

Development is a Journey Implementation Guide

A Conversation Roadmap for Mental Health Clinicians

Mental Health Clinicians play an essential role in early childhood development, from conducting developmental screenings and surveillance, to identifying delays, making referrals, and addressing parental concerns. Conversations about developmental screening results and concerns can be time-consuming and anxiety-provoking for families and professionals, and clinicians are already expected to do so much with so little time during well-child visits. Yet the benefits are clear: when families and pediatric clinicians have productive conversations about a child's development, they are better equipped to work as a team to co-create and follow through on a collaborative plan that supports the best outcomes for the child, especially when parents and providers might not see things the same way.

To **simplify, support, and strengthen** these important and often challenging conversations, the Brazelton Touchpoints Center, in partnership with Ariadne Labs, has created a **Conversation Roadmap for Mental Health Clinicians**. The Roadmap is designed to facilitate these conversations via **7 short and simple steps to actively engage parents and other caregivers** in understanding and planning for their child's developmental needs, and **enhance the clinician-caregiver partnership**. The Roadmap is designed to:

- Follow the formal screening process, not rescreen or diagnose
- Begin with appreciation of developmental progress, even if a screening tool raises concerns
- Prompt collaborative conversations that build on family caregivers' perspectives and concerns, or lack of concern
- Help clinicians understand caregivers' perceptions of the child's development
- Intentionally discover and safely discuss points of disagreement and agreement
- Address screening findings and referrals
- Support caregivers to learn about and advocate for resources for their child
- Provide a physical take-home document that clearly outlines next steps and resources

Conversation Roadmap Instructions

When to use: For children ages 0–5 years, during well-child visits after a developmental screening tool has been completed before or at the time of the visit. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends developmental surveillance at all well-child visits; screenings at 9, 18, and 30 months; and autism-specific screening at 18 and 24 months. Any concerns elicited during surveillance warrants a developmental screening and/or referral for further evaluation.

How to Use the Roadmap's 7 Steps

Sit down alongside the parent or caregiver with the printed Development is a Journey Conversation Roadmap so that you both can see it clearly. If this is a virtual visit, share your screen so that the Roadmap is visible to everyone. You can download and use the digital version of the tool.

1. Celebrate progress!

Begin with the child's strengths and progress:

- Thank the parent or caregiver for completing the screening tool, and let them know that their insights about their child help you understand the child better.
- Observe and describe something you see the child doing in the moment.
- Mention one activity from the screening tool that the child is capable of doing. This helps you enter into the conversation from a strengths-based stance.
- Invite conversation about the child's progress. Ask the parent about their knowledge of their child.
- Describe something you see in the caregiver-child interaction that demonstrates how well they are doing together.

WHY: Well-child visits provide opportunities for the clinician and family caregiver to celebrate the child's development and honor the family's primary role in the child's life. Finding common ground in strengths-based clinician and parent observations of the child can help reduce anxiety raised by any concerns identified in the screening tool. It also can help to prepare caregivers to process potentially upsetting information, if the screening tool indicates a possible developmental delay or concern.

Sample language: "It is good to see you and today. I noticed when you came in that she was reaching for you and wanted you to pick her up, so she said 'Uppy. Uppy.' When you did, I saw her smile such a big smile. It's so nice to see that she is using words to tell you what she wants. What other things do you see her learning to do?"

2. Does anyone have any concerns?

Mark the boxes accordingly to indicate whether the clinician, caregiver, or screening tool has any concerns about the child's development. Note the concerns.

WHY: This continues honoring the family's perspective and role, and begins the process of inviting parents' concerns, sharing any you may have, and discussing the screening findings. It also opens up the process of discovering differences in perspective, and normalizes these.

Sample language: "Today, I'm hoping we can talk together about how your child's development is going. Thank you so much for filling out the screening tool. It helps me to understand the child you see and know at home. I wanted to offer to discuss together what you said on the screening tool and the new things your child is doing that we can celebrate. We can also talk about any concerns that you may have. If there are any concerns, we can work together on determining the steps we can take next. Does that sound okay?"

3. Do we agree?

Mark the boxes accordingly to indicate whether there is full agreement among the provider, parent, and formal screening tool, or not.

WHY: Different perspectives are to be expected and can be quickly and safely discovered so that consensus on next steps can be reached and openly include any such differences.

