



## Developmental Screening in Pennsylvania Child Welfare Services (Ages & Stages)

### Research Notes



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**pennsylvania**  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

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### Issue #2 (October, 2009). Changing Child Welfare Practice: What are the advantages to doing early developmental screening?

Interviews have been conducted with child welfare workers in each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. Thanks to all of you for completing these interviews and managing the database that will help us learn more about the needs of very young children and their families who are referred to PA child welfare services.

This is the second of a series of Research Notes that will address study topics throughout this research. This Research Note focuses on what child welfare workers say about the advantages to conducting developmental screenings.

#### **Introduction:**

Pennsylvania is implementing one of the most comprehensive screening policies in the country for young children involved with child welfare. The state's commitment to studying this effort and what it means for families, agencies, and children, puts Pennsylvania in a unique position to share with other states, the benefits and challenges to screening. As you learn more about how screening is going in your county, or have information to share about what your county is doing that works well (or doesn't), please let us know! Contact Rachel Winters at 412-624-3838 or [rw14@pitt.edu](mailto:rw14@pitt.edu).

#### **Research:**

Research is being conducted by the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work to understand county, child, and family needs concerning screening and early intervention. The research is being conducted in three phases—interviews with child welfare workers and early intervention providers, a statewide screening database, and interviews with caregivers about their experiences and access to services for their child. Interviews with child welfare are complete, early intervention interviews and the screening database are underway, and caregiver interviews are planned to begin January, 2010.

This research brief presents child welfare workers' opinions about what the benefits are to conducting developmental screenings.

## **Results**

The responses to the open-ended question were grouped according to common themes.

### Screening as a method of engaging families

Individuals who were interviewed reported that the process of screening helped them to engage the family by talking about their child's development. Also, caregivers seemed to be open to listening to the information and were interested in learning more.

### Educating parents about early child development

The screening tool can be used to explain and demonstrate to parents about what their child should be doing and when. This kind of "real world" demonstration is more powerful than explaining a list of developmental milestones.

#### **Your comments concerning the screening tool and caregivers:**

"Good tool for caseworker interaction with the parent and for the parent-child bond."

"The screening is a nice way to engage parents and parents enjoy the process."

"Young parents who are apprehensive are shown that their child is developing normally"

"Caregivers are open to taking their caseworker's suggestions on how to work with their children with concerns"

### Educating workers about early child development

Similar to parents, caseworkers also became more aware of the developmental milestones and the ways neglect and abuse can impact

child development.

### Early identification of children with delays ; children "not falling through cracks": Increased volume of referrals to EI

The perception of those interviewed was that the screenings identify children with developmental problems who may not have otherwise been identified. They also perceived that child welfare workers were making more referrals to their early intervention providers.

### Children receiving services

Interviews revealed that not only are children with developmental problems being identified, they are also receiving services that address their issues. A follow-up study will examine whether or not those services are being received after referral.

### Improved collaboration with Early Intervention

Those interviewed believed that their county child welfare system and the early intervention providers were communicating and collaborating to a degree not experienced prior to implementing the screenings.

### Changes in case worker attitude about the value of screening

Those interviewed described how some of the caseworkers came to see the practice of screening as valuable. Moreover, they have become advocates for screening as a regular part of casework.

#### **Your thoughts on the screening tool and caseworkers:**

"Because of the screening, workers get a better understanding of developmental milestones"

"Caseworkers gain a better relationship with parents and children they are working with."

## Discussion—the challenge for leaders

One of the challenges facing supervisors is how to encourage workers to engage in practices that have not been seen as “typical” of child welfare casework, such as screening for developmental delays or for early social and emotional problems. Child protection casework is evolving into a practice that promotes child well-being as well as safety. Caseworkers are one of the few individuals who have access to the family during the early years when prevention can have a powerful impact. What can a supervisor do to help their workers see screening practices as part of their role?

Research tells us that the adoption of new practices is influenced by the interaction between the new practice, the adopter and the environment (Rodgers, 1995). What follows are suggested strategies for creating a positive context for adopting the practice.

- Help your workers to understand that finding out about problems, engaging with, and educating parents now saves time later—stressing the relative advantage of the practice.
- Focusing on the evidence is also a good supervisory intervention. Peer to peer experiential evidence can be very persuasive (Dopson et al., 2002). A worker’s report of how doing the screening helped him/her identify a child with delays can be a powerful persuader for the reluctant adopters.
- As workers begin to change their attitude through positive experiences, these individuals then become advocates of the practice. Taking time in meetings to discuss the experiences (both positive and negative) can create an atmosphere for adoption of screening into caseworker

practice.

- A supportive infrastructure is important. Are your caseworkers trained and comfortable with doing the screening? Do they need training or booster sessions? Do you have a worker who is comfortable with conducting the screenings and who can help mentor the workers who are struggling with learning the skill? The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program is a training resource for the screening tool, contact Rachael Ickes at [rmi6@pitt.edu](mailto:rmi6@pitt.edu) or at 717-605-0265.

## Summary

Child welfare workers in Pennsylvania’s 67 counties report advantages to using standardized developmental screening with families. Workers report using the tool as a method to engage families, educate parents about children’s development, and learn more about child development themselves.

Workers believe the tool leads to more children in need being identified and referred to early intervention services. Supervisors who want to promote the practice should take time in meetings to discuss worker experiences, both positive and negative. The relative advantage of screening is that finding out about family problems, engaging with, and educating parents now may save time later.

## References

- Rodgers, E. (1995). *The Diffusion of Innovations*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Free Press.
- Dopson, S., FitzGerald, L., Ferlie, E., Gabbay, J., & LuLocock, L (2002). *Health Care Manager Review*, 27(3), 35-47.

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