



Chapter 3: Referral

Referral is the first “service” that a child and his/her family receive from First Steps. The SPOE system ensures that every child and their family have equal access to early intervention regardless of where they live in Missouri. Building a strong network between the RICC, SPOE, and primary referral sources in a community assists in the early identification and referral of potentially eligible children.

The number of potentially eligible children will vary from county to county. The data system tracks this number and referral sources, and a monthly report is provided to the SPOEs. RICCs and SPOEs can track the number of referrals, referral sources, and other key indicators (e.g., families that decline to participate, cannot be located, etc.) to judge the integrity of their local public relations work, child find, and referral system. DESE also monitors this data from the state level and provides technical assistance.

Primary Referral Source

A “primary referral source” is the individual or agency that first referred the child to the SPOE. Primary referral sources are informed about the referral process and procedures through the public awareness activities in the region. Primary referral sources include:

- 1) Hospitals, including prenatal and postnatal care facilities
- 2) Physicians
- 3) Parents
- 4) Child-care programs
- 5) Local educational agencies (including special education and Parents as Teachers)
- 6) Public health facilities
- 7) Other social service agencies
- 8) Other health care providers

If a referral is received from any other source, the Service Coordinator will suggest that the parent be contacted to make the referral.

A referral to First Steps can be made in a variety of ways. A standardized referral form has been developed, along with a cover letter, for use by all referral sources. Additionally, a referral form specifically for infants who are being referred from the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) has been developed. These forms may be faxed or mailed to the local SPOE.



To make a referral by phone, First Steps operates a toll-free statewide referral line (1-866-583-2392).

Primary referral sources can also make online referrals to the First Steps program through WebSPOE.



Referrals from Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)

Part C of IDEA incorporates a requirement of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Staff of the Department of Social Services, Children's Division, must refer to First Steps any child under age three who has been involved in a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect.

The purpose of the requirement is to promote collaboration between the Children's Division and the First Steps system based on the recognition that a large proportion of abused/neglected children under age three have health and developmental problems and may be eligible for First Steps services. SPOE staff will address CAPTA referrals in the same way as all other referrals received by First Steps. In some cases, the child being referred under CAPTA procedures may already be a child who is enrolled in First Steps or in the evaluation process.

Referrals for Prenatal Drug Exposure

IDEA requires children under the age of three identified as affected by illegal substance abuse, or withdrawal symptoms resulting from prenatal drug exposure, be referred to First Steps. These referrals should be addressed in the same way as all other referrals received by First Steps.

Timelines

The initial Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meeting must be held within 45 calendar days from the date of referral. This 45-day timeline is known as the referral, intake and eligibility determination process. Although there is no specific timeline requirements for when the intake and evaluation activities must occur after the referral, these activities should be conducted in a timely manner to ensure that the 45-day timeline is met.



Initial Contact

When an individual contacts the SPOE, s/he may be making an inquiry about the program or may be referring a child. It is important to distinguish between an inquiry and a referral, and the procedures for processing each.

I. Inquiry

An inquiry occurs when it is apparent that the individual only wants general information about the First Steps program. Some examples include:

- Inquiry about the purpose of the First Steps program
- Inquiry about a child who is not birth-3 years of age
- Inquiry about program eligibility criteria

If sufficient information (e.g., contact information, the name of the child, age of the child, etc.) was provided by the individual, the SPOE would enter the inquiry into WebSPOE and inactivate the child's record using the reason: "Inquiry Only."



This contact is stored as “Inquiry Only” data and not referral data. If sufficient information was *not* provided by the individual, the SPOE cannot enter the contact in the WebSPOE. The SPOE may maintain the information received if they choose, but this is not required.

II. Referral

A referral occurs when a primary referral source contacts the SPOE with developmental concerns or medical information about a child who is birth to 3 years. The SPOE must determine, based on information obtained during the initial contact, whether it is appropriate to proceed with the referral.

A. Medical / Newborn conditions:

1) If the child’s medical or newborn condition is specifically listed in the Missouri First Steps eligibility criteria, the SPOE should proceed with processing the referral.

