THE NIPISSING DEVELOPMENTAL SCREEN: An Innovative Screening Tool

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In 1993 the Nipissing District Infant Development Program (IDP) became concerned about the number of referrals of children who were experiencing developmental delays as late as between ages 2 and 5 years when they should have been referred much earlier. On intake, parents frequently stated that they had voiced concerns about their child's development to the family physician much earlier, but there seemed to be a lack of understanding in our community regarding when and where to refer these children for early intervention services.

Our community has no single point of access to children's services, and physicians identified that keeping up with changing programs and mandates was a barrier to their helping families access the intervention they need. Since early intervention services in our community have a close working relationship with one another, there was a willingness to develop an instrument that would assist physicians in their early identification and referral of children experiencing possible developmental delays.

Consequently, a group began meeting on voluntary time to develop the actual Nipissing Developmental Screens. Group members included representatives from the Infant Development Program, Rehabilitation Outreach Services (Physical, Occupational, Speech and Language Therapy), Home Care (Speech and Language Therapy), and the Community Action Program (CAPC) for Children.

Our task was not easy because, although we were all committed to the same goal, each discipline had its own agenda of items at each age range that they felt important to include. To further complicate the issue, we had decided that the format needed to be at a Grade 5 literacy level and worded in a manner that would illicit a “Yes” or “No” response with “No” indicating a “red flag.” As well, we all agreed that it was important to include a representative sample of all areas of development.

After two years, we were in a position to hire a graphic designer to assist in the actual layout of the Screens. Once the layout and sketches were finalized, we placed an order for our first run of 100 sets. Health Canada, through CAPC, provided the initial funding for the first printing, recognizing that this instrument would be useful as a part of their required ongoing evaluation process. Our hope was that by charging a minimal amount for each set we could generate enough revenue to make the Screen self-sustaining.

In March 1995, we approached Dr. Joseph Madden, the Chief Paediatrician at North Bay General Hospital, who had supported the project from its inception, to endorse the Screen in a letter. A sample set of Screens along with this letter of endorsement and an explanation were mailed to each district family physician in May, 1995.

A total of 65 letters were distributed. Approximately 60% of the doctors requested a full set of the Nipissing Developmental Screens, which were distributed free of charge. Personal follow-up visits were made to those physicians who did not respond to the letter. This resulted in 80% of district family physicians using the Screen in some manner.

At every opportunity we began to promote the Screen to preschool programs in our community, with our goal continuing to be the early identification of children experiencing developmental delays. The Nipissing District English Separate School Board offered to translate the Screen into French with the Clinique Universitaire d’Orthophonie at Laurentian University writing the language items to meet the French language criteria. As a result, the Screen is now available in bilingual sets.

Our group continues to promote the Screen both in and out of our community through displays at conferences and health fairs. In the August 1996 Ontario Medical Review, a reference to the Screen by Dr. Paul Steinhauer in an article on “Improving Developmental Outcomes for Youth” resulted in a large response from physicians all over Ontario.

What is the Nipissing Developmental Screen?

The Nipissing District Developmental Screen (N.D.D.S.) is an informal tool designed to assist in the identification of children ages one (1) month to six (6) years, who may require early intervention. It is important to note that the N.D.D.S. itself has not been standardized nor has reliability or validity research been undertaken. However, the N.D.D.S. has face validity in that the items included in this Screen were compiled by a multi-disciplinary committee, using a wide variety of standardized and non-standardized developmental instruments. The areas of development covered by the Screen include vision, hearing, speech, language, gross motor, fine motor, social, and self-help skills.
The screen has been designed to be filled out by parent(s) or caregiver(s) and reviewed with a qualified professional (e.g., physician). The checklist coincides with infant immunization schedules up to age two, and follows yearly thereafter. The child’s chronological age will determine which checklist to use. The ages are noted at the top of each checklist. If the child falls between two ages, the earlier checklist should be used (e.g., for a 31/2 year old child use the checklist for 3 year olds). Examples of the checklists for Four Months and for Twelve Months are provided on the following page.

When one or more items are checked “No” the professional should discuss the response rating with the parent or caregiver to determine appropriate follow-up. If an item is marked “No” this is a “red flag” for a possible problem as all skills in each checklist are expected to have been mastered by the age shown. These “red flags” indicate that the child’s development is at risk and further investigation is required in the area(s) identified.

In our most recent reprint, a space was designed to accommodate personalized information on agencies in other areas using the Screens for their particular situation.

Replacement Screens are available in each age range in pads of fifty (50) for a minimal cost so that we can continue to reprint them.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services has provided funding to distribute copies of the Screen to all daycare centres and kindergarten teachers in our district. We meet regularly to evaluate the content of the Screens and make necessary revisions. Future plans include development of support materials to accompany the Screens. We will be sending out a newsletter in the fall about the Screen to the family doctors in our district highlighting the suggestions and feedback that we have received.

An order form and sample set of the Nipissing District Developmental Screen can be obtained from: Linda McLay, The Nipissing District Infant Development Program, Fax (705) 472-9743.

Cost: Complete set English — $25.00
Bilingual (French/English) — $35.00, plus $5.00 postage and handling.

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Sample pages from the Nipissing District Developmental Screen