Monitoring the health, development, learning and wellbeing of young children through the use of screening tools

Numerous studies have documented the importance of healthy development in the early years of life for children’s educational and life outcomes. Monitoring early childhood growth, development and health is an important indicator of future health outcomes and a fundamental component of universal child and family health services. Developmental monitoring, conducted in partnership with parents, aims not only to detect delays early, but also identify and intervene in risk factors and promote child health, development and wellbeing.

Concerns raised through developmental monitoring should lead to information provision, screening, review, or referral for further assessment. Monitoring child health, development and well-being allows for the early identification of children with developmental delay, and provision of early childhood intervention services. However, for many families, developmental monitoring simply leads to reassurance.

In most developed countries, child growth and development monitoring programmes typically include the routine measurement of height and weight, screening tests and discussions with parents regarding developmental milestones. They also include the provision of parent information and education regarding child development, health, illness and safety, and often include immunisation schedules. In Australia, all States and Territories have a system of free, universally accessible ‘well-child’ care for children birth to school age, with six to ten scheduled contacts. These services provide a comprehensive approach for the promotion, prevention, early detection, and intervention of the physical, emotional or social factors affecting young children and their families (FaHCSIA, 2011).

Monitoring the health, development and wellbeing of young children is a partnership between parents and professionals. Many parents have some concerns about one or more aspects of their child’s health, development, behaviour, or social and emotional wellbeing. Many of these concerns relate to ‘normal’ and transient developmental behaviours (e.g. fussy eating, tantrums, toileting) that can be challenging for parents to understand and manage. Parents may need reassurance that
their child’s development is on track, and accurate information and appropriate strategies to guide them. However, some developmental behaviours are more severe and persistent, and the concerns of their parents are well-founded (FaCHSIA, 2011).

The Parents’ Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) provides an opportunity for parents/carers to talk with a professional about their child’s health, development, learning and wellbeing. The ‘conversational’ approach of PEDS is in line with current research which demonstrates that if parents are asked the right questions in the right way they are very reliable observers of their child’s behaviour and development, and when they have concerns there is considerable likelihood that the child will have problems. However, lack of parental concern may not mean that the child’s behaviour and development is ‘normal’ as parental recall of developmental milestones may be biased, particularly if a significant delay is not present (Glascoe, 2003; Glascoe et al., 1989). Best practice monitoring strategies such as the PEDS, which incorporate parent knowledge and professional expertise, are critical in promoting child health, development and wellbeing.

References


