Developmental Concerns in Early Childhood: The Important Role of Parents

The 2005 Los Angeles County WIC Survey: The Fifth in a Series of Reports

Although there is mounting evidence that early identification of and intervention for developmental delay yield the greatest benefits for children as well as significant cost savings, critical barriers remain in identifying children early and accessing adequate services. A number of recent initiatives, including the First 5 LA-funded Early Developmental Screening and Intervention initiative, and the Early Identification and Intervention Collaborative in Los Angeles County, are working to address these barriers by seeking to change existing systems such that parents, health care providers and early childhood education specialists can more easily work together toward a shared goal of early identification and intervention. These initiatives are strengthened by data that illustrate the concerns expressed by parents about their young children, as well as by the recognition that parents play the most central role in the early identification of developmental delay. Parents are the best observers of their children and can most effectively support the development of their children by raising their concerns with health care providers and early childhood education professionals, thereby receiving information and resources their children may require. The purpose of this brief is to illustrate the concerns expressed by low-income mothers about their young children's development, learning and behavior. The data are intended to illuminate areas in which broader policy initiatives may focus, and are also intended to assist health and early childhood education providers to identify the key concerns expressed by parents.

This report is based on data collected during the 2005 L.A. County WIC Survey, a survey of 5,015 families served by the WIC Program. For more information, please see the first brief in the series at www.First5LA.org/research/phfe-wic. The survey included 12 questions pertaining to developmental concerns of early childhood. In the survey, 3,495 parents with children between 1 and 5 years of age were asked whether they thought a variety of age-appropriate developmental issues were "not a problem," "a small problem" or "a big problem" for their young child. Developmental domains included (1) Social and language development (understanding language, making speech sounds or talking and making words); (2) Cognitive development (learning to do things on his/her own and success in age-appropriate activities); and (3) Physical development (seeing and hearing, using arms, legs, hands and fingers appropriately). Approximately 63% of those surveyed were Spanish-speaking caregivers and the remainder were English-speaking.
How Concerned Are WIC Parents?

Survey results demonstrate that it is quite common for parents to have concerns about their young children, and most developmental concerns are mild in nature.

- 60% of parents report having one or more mild concerns.
- 8% of parents report having one or more major concerns.
- Very rarely do parents have multiple major concerns.

As these data represent self-reported parental concerns, it is important to note that one parent may view the same developmental issue as major that another parent views as mild. In addition, parents may not recognize concerns that providers recognize. These data suggest that health care providers and early childhood education professionals engage parents in discussions about their child’s development, as parents often have areas of mild concern that could be acknowledged and addressed.

What Are WIC Parents Concerned About?

**Figure 1: Children’s Social and Language Development**

Social and language development issues concern parents the most. As shown in Figure 1, the most common mild concern is how the child behaves. The most common major concern of parents is the child’s ability to talk and make words. Overall, English-speaking parents tend to be more concerned about how the child behaves, and Spanish-speaking parents are more concerned about language development.

**Figure 2. Children’s Cognitive Development**

Across the three cognitive domains measured, about 1% of all parents report that cognitive skills are a major concern for their children; 7% to 15% report that they are a minor concern. Spanish-speaking parents report having more concerns about their child’s cognitive skills than English-speaking parents.
Only a small portion of parents (fewer than 4%) report that using hands, fingers, arms and legs, seeing or hearing is a problem for their child. Physical problems tend to relate to health issues, as parents who report physical development as a problem for their child also report their child to be in poorer health.

Parental Concerns by Children's Sex and Age

Regardless of background, parents have more developmental concerns about boys than girls. 61% of parents of boys versus 54% of parents of girls report having a mild concern; 11% of parents of boys versus 7% of parents of girls report having a major concern. Except for feelings and moods, both English- and Spanish-speaking parents tend to be more concerned about boys across all the developmental domains.

As expected, developmental concerns change with age. As children grow older, parents are increasingly concerned with how they behave. While parents are considerably less concerned about their children learning to do things for themselves, this concern increases slightly with age. Parents’ concerns over emotional development (child’s feelings and moods) and social development (getting along with others) first increase steadily between the age of 1 to 3, peak at 3, then start to slightly decline. Parental concerns about language development are highest at ages 1 and 2, when children are using their first words. As children grow older and presumably begin to acquire language, parents are decreasingly concerned with talking and making words. However, for those children not expressing any language by 18-24 months, parental concerns about language generally continue to increase with age.
Conclusions

- It is very common for parents to be concerned about their developing young child. In most cases, these concerns are mild. The breadth of concerns highlights that it is important for health care and early childhood education professionals to engage parents in conversation about their children, not only to identify any developmental delays, but also to provide the appropriate information parents need to support their child’s development and address their concerns.

- Health care providers and early childhood education program providers need to encourage parents to share their concerns. This is particularly true regarding children’s behavior and language development, as parents are the best observers when it comes to these domains of the child’s development. Health care providers often recognize that behavior and language expressed in a 15-minute pediatric appointment are rarely indicative of the child’s typical behavior at home. As a result, health care providers tend to rely on parent reports about their child’s language and behavior as part of the clinical assessment. To assess behavior, language and other domains of development, professional recommendations call for primary care doctors to use standardized developmental screening instruments such as the PEDS and ASQ to engage parents in a dialogue about their child’s development. Not only will such instruments aid the provider in identifying aspects of development that need follow-up, but the ensuing conversations with parents will also provide an opportunity for the provider to make recommendations for home activities that can address the underlying concerns. Early care and education programs along with WIC programs may play a supportive role by encouraging parents to discuss their observations and concerns with health care providers as part of regular child health visits.

- Parents are most concerned with their child’s language and social development, and Spanish-speaking parents are particularly concerned with their children’s language acquisition. Parents need to know that there are things they can do to help children with talking and making words, such as reading together and sharing picture books. Studies have shown that reading and talking in any language is equally beneficial. Health care or educational providers who regularly come into contact with new caregivers should encourage them to read to their children early and often, and in the language they know.

- For effective early identification and response to take place, health care and early childhood professionals, parents, and specialized early childhood programs need to work hand in hand. Policy efforts designed to clearly define roles, services and desired outcomes are necessary to steer efforts in the direction of a systemic approach to the early identification of developmental delay.

The Data Mining Project

The Data Mining Project is a Research Partnership between PHFE-WIC and First 5 LA. The primary goal of the Project is to provide comprehensive data about the low-income 0–5 population in Los Angeles County served by the WIC Program.

WIC is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. The 2005 L.A. County WIC Survey was conducted with a random sample of 5,015 WIC families. For more information about the survey, please visit www.lawicdata.org and click on the link “Report #1 Overview of the Survey.”

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First 5 LA

First 5 LA is a unique child advocacy organization created by California voters to invest tobacco tax revenues in programs for improving the lives of children in Los Angeles County, from prenatal through age 5. First 5 LA champions health, education and safety causes concerning young children and families. For additional information about First 5 LA, our partners and projects, visit www.first5la.org.

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Acknowledgments:

We gratefully acknowledge Lu Jiang, Ph.D., Moira Inkelas, Ph.D., Sarah Martinez, Ph.D. and Michael Regalado, MD for their participation in the writing and review of this brief.