OR

2) If the medical or newborn condition is *not* listed in the Missouri First Steps eligibility criteria, the SPOE should determine if the condition has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay or disability. Resources the SPOE can utilize to investigate the medical condition include, but are not limited to, internet websites such as webmd.com, medical dictionaries, other medical references, etc. Although the information gathered from these resources is not appropriate to use for eligibility determination, it is acceptable to use in order to determine whether or not to proceed with processing the referral.

If, after reviewing information on the medical condition, the SPOE:

1) Determines that the condition may be associated with developmental delays or disabilities, the SPOE should proceed with the referral.

OR

2) Determines that the medical condition is not associated with developmental delays or disabilities, the SPOE should refuse the referral and inactivate the child's record in WebSPOE using the reason: "Part C referral refused by the SPOE" [See section III: Refusing a referral].



OR

3) Is not certain if the medical condition may be associated with developmental delays or disabilities, the SPOE should proceed with the referral.

B. Developmental Concerns:

When a primary referral source contacts the SPOE office with concerns about a child's development, the SPOE should conduct a discussion of development. This discussion about the child's current functioning is to determine if developmental delays are present and whether or not to proceed with the referral. The discussion can consist of informal checklists, questionnaires, etc.

If, after the discussion of development, the SPOE:

1) Concludes there is a reason to suspect a developmental delay, the SPOE should proceed with the referral.

OR

2) Concludes there is a reason to suspect a developmental delay does not exist, the SPOE should refuse the referral and inactivate the child's record in WebSPOE using the reason: "Part C referral refused by the SPOE" [See section III: Refusing a referral].



OR

3) Is not certain about the level of delay, the SPOE should proceed with the referral.

C. Late Referrals (children referred 45 days or less prior to the third birthday):

Sometimes children will be referred to First Steps shortly before their third birthday. In these situations, the SPOE will talk with the family about the timelines associated with the First Steps evaluation process. In general, if the



child is referred more than 45 days prior to their 3rd birthday, then the SPOE **MUST** proceed with the referral. However, if the child is referred 45 days or less from their 3rd birthday, the SPOE is not required to proceed with the referral. The following are options for processing a late referral that is received 45 days or less from the child's 3rd birthday:

1) If the family and SPOE *mutually* agree there **is not** sufficient time to pursue First Steps eligibility, the SPOE should send the parent a letter confirming the initial contact. The letter would indicate a referral to First Steps will not be made because it was mutually agreed there is not sufficient time for an evaluation to be conducted to determine if the child would be eligible for early intervention services. Furthermore, if found eligible, the child would likely not benefit from early intervention services in the limited time available. The SPOE should:

- a) Enter the referral in WebSPOE,
- b) Inactivate the child's record using the reason: "Withdrawn," and
- c) Send the parent information about Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and other community programs for children ages 3-5.



2) If the family insists on pursuing a referral to First Steps and there is sufficient information to suspect that the child may have a qualifying medical condition or a significant developmental delay that warrants further evaluation, the SPOE should:

- a) Enter the referral in WebSPOE,
- b) Proceed with Intake, and
- c) With parental permission, contact the local school district *immediately* to assist with the referral to ECSE to determine eligibility.



3) If there is no reason to suspect that the child has a qualifying medical condition or s/he does **not** appear to have a significant developmental delay that warrants further evaluation, the SPOE should explain to the parent

that a referral is **not** warranted at this time and the SPOE should:

- a) Enter the referral in WebSPOE,
- b) Refuse the referral and inactivate the child's record in WebSPOE using the reason: "Part C referral refused by the SPOE" [See section III: Refusing a referral], and
- c) Send the parent information about ECSE and other community programs for children ages 3-5



A NOTE ABOUT SUMMER BIRTHDAYS:

If a child whose 3rd birthday falls between April 1 and September 8 is eligible for First Steps, they may continue to receive First Steps services throughout the summer **if the child has also been determined eligible for ECSE**. The SPOE should take this into consideration when reviewing late referral options with the family.

