

Early Intervention

When Mental Health Services May Be Needed

Parents sometimes wonder if their child's development is normal or if their child's behavior might mean that a problem exists. Although early childhood development does vary greatly, parents often seem to have an intuitive sense about their children.

Many parents whose children have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder have said things like, "I knew by the time she was two something was wasn't quite right" or even, "He was different from the moment he was born." In some cases the parents may not raise the concern, but an early childhood professional who works with a child may suggest that a child they work with may benefit from an evaluation. Even though some neurological disorders such as autism or fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) cannot be totally overcome, the effects can be lessened with early intervention and these children, too, have a wonderful chance of growing into mentally healthy adults.

What Options Are Available If My Child Needs Help?

If a parent has concerns, several options are available. Some families will have their child evaluated by a doctor—perhaps their pediatrician—who can advise the parents about what to do next. Others may contact their school district's Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) program to learn about their screening and evaluation process and available services. For more about ECSE, visit <http://education.state.mn.us/EarlyLearningServices/search.do>.

When parents do decide to have their child seen, it's not uncommon for parents to feel conflicted, scared, nervous, and/or confused about the process. Many parents feel very vulnerable and may need a safe and supportive place to ask questions. They may have significant concerns, even some fears about their child's future. Along with getting help for their child, parents should ask about parent support groups—this is where parents share their experiences and concerns with other parents who have similar problems.

What If a Parent Decides Not to Seek Help Right Away?

Some families will take a wait-and-see approach because they believe that their child "will just grow out of it." If the decision is made to wait and see, parents should continue to watch their child's behavior. If the behaviors that are causing concern happen more often or get worse, the family should consider consulting their doctor or a mental health professional.

What If Someone Else Says My Child Needs Help?

Sometimes a childcare provider will raise a concern. Some parents follow through right away but others wait. In some cases waiting may be acceptable. If a parent does wait, the care provider who made the original suggestion will likely continue to provide the parents with observations about their child's behavior. Depending on the child's symptoms and behaviors, however, a parent who doesn't respond to the suggestion that their child be evaluated may be considered neglectful.

Why Early Intervention

One study found that preschoolers are expelled for behavior problems three times more often than K-12 students.

The Value of Early Intervention

Early intervention services can prevent the need for services later in life.

Giving children the support they need when they are learning to control their behavior and express themselves is a great way to help them develop good mental health.

Early intervention can improve a child's ability to form meaningful relationships and help them learn the social skills necessary for school success.

Pre-Evaluation Tips

If you have concerns about your child and you can't find another explanation—such as oncoming illness or a change in routine—start here:

- Record specific behaviors and watch for patterns.
- Find out if the behaviors are happening in other settings.
- Try simple strategies first. For example, if your child is anxious, see if a calm activity reduces the anxiety.

