

# Developmental Delay or Disability?

## Making Early Identification of Your Child's Special Needs

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Parents of young children, particularly children under the age of 5, often wonder whether their child is meeting all the important developmental milestones. Many guiltily admit that they want to know how their son or daughter compares to other kids their age, and they become concerned if they hear that another child can do something theirs cannot.

Sometimes these worries simply trouble loving parents who want the best for their children, and they soon realize that their child just needed a little more time to accomplish the same task. Other times, and at an ever-rising level over the past decade, the concerns of parents are justified, leaving them to wonder, 'what do I do now, and whose attention can I bring this to?'

If this situation sounds familiar, the first step in the identification process is to bring your concerns to your child's pediatrician. The doctor can be a very powerful influence when making the initial decision about whether to seek formal testing, and also later when determining what types of services are important and appropriate.

Between the ages of 1 and 3 (or prior to the start of preschool), your child is entitled to a free assessment/screening, typically referred to by a pediatrician. This is usually performed by the infant-and-toddler program in your area. If the results of the assessment indicate and identify a need, the commonwealth will provide your child with certain services, potentially in and out of your home, free of charge.

Once your child reaches the age of 3, the types and availability of those services may change. These are the preschool years, where by your child will receive services through an individual education program (IEP) designed just for them and administered by the early-intervention program located within your town. This IEP, subject to review and revision, follows your child into kindergarten at age 5 and beyond. Parents have a right to be involved in the contents of the IEP, and you should remain as involved as possible.

From the special-education perspective, having a child attend a private or public preschool can be pivotal. Preschool is often the first social interaction outside the home



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or parent-supervised playdates a child has. Because there are so many quickly changing and growing stages up until the time a child begins to read and write, there is more than one appropriate time to discover a special need.

When your child has been attending a private preschool, and you learn that early intervention is needed, you may be faced with the difficult decision of whether to take the child out of the private school, where he or she has become comfortable, and enroll them in your town's early-childhood program. You may ponder the benefit of continuing to pay for a more expensive private school when a public alternative is available.

It is important to note, however, that the private preschool can still be used as a valuable social-skills developmental tool for continued interaction in a safe environment that your child already trusts. In those instances, the private preschool can be used in conjunction with the town program for services to ensure that your child is receiving the best overall services and is engaged in the best possible action plan to suit his or her particular need.

Prior to the preschool years, your child

may not yet have been identified as having a special need for which services are required and necessary. It is important to recognize that the lack of identification is not necessarily a parental failure, but can be due to the fact that your child has not yet been placed in a situation where his or her need would be discovered. Parents should always embrace the assessment suggestion and never shy away from it. Neglecting to identify your child's need sets them up for unnecessary difficulties in later school years. Early intervention can have a huge impact on the overall development of a child and his or her ability to succeed in school.

By way of example, a trained preschool teacher can recognize and identify issues involving hand-eye coordination, speech, and independent social interactions that may not be obvious to a parent who is with

their child every day. If a teacher suggests that your child should have an assessment, it is because they have observed your child on multiple occasions having difficulties or experiencing an inability to meet a developmental stage that is imperative to continued learning and/or social development. Additionally, sometimes a need is not discoverable until kindergarten or even first grade, when a child begins to read, write, and engage in reading comprehension. A disservice is done to a child, however, if an assessment is not performed when a delay or disability is suspected.

Remember, you are your child's strongest advocate. If you suspect your child may have a special need, show your strength and concern as a parent and get them the assistance they are entitled to. ■

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