

Chapter 3

How to Identify Children with Special Needs

- Causes of Children's Problems
- Tips on Monitoring Children's Learning
- Common Developmental and Learning Problems



Chapter 3: How to Identify Children with Special Needs

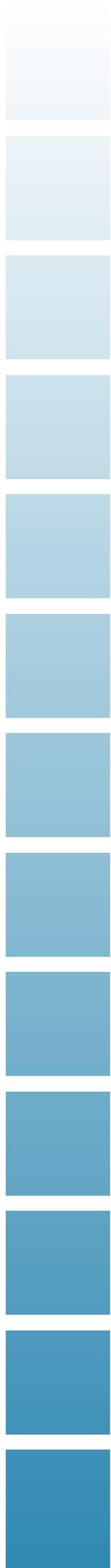
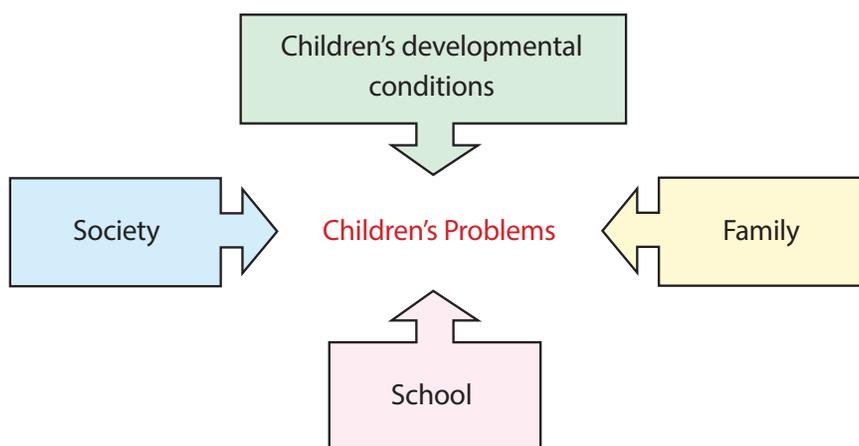
Every child is unique. Children have their own strengths and weaknesses. Their development progresses according to certain sequences, but the pace may vary. It is natural that some children may excel in certain areas but have deficiencies in other areas. However, if children display marked problems or difficulties in one (or more) developmental area(s), and their performance shows significant discrepancies compared with other children of the same age, it is advisable to refer the children for professional assessment.



Children progress rapidly in their early years and lots of changes are expected in a year or even a month's time. Because of this, even experts may find it difficult to make a firm diagnosis based on a young child's conditions. On the other hand, it is precisely the plasticity of children's development that makes early identification and intervention important. With early identification of children's developmental and learning problems and prompt referral for assessment, it helps us understand and support the children's conditions and needs in development and learning.

I. Causes of Children's Problems

Developmental and learning problems of children may be associated with a combination of factors. The child's own developmental conditions or other environmental factors, such as the family, school or society, may play a part.



Therefore, when children exhibit a particular learning, emotional or behavioural problem, apart from being aware of the severity, duration and frequency of the problem, teachers should also gather information from different sources to understand every possible factor that may attribute to the children's presentation. Sometimes, a problem may be caused by different factors. For instance, if children are inattentive and cannot concentrate in class, the possible reasons are:

- They have problems in attention control.
- Recent family conflicts have upset them and affect their concentration in class.
- The noisy environment of the school easily distracts their attention.
- The curriculum may be too difficult for them such that they lose interest in class.

Hence, teachers should pay attention to the various factors when observing children's performance.

