

Concerns about Autism: Talking with Families

Have you been in an assessment or on an early intervention visit and had concerns that the child may possibly have characteristics of autism? Have you wondered how or if you should discuss this with family members?

Remember, early interventionists provide resources, information, support and linkages **regardless of developmental delays, disabilities or diagnosis.**

Who CAN diagnose Autism?

Physicians and clinical psychologists typically use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) to diagnose autism. Other trained providers such as licensed clinical social workers, school psychologists and speech language pathologists who have received specialized training in autism and who have demonstrated competence in diagnoses may also diagnose autism.

This sample conversation can provide you with ideas of how to share concerns about autism without making a diagnosis:

I'm so glad I have had this opportunity to get to know you and Jeremy. He is a delightful little boy. It is really clear to me that he loves his dinosaurs and playing with trains. You have provided us with some great information about what he likes to do at home, what his everyday routines look like and how he interacts with other family members and friends. It sounds like he has a great relationship with his Grandpa!

As you've heard from the assessment results and Jeremy's eligibility determination, we do have some concerns about Jeremy's language and social skills (*provide a few specific examples of the child's behavior/skills and what is typically expected at the child's age*). We believe it might be beneficial to have Jeremy evaluated further by a physician who specializes in young children's growth and development. This additional assessment would help you and us answer some questions about his progress and how we can support his development. Getting help early can make a big difference. Can I help you get an appointment with a doctor who can take a closer look at Jeremy's development?

If a parent approaches you with concerns that his or her child might have autism, this might help you respond:

Mrs. Smith, it sounds like you have some particular concerns about Jeremy's development. Can you tell me more about that?

[Listen to her concerns. See if she has noticed the same behaviors you have, and share examples that are the same as or different from

hers. Parents often research autism online and have a lot of information.]

It sounds like you are really worried about autism and you've done a lot of research. As an early interventionist, I am not trained to give a formal diagnosis such as autism. I can, however, provide you with some information about common characteristics of autism. Would that be helpful? I can also help you get connected with a physician or clinical psychologist who can assess Jeremy further and help us get some answers that will guide us as we work together to support Jeremy. You can think about those options, talk to your husband and let me know how you would like to proceed.

Tips for these conversations with parents

The CDC Act Early campaign offers these tips:

- Highlight some of the child's strengths; tell the parent what the child does well.
- Use evidence based resources and materials to provide information. This helps parents know that you are basing your comments on facts.
- Talk about specific behaviors that you have observed when interacting with the child.
- Try to make it a discussion. Pause a lot, giving the parent time to think and to respond.
- Expect that if the child is the oldest in the family, the parent might not have experience to know the milestones the child should be reaching.
- Listen to and watch the parent to decide on how to proceed. Pay attention to tone of voice and body language.
- This might be the first time the parent has become aware that the child might have a delay. Give the parent time to think about this and even speak with the child's other caregivers.
- Encourage the parent to talk with the child's health care provider.
- Remind the parent that early interventionists will help support him/her through the process.

