

# Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!

## A Home Visitor's Guide for Developmental and Behavioral Screening

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
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## A Home Visitor's Guide for Developmental and Behavioral Screening



As a home visitor, you are in a unique position to become a trusted partner of children and families. You are aware of the strengths and vulnerabilities that can impact a child day-by-day and across his lifetime. Because of this, you are well-positioned to support the health and well-being of families, including the promotion of family skills and relationships that support the health and development of the infant/child.

Not only are you focused on strengthening families, but you are observing the development of young children over time. You may be the first to notice potential developmental and behavioral delays. When delays are caught early, you can ensure that children and families receive the information and extra support they need. This approach to partnering with families will ensure that children have the best possible start to a bright future. That is why we are providing you with this guide on how you can best support the development of young children in families you serve. A comparable guide has been designed and distributed to early care and education

providers, early intervention service and early childhood special education providers, primary care providers, behavioral health providers and child welfare case workers.

Accompanying this guide is a list of standardized developmental and behavioral screening tools and the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#), which includes information about healthy development, developmental and behavioral concerns, where to go for help, how to talk to families, and tips on how to best support children. If you are part of a network of home visitors, we encourage you to work with your colleagues and director to implement universal developmental and behavioral screening of each child you visit. We hope this guide, together with the screening tool list and [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) will support your work with families in helping all children develop in a healthy way and reach their full potential.

### ***What influences child development and behavior?***

Starting at birth and continuing throughout childhood, children reach milestones in how they play, learn, speak, act, and move. Skills such as taking a first step, smiling for the first time, and waving "bye-bye" are called developmental milestones. Children develop at their own pace, so it can be difficult to tell exactly when a child will learn a given skill. However, developmental milestones give a general idea of the changes to expect as a child gets older. Developmental and behavioral screening plays an important role in early detection and obtaining appropriate supports for children who may be experiencing delays for any number of reasons.

Many factors can influence child development, including biology and early experiences with caregivers and peers. Factors like warm and secure relationships, enriching learning opportunities, and proper nutrition, exercise, and rest can make a big difference in healthy child development. On the other hand, poverty, unstable housing, parental stress and adverse events such as household dysfunction, maltreatment, abuse, neglect, exposure to alcohol and substance abuse, violence, and/or trauma can have serious negative impacts on child development and behavior. To learn more about the effects of adverse early childhood experiences, check out the [Early Childhood Trauma](#) and [Identifying and Providing Services to Young Children Who Have Been Exposed to Trauma](#) resources in the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#).

### Child Maltreatment, Abuse, and Neglect

We recognize that in the course of conducting screening, providers may discover situations of concern, in particular where they suspect child maltreatment or neglect. We know that adverse experiences like these have been shown to negatively affect brain and cognitive development, attachment, and later academic achievement and have enduring physical, intellectual, and psychological repercussions into adolescence and adulthood.

Home visitors are required by law to report suspicions of abuse or neglect to state child protective services (CPS) agencies. If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected or if domestic or sexual abuse is disclosed, contact your local Child Protective Service (CPS) or law enforcement agency so professionals can assess the situation. Keep in mind that CPS agencies are better equipped to investigate the home situation and have the resources to provide needed family support. Many States have a toll-free number to call to report suspected child abuse or neglect. To find out where to call, consult the *Child Welfare Information Gateway* publication, [State Child Abuse Reporting Numbers](#).

For additional resources, check out Childhelp<sup>®</sup>, a national organization that provides crisis assistance and other counseling and referral services. The [Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#) is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with professional crisis counselors who have access to a database of 55,000 emergency, social service, and support resources. All calls are anonymous. Contact them at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453).

### ***What is developmental and behavioral screening?***

Developmental and behavioral screening is a first line check of a child's development using a developmental and behavioral screening tool. A developmental and behavioral screening tool is a formal research-based instruments that asks questions about a child's development, including language, motor, cognitive, social, and emotional development. A screening does not provide a diagnosis, rather, it indicates whether a child is on track developmentally and if a closer look by a specialist is needed. All children should receive screening as part of routine health and development services and not just episodic or as concerns arise. Screening results can be both reassuring to you and your families, but also help you plan how to best support the development of the children in your service. Screening results can be used to open discussions with families and referrals with physicians and development and early education specialists for more in depth evaluation and supports.