II. Tips on Monitoring Children's Learning

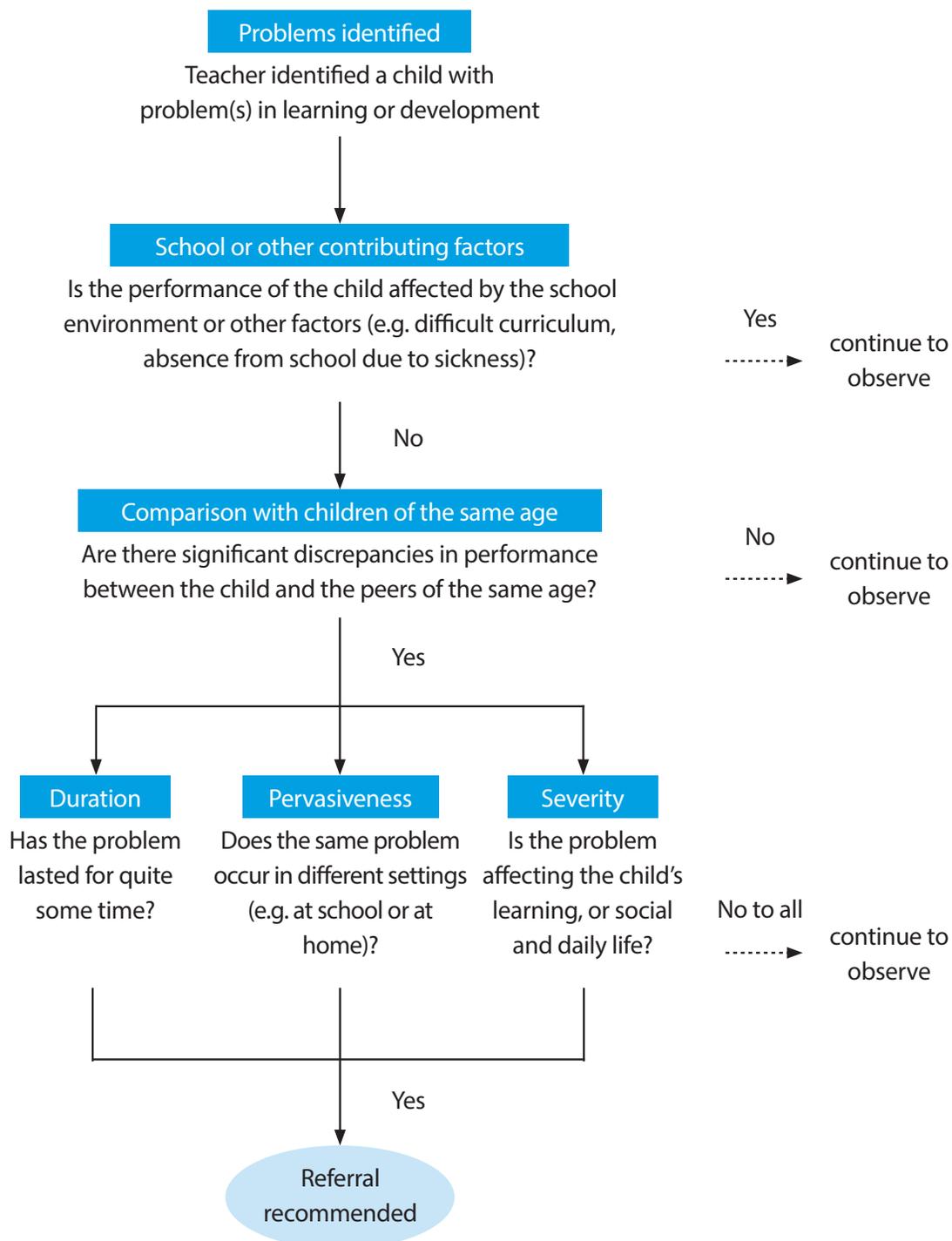
If teachers suspect that a child has developmental or learning problems, the following points should be taken into account when monitoring his/her conditions:

- The progress of development varies among children. It is perfectly natural that some children attain some milestones earlier and others later than the general trend.
- There may be a wide age gap among children in the same class. Younger children may need more time and assistance to master the knowledge and skills taught. Teachers and parents should adjust their expectations on children's learning accordingly.
- Children's performance may vary in different settings. Communication between teachers and parents enables the two parties to have a better understanding on the children's behaviour under different circumstances.
- If children have been absent from school for a period due to sickness or any other reasons, they may have difficulty getting back on track with their learning in the short run. Teachers and parents should spend more time assisting and monitoring the children's adjustment.



If there is a cause for concern about children’s development, teachers and parents can observe if the children show improvement after a period of adaptation to school life. If the concern is only transient, or if the children have slightly weaker performance in only one or two developmental domains (e.g. language, cognitive ability, gross and fine motor abilities, etc.), there is no cause for undue alarm. However, if there are noticeable and persistent discrepancies in development compared with that of their peers, teachers and parents should be alert and discuss whether follow-up actions need to be taken.