Sample language: "It sounds like she's made a lot of progress in many areas. Are there others where you have a concern? No. Okay, great. So you don't have any concerns about her development. It sounds like things are going well. Now let's look at what you noted on the screening tool. You shared great examples of things she's able to do in a lot of areas of development. The scored screener suggests that we could take a closer look at her language. So, I am going to mark this box as 'No' since, right now, there is some disagreement, and so that we can keep talking about it to discover more."

4. What is the child's behavior telling us?

Discuss together the caregiver's responses on the screening tool and whether there is anything about the child's behavior that may be saying the child is feeling the effects of a developmental delay; for example, a child with a language delay might exhibit frustration. This step helps parents experience your concern for the child. Make a note of the caregiver's observations in the margin of the paper Roadmap.

WHY: Children communicate through their behaviors. By observing a child's behavior, we can learn what the child is telling us. Clinicians can inquire about or describe children's behavior without interpreting it. This invites the caregiver to offer what they feel the child's behavior means.

Sample language: "I heard her talking when you walked in, and you've told me she's learned a lot of new words. Let's look at how many words she's using right now to get a better understanding of where she is developmentally, since the screener is flagging a possible language delay. I want to learn more from you about what you are hearing her say at home. Do people understand what she is saying? When they can't understand her, what does she do?"

5. What are your hopes for your child?

To set the tone for the discussion that follows, ask the parent or caregiver about their hopes and goals for their child's development over the next few months. This provides an opportunity to connect with the parent even — perhaps especially — if there was not earlier agreement on a concern. All parents want their child to make progress, and you can join them in their hopes and goals.

WHY: Asking caregivers about their hopes for their child is a powerful way for you to communicate your concern — and intention to support the parent's priorities. It signals to parents that you care about the whole child and paves the way for engaging parents in next steps and referrals in service of their hopes and goals, even if they don't agree with you about a potential delay.

Sample Language: "Given the progress your child is making and the questions we may have about how things are going in some areas, I want to be sure I understand your hopes for . What would you like to see in her development in the next few months?"

6. Let's discuss

Ask for the parent's observations, and explore together areas of agreement and differences in perspective, digging into the developmental domains listed at the bottom of the Roadmap. Confirm your understanding of areas of agreement with the parent. If necessary, agree to disagree. Commit to partnering together on next steps, which may include a plan to learn together and revisit areas of disagreement as the child continues to develop. The plan may also include being open to what subsequent evaluation and treatment reveal.

Why: It is essential to your alliance with families to ask for details that honor parents' perspectives. When you show interest in these details, parents are more likely to open up and engage, even if they disagree with you about concerns related to their child's development. If you show willingness to not have this become a conflict of opinion but rather a plan for progress, parents will more likely warm to your concern for their child.

Sample Language: "Given that we see some things differently, I want to be sure I understand what you see so that we can work together to help your child make the progress that you want."

7. Let's make more progress

Assess what the caregiver is ready for. Discuss follow-up steps to consider together, including those indicated in the Roadmap's "Possible Next Steps" on page 2. Check in with the caregiver to determine their level of understanding of and support for these steps. Ask about any concerns or hesitations. Discuss possible timelines for these steps. Write out next steps with the caregiver. The Roadmap includes a template for you and the caregiver to write down potential next steps and local resources that can help with these steps. The caregiver can take home a copy of the Roadmap and these next steps.

WHY: Documenting next steps gives caregivers a reminder of the visit that they can take home with them, and share with other providers involved in their child's life. Seeing the variety of possible steps gives them an understanding of their options and potential resources. When parents know that there are options for them to choose from, they may feel more in control and better able to cope.

Sample language: "We can sort out our next steps by starting with this list of ideas and options. Let's take a look at your choices. I will . You can . These are the steps that we both think are important, and here are a few more that I would suggest. Do you have others that we should add here? Here are a few resources that you can call for additional information. (If available, you may offer a case manager's support at this point.) Do you have other questions? Let's also set up a time for an extra visit so we can talk more about areas we still see differently, check in on how your child is doing, and discuss how our next steps are going."

For more information about developmental screening and surveillance, review these related resources for providers and parents:

- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommendations for screening and surveillance:
 - Promoting Optimal Development: Identifying Infants and Young Children With Developmental Disorders Through Developmental Surveillance and Screening
 - Identification, Evaluation, and Management of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Learn the Signs. Act Early. Developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive! Developed through a Partnership between Help Me Grow, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S Department of Education.

For questions about the Development is a Journey Conversation Roadmap or this Implementation Guide, contact the Brazelton Touchpoints Center at touchpoints@childrens.harvard.edu