.

Important Considerations with Assessing Communication Skills

Child Welfare professionals should pay particular attention to be culturally sensitive when assessing in this area. Children tend to communicate in a style that resembles their parents'/caregivers' way of communicating and diverse cultures converse and explain things different ways.





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Reflection on Content

Consider the methods in which you have attempted to learn information with non-verbal children. Were there ways in which you could have come better prepared to communicate? (think about observational skills, use of resources or collateral contacts)

Action Item

Plan to incorporate methods of communication through play during your next interaction with a child beginning new verbal skills. What item(s) can you bring to that interaction to increase the level of communication during the contact?