The flowchart below helps us to consider whether a child needs referral:



III. Common Developmental and Learning Problems

The following paragraphs described the problems and difficulties that children may encounter in different developmental domains as well as scenarios of possible presentation in class. The material serves as a reference for teachers in identifying possible problems of children so that prompt referrals can be made. The primary role of teachers is “to identify” and “to refer” rather than to diagnose / confirm which developmental disorder the children face. Being able to identify the problems and encourage parents to accept referral for professional assessment, teachers have taken the very first step in helping the children.

(Teachers may also refer to "Chapter 2 Development of Pre-primary Children" in this manual), and the leaflet “Understanding Your Child’s Development – For Parents of Preschool Children”) for more information about the development and performance of children at different ages, and red flag conditions when referral is warranted.)



Refer to “Understanding Your Child’s Development – For Parents of Preschool Children” leaflet (<http://s.fhs.gov.hk/p1qih>)



Refer to Chapter 3 of the DVD

Children’s Developmental Conditions

1. Learning and Cognition

i) Global Learning Abilities

Children with relatively weak global learning abilities have significantly weaker performance in every aspect compared with other children of the same age. They are usually slower in acquiring new skills and knowledge, more difficult to adapt to new environments and things, more reluctant to take challenges and also tend to be more dependent.



These children may:

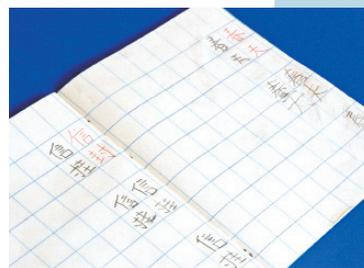
- Have difficulty understanding and grasping the content of the subjects (e.g. language, general studies and arithmetic); or fail to generalise their acquired knowledge for application to other situations despite repeated instruction.
- Take a longer time to learn and practise new skills, e.g. in art and crafts and in playing games.
- Be constantly in need of individual guidance from teachers during class or in completing class work.

ii) Word Learning

Some children may have problems in certain subject areas only. A common problem is in word learning.

These children may:

- Forget easily how to read or write words even with repeated practice.
- Often mix up words with similar sounds, meanings or written forms, e.g. writing "goat" as "boat" and reading "ears" as "eyes".
- Be slow in reading and sometimes skip words or lines.
- Copy words with difficulty. They are slow, and often make mistakes in copying.
- Have frequent error in writing Chinese such as mirror writing (e.g. "水" becomes "水") and reverse the parts of a Chinese character (e.g. "蛙" becomes "圭虫"), or adding / omitting stroke of a Chinese character (e.g. "月" becomes "月" and "花" becomes "花").
- Have mirror writing in English letters (e.g. "b" becomes "d" and "p" becomes "q"), and difficulty in spelling simple words and forgetful even with intensive drilling.
- Have weak sense in sequence. Difficulty in reciting letters or numbers in correct sequence.



Above difficulties are common to children with word learning problems, teacher should pay attention not just to single sign of difficult but also to the overall performance of the child. The severity and the frequency of the problems should also be taken into consideration. Some children will improve when they enter primary school.

2. Language Ability

Language development involves comprehension, expression and articulation. Generally speaking, verbal comprehension develops before verbal expression. In addition to the children's own attributes, the language environment, the opportunity in talking with adults or peers and the attitudes of adults all directly influence the children's language development.

Children with weak language ability may have problems in comprehension, expression and/or articulation, thus affecting their learning as well as everyday life. Owing to their weak language ability, these children may avoid communication with others and social functioning may thus be affected.

Possible performance of these children in:

i) Verbal Comprehension

- Have difficulty understanding long and complex sentences or oral instructions.
- Misunderstand the meaning of questions and give irrelevant answers, e.g. when answering the teacher's question of "What does a fireman do?", the child may say, "A fire engine".
- Be unable to understand a story or a cartoon video.



ii) Verbal Expression

- Lack in vocabulary and usually give short and simple responses.
- Speak with incorrect sentence structure or grammar, e.g. "Why not me can play?"
- Have difficulty expressing themselves properly and be disorganised in verbal responses.
- Find it difficult to recall a simple event or convey a simple message.



iii) Articulation Problems / Stuttering

- Mispronounce words, e.g. saying "sand" as "dand"
- Have stuttering, e.g. "Can ...Can...Can... I go to toilet?" or "I want to ha... ha... have... biscuits."

