**Parents: When in Doubt Reach Out**

*Early identification of developmental delays is crucial*

*By Rebecca Bryant*

The first day of each new school year typically marks an important milestone in a child’s development. But a set of even more important developmental milestones actually begin as young as two months of age. By then, for example, most babies should be able to make sounds other than crying and hold their head up when on their tummy.

By six months, most babies can roll from their tummy onto their back and reach to grab a toy they want. At a year, they can pull themselves up to stand, walk holding furniture and play simple games with you like patty-cake.

All children develop at slightly different rates, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC has outlined developmental milestones like these up to age five to benchmark whether a child’s cognitive, social, motor, speech and other important skills are progressing on schedule – or appear to be delayed. These may be found on the CDC’s website by searching for “CDC’s Developmental Milestones.”

It’s important to identify any developmental delays early because they do not go away on their own. The earlier a child can receive therapy or services to help them develop the skills they lack, the better their outcome will be later on.

The good news is that Early Supports and Services for children with developmental delays are available to all children from birth to three who qualify, and are paid for by federal and state funding.

Throughout New Hampshire these services and the Early Intervention Evaluation to assess your child’s development are available through the ten nonprofit area agencies who serve people with developmental disabilities and their families located in each region of the state.

The initial evaluation is free for all children and parents may call an area agency directly to request one if they have concerns about their child. Qualification for free services is then determined by a child being evaluated as 33% behind where children are typically in their development at their age or being diagnosed with a condition like Autism or Down Syndrome.

Developmental screening is routinely conducted by pediatricians during well-child visits, but parents generally have the best sense of how their child is progressing developmentally. Even if your pediatrician doesn’t think something is wrong, you may still request an evaluation from your area agency. The evaluation is a valuable and powerful tool.

What’s different today is that we are seeing an increase in children whose development has been affected by the pandemic. Unfortunately, we have a population of children under the age of three who have lived in a world where for a long time everyone wore a mask and was subject to social distancing.

This cohort of young children has been limited in their ability to play with other kids. Many have not been to day care like their siblings, or even been able to attend a story time.

As a result, some of these children have not yet developed the skills needed to interact with their peers. They don’t make eye contact. They don’t know how to initiate greetings or recognize facial expressions. Their speech and language skills may be developing more slowly than they should due to the lack of socialization caused by the pandemic.

Interestingly, we are seeing an increase in referrals for developmental evaluation because parents are taking their children to parks and playgrounds now and are noting how their child compares to what they observe other children being able to do.

Early intervention is powerful. For example, one young couple was told by their pediatrician that their 10-week-old son might never walk. With weekly physical therapy early intervention services, he hit his developmental milestones. He crawled on time. He rolled on time. He walked on time.

His physical therapist later noticed that there was something off with his speech and the way he was chewing his food. She brought in other therapists to help in those areas and this now three-year-old boy walks and talks and eats normal food just like his age group peers. Not every child makes this kind of progress, but the earlier that developmental delays are identified the better the outcome.

We strongly encourage any parent of a younger child who has a concern that something might be off or different in their baby, infant or toddler’s development to ask to have their child evaluated to make sure everything is okay.

The good news is that with proper identification, a plan in place, and early intervention supports and services from therapists, children can develop the important developmental skills they need.

Purposefully identifying and addressing a child’s developmental delays early is absolutely crucial. As a parent you want to know, “Is this okay or is it not okay?” and an Early Intervention Evaluation can give you that answer.

*Rebecca Bryant is President and CEO of Lakes Region Community Services and chairs the board of Community Support Network, Inc., the association of New Hampshire’s ten area agencies which help people with developmental disabilities and their families lead fulfilling lives.

Area Agencies are located throughout the state and include Northern Human Services, Conway; Pathways of the River Valley, Claremont; Community Bridges, Concord; Monadnock Developmental Services, Keene; Gateways Community Services, Nashua; The Moore Center, Manchester; One Sky Community Service, Portsmouth; Community Partners, Dover and Community Crossroads, Salem.*