## *What is developmental monitoring?*

Developmental monitoring is a flexible and repeated observation of children’s developmental milestones over time. Different from screening, developmental monitoring is more frequent and less formal. Within home visiting programs, developmental monitoring is often embedded in the curriculum or particular model’s best practice and guidance. Activities during home visits often focus on the observation of the parent-child relationship and actions that promote child development. Careful attention is paid to progression in developmental milestones, caregiver attunement, emotional engagement, language stimulation, joint attention and turn-taking in play. Monitoring can help you decide if a child should receive a formal developmental screen or see a developmental and behavioral specialist. Encouraging families to use developmental monitoring checklists can help clarify what behaviors they should be observing in their children.

## *How often should children be monitored and screened?*

Children’s development should be *monitored* on an ongoing basis, in the home, child care settings, and anywhere else children spend their time. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends developmental and behavioral screening with a standardized developmental screening tool when a child is 9, 18, and 24 or 30 months of age. Although there are specific ages that screening is recommended, screening should be done at any age if you and/or the child’s family are concerned about a child’s development. These screenings may be done in early childhood settings, schools, community-based intervention programs, or in the child’s [medical home](#), the model of comprehensive children’s health care recommended by the AAP.

## *A Team Approach*

Developmental and behavioral screening and support is a team effort. There are many different professionals that interact with children and families. Parents and families are at the center of children’s support teams. Other important members of the team include early care and education providers, medical providers, early intervention service providers, home visitors, and behavioral health specialists, among others. As a member of the team, you should encourage and remind families to communicate developmental or behavioral concerns, screening results, and support plans to all members of the team. With everyone on the same page, children can get the support they need in *every* setting.

A developmental and behavioral screening passport, similar to an immunization card, is a tool to help families keep track of their children’s screening records. It can be used to inform all members of the team of the child’s screening record. A passport is included in this [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#). Encourage families to use it and share it with all of the professionals on the child’s team.

### **Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive! Passport**



One tool for helping parents to monitor developmental progress is the use of a screening passport, which is similar to an immunization card or booklet. This tool can help parents keep track of their child's screening records and share screening information with providers. A passport is included in this *Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive Toolkit* and can be shared with parents.

## *When should I talk to families about development and screening?*

Developmental monitoring and screening should be considered an everyday part of a home visitor's commitment to ensuring the healthy development of young children with all families. If a developmental and behavioral screening is to be conducted, explain the screening and offer assurance that it is a regularly performed screen for all children, like a hearing or vision screen. Celebrating developmental milestones together helps to assure families that their children are developing successfully. In addition, you can encourage families to talk directly to their primary healthcare provider about their child's development at every well child visit.

If you have concerns about a child's development, have a more in-depth conversation with caregivers about screening. Remember, all children are different and do not develop at the same pace, but if you notice a child is behind his peers socially, emotionally, or in any other way over time, you should speak up. Engage families in the screening process, and share information on helpful resources and services as needed.

## *How do I engage families in the screening process?*

Check [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!](#) for the soon-to-be-released learning module "Talking to Families about Developmental Screening," to guide you in talking to families. You also can connect all families to parent training information centers, family-to-family health information centers, or parent-to-parent programs that connect new parents of children with special needs with experienced parents for emotional support and help finding information and resources. Information on these family support centers is also available in the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#). Here are a few helpful tips to get you started in the meantime:

### **Talk to families before screening**

- When talking to families, it is best to use the language that they use at home.
- Start off by pointing out something positive. Name a skill or behavior the child is doing well and note their progress.
- If you are concerned about a child's development, point out the specific behavior the child is struggling with and ask families if they observe the same behaviors. Ask if their child care provider or other family member has observed similar behaviors. It is okay to say, "I may be overly concerned, but I just want to make sure".
- Use and share the [Learn the Signs. Act Early](#) developmental factsheets to support your observations on the child's strengths and challenges. This will assure families you are basing your comments on facts.
- Explain what developmental and behavioral monitoring and screening is and note that it is a normal process to make sure children are on track in their development. Give them time to listen, reflect, and provide input.
- Stress that a screening does **not** provide a diagnosis.
- Ask families if they know whether their child has been screened in the past. If so, talk about the results in a confidential environment. Remember that multiple screens for the same child in a short period of time and for the same purpose can be counter-productive. You should be aware of and coordinate with screening activities conducted by other providers, including schools, Head Start and child care providers.
- If they have not been screened in the past, ask the family for permission to perform a screening using a standardized tool.

- Provide families with informative materials and places they can go to learn more.

### Walking families through the screening process

- If a family informs you that their child has not been screened in the past or they have concerns about their child, ask the family for permission to perform a screening using a standardized tool and explain the survey will take about 5 minutes. Feel free to let the parent or caregiver know that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be screened for general development at 9, 18, and 24 or 30 months of age or whenever a parent or provider has a concern.
- If the family gives written consent, find a confidential space to conduct a developmental and behavioral screening using a tool that is appropriate for the families you serve. Most tools are surveys about children’s development that parents can fill out themselves or have read to them.
- Score the developmental and behavioral screening in accordance with the instructions in the tool’s manual.
- If you do not feel comfortable going through the screening process with the parent yourself and would prefer to refer the parent elsewhere for the screening, the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) can help in finding appropriate places to refer, including the child's medical home or an early intervention specialist.

### Talk to families after an “at risk” screening result

- Remind them that this is **not** a diagnosis. An “at risk” screen simply means the child should be evaluated more thoroughly by their primary health care professional, medical home, or early intervention or public school program. Even if you are not concerned, an “at risk” result indicates further evaluation is needed. Standardized screening tools detect many delays before delays are overtly apparent.
- Connect the family to the right specialist, like a pediatrician or developmental specialist. You may also wish to refer the parent to an early intervention program, which conduct its own review and do a more in depth evaluation, if warranted, to determine if the child may be eligible for early intervention services.. The [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) can help you find resources and specialists.
- Work together to create a list of questions to ask their pediatrician or early intervention program as a result of the screen.
- Suggest activities that families can practice with their children to help in their development. The tips and learning modules in the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) offer many ideas for activities.
- Use the information in this [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) to learn more about development and screening so that you can answer families’ questions as best you can. If you do not know the answer to a question, it is ok to say you are not sure but will find out.

### Talk to families after a “low risk” or “no risk” screening result

- Discuss the results with the families and remind them that *monitoring* a child’s development should be ongoing the home, in child care settings, and elsewhere.
- Give them materials that describe their child’s next developmental level. The *Learn the Signs, Act Early Milestones Moments* booklets included in the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) can serve this purpose.



- Use the screening results to talk about the child’s strengths and challenges. The [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) offers ideas for activities that families can do with their child to help in development.
- If you are still concerned about a child’s development after a “low risk” or “no risk” screen, speak with the family and ask them to share your concerns with their child’s primary health care provider who may administer another test or refer the child to a specialist who can do a more thorough evaluation.

### ***How do I refer families to the right place after screening?***

There are people in and around your community who can help children with developmental concerns. Many children have a regular primary health care provider or medical home that can look at developmental concerns more closely. Ask families to take the results of their screen or a milestones checklist to their child’s primary health care provider or medical home. With the family’s consent, home visitors may call the physician’s office, forward the screening results to the medical



office, or even accompany the family to the medical office visit. Whether or not the child has a medical home, if a child under 3 years of age has an “at risk” screening result, connect the family to a local early intervention program. Early intervention service programs under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are available in every state and territory of the United States and offer child evaluations free of charge if a child is suspected of having a disability to determine if a child is eligible for services under IDEA. The [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) accompanying this guide provides a description of the early intervention system and a state by state directory of early intervention coordinators, often called “Part C coordinators”. If the child is age 3 or older, you can help connect the family to their neighborhood public school, which can provide information on evaluation under Part B of IDEA, even if the child is not in kindergarten yet. You also can connect all families to parent training information centers or family-to-family health information centers. Information on these family support centers is also available in the [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#).