3. Gross and Fine Motor Skills

Gross and fine motor development includes muscle movement, coordination of limbs, eye-hand coordination and bodily movement in space. Children with weak gross and fine motor skills appear to be awkward and clumsy, which affects their daily life including self-care and even learning.

Possible performance of these children in:

i) Gross Motor Skills

- Have relatively weak muscle tone.
- Be slower in gross motor development, e.g. able to run, jump or climb at a later age than other children.
- Have poor balance and fall easily when walking or running.
- Have poor movement coordination, being awkward during gross motor activities.
- Have difficulty judging distances, often running into people or objects.
- Find it difficult to learn new physical activities or ball games.



ii) Fine Motor Skills

- Write slowly and often cannot keep their writing on the lines.
- Be crude and messy in art and crafts, e.g. cannot cut a circle neatly or colouring within lines.
- Be clumsy in using spoons and forks and spilling water when pouring.
- Require assistance in buttoning up clothes or tying shoelaces.



4. Attention

Attention refers to a child's ability to concentrate on a specific object or activity, such as in class, reading, talking with people and playing games.

In general, children's attention control improves with their age:

Under 3 years old – cannot control their attention well

3 to 4 years old – can concentrate with external prompts or adult's guidance

5 to 6 years old – begin to control their attention and able to concentrate

An average child of 2 to 5 years of age can sustain their attention on the same thing for about 2 to 5 minutes while those from 6 to 10 years old can sustain for about 8 to 10 minutes. Children with a short attention span have difficulty concentrating especially at activities that require sustained concentration.

These children may:

- Have difficulty concentrating during class and are easily distracted, such as often looking out of windows or being distracted by sounds outside.
- Have difficulty concentrating on class work and make careless mistakes such as missing items when doing worksheets.
- Not concentrate when talking with others; often unable to follow instructions for not paying attention to what others say.
- Appear to be forgetful or careless and often lose their belongings.



5. Behaviour

i) Activity Level

Children differ in their level of activity. Some are more active than the others. However, certain children are obviously much more active than others of the same age. This not only affects the children's learning but also disturbs other classmates or the classroom routines.

These children may :

- Often leave their seats, climb up and down, or move about in the classroom.
- Be restless in seat, such as fidget with their legs, stretching their bodies, or frequently drop things on the floor.
- Be excessively talkative and not able to work or play quietly.
- Be impatient, dislike taking turns and being unable to wait quietly in queue.
- Have relatively weak self-control, tend to be impulsive; often interrupt a conversation or answer questions in class without raising their hands.



ii) Oppositional Behaviour

It is normal for children not following adult's instructions at times. However, some children are often uncooperative and rebellious. They may lose their temper easily and often argue or quarrel with others. Special attention and prompt referral are necessary if children are found to have such problems.

These children may:

- Lose their temper or be irritated easily even for trivial things.
- Refuse to follow instructions or compromise and often argue with others.
- Seldom admit their own mistakes and often blame others.
- Irritate people intentionally, sometimes by doing things such as casting classmate's stationery purposively.



6. Emotion

i) Throwing tantrums

Young children have immature self-control which may lead to their frequent tantrums. If the intensity and frequency of tantrums are not high, positive management strategies can be used for managing the behaviour (refer to "Chapter 5: Basic Behaviour Theory and Techniques" in this manual and the DVD). However, for those children who frequently lose their temper and show destructive and aggressive behaviours including hurting themselves, hurting others or damaging things during their tantrums, referral may be necessary.



ii) Anxiousness

Some children get anxious easily. Their anxiousness is more than being shy. When they are facing strangers, in an unfamiliar environment or are the focus of attention in a crowd, they will appear uneasy and restless.

These children may:

- Fear of going to school or fail to adapt to school life even after starting school for a period of time.
- Appear nervous while talking and interacting with others, especially with strangers.
- Fidget and at a loss when they are asked to stand up and answer questions or to perform in front of their classmates.
- Speak in a soft voice and avoid eye contact.
- Only talk to family members or teachers they trust while remain very quiet when facing other people.



iii) Depressed mood

Children will experience times of sadness or feeling down. Transient mood swings are considered normal. However, if children stay gloomy for a prolonged period and this begins to affect their learning or daily life, taking a closer look into the matter should be warranted.

