



Early Identification for Children with Special Needs¹



You may be the first to notice that a child in your child care setting has special needs. Perhaps no one has realized that a problem exists or perhaps parents² deny that their child has a problem. The family physician may have told the parents that the child will outgrow it. Yet parents need to know if you think their child has special needs. However, it is ultimately the parent's decision to seek help.

Taking the following 10 steps can lead to securing help for the child, the family and child care providers — everyone on the team.

1 Observation

Observe the child at different times of the day. Document your observations without interpretation. Provide clear evidence of the child's difficulties and always include the child's strengths. Be concrete.
For example: In morning circle, child imitated hand and body gestures to songs. When story was read, got up from circle three times; teacher had to bring child back to the group.

2 Strengths and Needs

Develop a list of the child's strengths and needs.
For example: Strengths – enjoys the program; likes water play; plays with cars. Needs – unable to verbally communicate, grabs toys from other children.

3 Consultation

Share your observations of the child with a supervisor. Decide on the best overall approach to help the child and family.
For example: Assign one person to spend more time with the child to build a positive relationship. That person should play a key role in communicating with the family.

4 Building Rapport

Develop your relationship with the child's parents. Ask about the child at home: favourite toys, communication skills, response to routines. This valuable information can help you better understand the child. Often the parent has the same concerns about their child and is waiting for someone to validate and assist them in accessing help.

5 Meeting with the Family

Arrange a meeting with the child's family. Be specific: *"I'd like to set up a time to talk with you about helping Johnny with his speech."* During the meeting, share specific examples of your observations, noting both the child's strengths and needs. Never diagnose or label the child. Put your feedback in the context of the child's ability to manage in a group setting. Come prepared with information about specialized services available to help the child and family.

6 Patience

Allow the parent time to consider their options and make an informed decision. If the parent agrees to involve additional services to help their child, have the parent sign a consent form so you can make a referral to the appropriate service. If a parent chooses not to pursue the issue further, continue maintaining communication with the parent. Gaining a parent's trust takes time. Parents' concerns can emerge gradually. Invite parents into the program to observe and discuss their child's progress.

7 Support Plan

Make a plan to support the child in your program using the expertise of your team. Set one or two specific goals that both teachers and parents can work on. Make goals achievable. Make a date for the team to review the child's progress. Set the child and team up for success. Teach the child skills that he needs.

For example: To facilitate play skills, turn taking and appropriate language, have one teacher sit with the child with special needs and another child from the group.

8 Resources

Involve outside resources to provide support. Your provincial/territorial licensing consultant can help identify available services. A resource consultant can visit your program, assess the child with special needs and assist in developing an individual support plan. An effective consultant facilitates the partnership between the centre, the family and any outside resources needed.

9 Training

Educate staff about the child's special needs through training by appropriate professionals. Circulate articles and/or videos to help staff better understand the child's particular needs.

10 Policies

Ensure that your centre has an inclusion policy that covers ways to access support for the team. This policy should be included and reviewed with parents upon the child's enrollment. Make all community resource information available to all parents.

Notes

1. A child with special needs refers to any child whose behaviour and/or development concerns you.
2. Parent refers to the adult(s) responsible for the child when not in care.