### ***How can I use screening results to individualize support for the family and children I support?***

While some children may need to be referred to a specialist outside of the home for a more in-depth evaluation, all children could benefit from individualized support in their home. Home visitors know the importance of bringing supports and resources to strengthen the family, caregivers, and caregiver-child interactions. The results of a developmental and behavioral screening can help identify both the caregiver’s and child’s strengths and challenges, as well as inform the home visitor where to focus initial attention. The

included [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive! Toolkit](#) may prove useful in learning more about individualized family and child support based on a child's specific needs and circumstances.

Addressing any family, environmental, or experiential factors that may be disrupting or impeding a family's ability to address the developmental needs of their child requires the expertise of the home visitor, safe and trusted relationship with the family, expertise of mental health or early intervention specialist, and sometimes additional services. As children are screened, evaluated, and, if eligible, provided specialized services within early intervention, like speech or occupational therapy, the home visitor can support guidance given by the early intervention service provider by strengthening messages and facilitating recommended activities.

Similarly, home visitors play a key role in furthering the coordination of developmental services with the family's physician and medical home. Coordination of care may be more effective if home visitors are present alongside caregivers when outside specialists provide services. The importance of the collaboration of providers and specialists, in partnership with families, to provide a coordinated team approach in delivering services to a child cannot be underestimated.

### *How do I select the right screening tool to fit my needs?*

#### **Find the Right Screening Tool**

- ✓ **Ages:** What age groups do I serve and what screening tools are made for those ages?
- ✓ **Time:** How much time does it take to use this screening tool? Which tool is practical within a child care or Head Start program?
- ✓ **Cost:** What is the cost for the screening tool and its ongoing use within early care and education programs?
- ✓ **Training:** Is there training required to use this screening tool? How much training is required? What type of training is recommended?
- ✓ **Languages:** Does the screening tool need to be available in different languages to fit the needs of the families I serve?
- ✓ **Culture:** Is it culturally appropriate?

The list of screening tools that accompanies this Guide may help you learn more about the tool your home visiting model is currently using. It may also help you find a new screening tool that fits within your program or home visiting model you are utilizing. This list describes the evidence base behind certain standardized screening tools. Information is included on the cost, time to administer, training requirements, ease of use, and other factors that can help you find the right tool. Programs should not interpret this list as recommending or requiring the use of a particular tool.

Many early intervention systems and medical homes have adopted their own standardized developmental screening tools. When choosing a screening tool, it may be helpful to align with local referral and child service agencies to support developmental screening activities recommended by the early intervention provider or medical home. It is also important to learn about whether or not the screening tool in use measures what it is supposed to measure with accuracy. Read about the tool in the compendium of screeners that accompanies this Guide to make sure the tool is of high quality and accurate in tracking development.

### *How do I use this list of screening tools?*

The list of screening tools that accompanies this document is made up of two sections: 1) A section of summary tables and 2) A section of individual profiles.



If you are looking for a new tool, start at the summary tables as they provide an overview of many different tools. The tables may help you narrow the range of tools to consider. Once you narrow down the screening tools that may fit your needs, you might choose a smaller set of tools to read about in more detail in the individual profile section. If your home visiting program or community already uses one of these tools, you can go straight to the profile section to read more about it.

### ***Making a Difference***

Research indicates that the first five years of a child's life are critical to brain development, academic achievement, and later life outcomes. The short time it takes to conduct a developmental and behavioral screen can change the trajectory of a child's life forever. By incorporating a system of regular developmental and behavioral screening, YOU can play an important role in making sure all children thrive. We hope you find this User Guide, Screening Compendium, and the series of [\*Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!\*](#) *Toolkit* useful in supporting young children and their families on their developmental journey. Visit [www.hhs.gov/WatchMeThrive](http://www.hhs.gov/WatchMeThrive) for a complete set of resources.



## **Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!**

*Celebrating Developmental Milestones • Implementing Universal Screening •  
Improving Early Detection • Enhancing Developmental Supports*