These children may:

- Appear to be sad or sullen persistently, or become easily annoyed or irritated.
- Show diminished interest in many things, being passive in class activities or games.
- Cry easily and seldom speak to others.
- Not have a good appetite, or not eat as much as they usually do.



7. Social Skills

Every child is born with a different temperament. Some are more outgoing, active and sociable; while others are more passive, need a longer time to warm up and adjust when getting along with people. Some children, however, encounter social problems that are not just a matter of passive temperament, but difficulties in communicating and interacting with others, as well as conforming to social norms.

These children may:

- Rarely make friends and prefer to play on their own.
- Be inadequate in social communication skills, often exhibit inappropriate behaviour or speech.
- Rarely share food, toys or their interests with others.
- Tend to be self-centred and insensitive to others' needs and feelings.
- Talk only about topics they like in conversation and ignore others' responses, resulting in one-way communication.
- Lack eye contacts, speak in a rather awkward and flat tone and rarely use facial expressions, gestures or body language in communicating with others.



Family Factors

Apart from the conditions of the children, family factors such as family conflicts, financial difficulties and weak parenting capacity also affect children's learning, emotion and behaviour. Teachers therefore also need to examine the conditions of the children, their parents' attitudes towards them as well as the family situations for any possible contributing factors to the problems.

1. Conditions of Children

i) Behaviour and Emotion

- Being emotionally unstable, appearing anxious, agitated, irritable or depressed.
- Being asocial, reluctant to talk with people or participate in activities.
- Showing destructive or aggressive behaviour, e.g. hitting others or tearing toys apart.
- Showing regressive and childish behaviour that is inappropriate for their age, e.g. reverting to bedwetting, asking to be held in arms.
- Exhibiting insecure behaviour by either over-clinging to adults or caregivers, or withdrawal from them.
- Being frightened of their parents or caregivers, even reluctant to go home.



ii) Physical Appearance

- Appearing to be tired, losing appetite.
- Being underweight.
- Having severe rashes or skin problems, or being deprived of suitable medical treatment and care when ill.
- Being untidy and dirty, or dressing inappropriately, e.g. not wearing enough clothing during winter.

iii) Learning

- Being absent from school frequently.
- Failing to hand in class assignments or to bring along necessary materials for classes.
- Showing a marked deterioration in learning ability.



2. Parents' Attitudes Towards the Children

i) Extreme Harshness

- Constantly shouting at, scolding or criticising the children.
- Constantly threatening or humiliating them.
- Using harsh discipline, e.g. corporal punishment, unreasonable or other bizarre punishments.



ii) Lack of Concern

- Being detached from and aloof towards the children.
- Treating the children entirely different from their siblings by being partial to their siblings.

iii) Unreasonable Expectations

- Having overly rigid or unreasonable expectations of the children.
- Asking them to assume responsibilities that are inappropriate to their age, e.g. a five-year-old child has to take care of a younger sibling.
- Encouraging deviant behaviour, e.g. theft, violence.

3. Family Situations

i) Family Background

- Coming from a family with a single parent or a step parent.
- Being new immigrants.
- Coming from a low-income family.
- Parents being unemployed or with unstable jobs.

ii) Health Conditions of Parents

- Being alcoholic, having substance use or gambling problems.
- Having mental health issues, e.g. emotional problems or psychiatric disorders.

iii) Other Conditions

- Frequent family conflicts.
- Domestic violence.
- Crisis or tension in the family, e.g. being forced to move home, having heavy debts or getting divorced.
- Frequent changes of residence.

If children have behavioural, emotional or learning problems that may be associated with their parents or family situations, teachers can provide relevant information on social services to the parents. Encourage them to contact social workers of the Integrated Family Service Centre / Integrated Services Centre in their district or Pilot Scheme on Social Work Service of PPI, if applicable, who will assess their specific needs and offer the most suitable services.

If children show sudden changes in behaviour and emotion, or demonstrate wounds that are caused by non-accidental injuries, teachers can refer to Protecting Children from Maltreatment – Procedural Guide for Multi-disciplinary Co-operation (Revised 2020) (www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/site_pubsvc/page_family/sub_fcwprocedure/id_1447/). If warranted, teachers should contact relevant departments or professionals as soon as possible for timely referral and management.