III. Refusing a referral

If the referral clearly indicates that the child **would not** be an eligible child under First Steps and that there is no reason to suspect a disability, the Service Coordinator would follow one of these steps:

1) Parent Referral – if after a review of the referral information (which should include a discussion of development), the SPOE refuses the referral and conducts the following steps:

- a) Send a letter of explanation to the parent,
- b) Enclose a completed copy of the Notice of Action (NOA) – Initial Evaluation Refused, and
- c) Enclose a copy of the Parental Rights Statement.



2) Referral from a primary referral source (with or without parent knowledge of referral)

- a) Contact the family,

- b) Follow the steps described above in Parent Referral,
- c) Send an acknowledgement letter to the referral source thanking them for the referral,
- d) Attach a copy of the First Steps eligibility criteria, and
- e) Inform the primary referral source that if additional concerns about the child in the future, contact the SPOE.



NOTE:

It is anticipated that this procedure (Referral Refused by SPOE) will be used rarely and only when it is **very** clear that the child does not meet First Steps eligibility criteria. If there is **any** uncertainty about eligibility or insufficient evidence to clearly determine whether or not the child might be eligible, an evaluation must be conducted.

Proceeding with a Referral

The referral date is the date the SPOE is made aware of the referral. For example:

- If the referral is received on the Web, the date of referral is when it is retrieved by the SPOE;
- If the referral is received by phone, the date of referral is when the call is received by the SPOE;
- If the referral is received by mail or fax, the date of referral is when the fax or mailed form is received by the SPOE.

If a referral is received after SPOE business hours, the date of referral is the next business day.

After a referral is received, a Service Coordinator should be assigned by the SPOE as soon as possible, **generally 1 – 2 days**. If the referral was made by someone other than the parent, an initial contact with the family should be made to explain the reason for the referral from the



primary referral source. It would be reasonable to anticipate that an initial contact with the parent would be **within two (2) working days** of the referral.

The purpose of the initial call is to:

- Briefly introduce the program
- Share eligibility criteria
- Discuss appropriateness of referral (parent withdrawal/SPOE refusal could occur)
- Discussion of Development: a discussion of typical developmental milestones, including completion of a developmental checklist with the family, if appropriate
- Schedule intake visit (if information gathered to this point supports the need for further evaluation)

The initial contact with family could be by phone or letter, introducing the Service Coordinator and making plans to get together. The First Steps informational brochure could be sent to the family along with the Parental Rights Statement, and then review this information with the family during the intake visit.



The SPOE sends a **written acknowledgment letter** to the primary referral source in a timely manner. This notification is simply for the purposes of acknowledging the receipt of referral and does not necessarily mean contact with the family has occurred. Any further information regarding evaluation/assessment results or types of early intervention services recommended are considered confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).



Sometimes referrals go directly to a community program or service provider rather than to First Steps. Therefore, SPOEs should develop local policies that outline procedures for primary referral sources, local programs, and service providers to ensure that First Steps is the first to receive the referral for evaluation.

The SPOE shall determine at the time of referral if the child might be in need of an educational surrogate. If so, the SPOE must follow the procedures outlined in the Part C State Plan (see Chapter 2: Parental Rights for additional information on Educational Surrogate).

The acceptance of a referral will require that a multidisciplinary evaluation of the child be conducted to determine whether or not the child is eligible for First Steps. Keep in mind that an evaluation does not always mean that tests must be conducted. In some instances, particularly children referred due to newborn or medical conditions, there is sufficient existing information about the child to confirm whether or not the child is eligible. The next chapter goes into more detail about intake and evaluation.

Unable to Locate a Family During the Referral Process

Prior to the initial IFSP meeting (i.e., during the referral, intake or eligibility determination process), if a Service Coordinator is unable to locate a family or if the family repeatedly fails to engage with the SPOE, the Service Coordinator must document all dates and times of attempted contacts in case notes as well as in letters to the family.

After documenting **three (3) good faith attempts** to contact the family with no response, a **certified letter** shall be sent stating that the child's referral record will be closed if contact is not made **within five (5) calendar days** from receipt of the letter.



No more than 30 days from the date of referral should pass during this process. This letter should contain detailed descriptions of how the family could re-establish contact with the First Steps system should they desire to do so in the future. A copy of the Parental Rights Statement must accompany this letter.

