

CONVEYING CONCERNS ABOUT AUTISM TO PARENTS

Suggestions compiled from survey responses from parents of children with autism

Helpful ways to convey concerns to parents

- **Provide a clear description of your concerns**
 - Explain the specific behaviors about which you are concerned
 - Talk about how your observations compare with expected milestones
 - *“Most children his/her age make more consistent eye contact and use more language.”*
 - *“These behaviors can interfere with a child’s learning and are sometimes signs of autism. Have you heard of autism?”*
 - Provide visual information, such as autism “fact sheets” and/or the M-CHAT-R/F results (**also see handout on discussing M-CHAT-R/F results**)
- **Elicit input from parents**
 - *“Do you see these behaviors at home too?” “What do you make of these behaviors?”*
- **Provide reassurance**
 - Explain that autism is a spectrum, that there are treatments
 - *“We want to make sure we do everything we can to put your child on the right trajectory to grow and thrive”*
 - *“I know that this is difficult information to hear, but please know that I will work with you to help get your child the services that s/he needs”*
- **Expect and plan for an emotional response**
 - Be aware that emotions may impede the parent’s ability to process all the information
 - Write down critical information
 - Offer a follow-up appointment
 - Allow time for the parent to remain in the exam room after the appointment
- **Encourage parents to take action**
 - Explain the importance of early detection and intervention
 - Give specific referral information for Early Intervention and a diagnostic assessment
 - Provide an up-to-date resource and information packet
 - *“You know that s/he is a beautiful child and I can tell you take excellent care of him/her. Most children his/her age show more interest in interacting with others and play with toys more flexibly. I think it would be a good idea for him/her to be seen by a specialist for a complete assessment of his/her development. There’s no need to worry right now. We’ll just get more information and if the evaluation indicates there’s something going on, we’ll work on strategies for care together.”*

Unhelpful ways to convey concerns to parents

- Telling parents you are concerned about autism without giving any information about what to do
- Handing a pamphlet or giving a referral without explaining what autism is and what it means
- Failing to provide examples of behaviors of concern
- Failing to emphasize the importance of early detection and intervention
- Failing to use the word “autism”
- Failing to emphasize the importance of getting into services and on waiting lists as soon as possible