CALECSE

California Early Childhood Special Education Network

Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE), Special Education Division

Partnering with Families Through Sensitive Conversations

November 4, 2026

About CalECSE

Funded by the CDE

Supporting Educators. Strengthening Partnerships. Improving Outcomes.

Explore. Learn. Connect.
Visit the CalECSE Network website for no-cost trainings, communities of practice, practical tools, and resources.

California Early Childhood Special Education Network (CalECSE)

A CDE-funded technical assistance project supporting local educational agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), county offices of education (COEs), and agency partners through:

- Professional learning
- Technical assistance
- Evidence-based resources
- Cross-agency collaboration

Mission

Strengthen early childhood systems to improve outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families.

Leadership Team

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California Early Childhood Special Education Network



Scott Turner
Co-Executive Director



Melanie Hertig
Co-Executive Director

IRVINE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



Carrie Rodrigues
Program Specialist, Exemplar Leads



Sara Castille
Program Specialist, Northern California



Laura Clarke
Program Specialist, Southern California



André Eng
Program Specialist, Birth to Three

Today's Presenters

Susana Avila
Geographic Technical Assistance
Facilitator, Region 9 CalECSE
Imperial County SELPA Program Specialist
savila@icoe.org

Kamica Barnes
Geographic Technical Assistance
Facilitator, Region 9 CalECSE
Orange County Department of Education
Director
kamicabarnes@ocde.us

Today's Objectives

- Use a strengths-based approach when sharing developmental concerns.
- Describe observations without assigning a diagnosis or label.
- Use language that reduces blame, fear, or defensiveness.
- Respond to family emotions with empathy and respect.
- Explain the basic referral for assessment pathways.

The goal is for families to feel supported, not judged.

Why These Conversations Are Sensitive

Families may be thinking …

- Is something wrong with my child?
- Did I miss something?
- Will my child be labeled?
- What will this mean for the future?
- Will people treat my child differently?

Professionals may be feeling …

- Concern about saying the wrong thing.
- Uncertainty about what to say.
- Pressure to explain observations.
- Fear of upsetting the family.
- Need to identify a clear next step.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development; Office of Head Start, Talking With Families About Their Child's Development

Language Access: Why It Matters

- Families should receive information in a language they can understand.
- Language access helps ensure meaningful participation in decisions about a child's development and services.
- Language barriers can lead to misunderstandings that affect trust, engagement, and next steps.
- Linguistically responsive practices help families feel respected, valued, and included.
- Ask families which language they prefer for conversations and written information.
- Arrange for a qualified interpreter when needed.
- Speak directly to the family, not the interpreter.

Sources: Office of Head Start, Screening Children; Office of Head Start, 45 CFR § 1302.50, Family Engagement

Strategies for Being Linguistically and Culturally Responsive

- Provide translated documents when possible.
- Use clear, jargon-free language.
- Recognize that bilingual and multilingual development varies.
- Invite families to share cultural and linguistic expectations that may influence communication and learning.
- Ask about families' routines, expectations, and what works at home.
- Recognize that prior experiences with systems may shape trust.

Sources: Office of Head Start, Screening Children; Office of Head Start, 45 CFR § 1302.50, Family Engagement

Before the Conversation



- Choose a private setting and allow enough time. Avoid initiating sensitive conversations during drop-off or pick-up.
- Review objective observations, developmental information, work samples, and successful strategies.
- Prepare specific examples of the child's strengths.
- Plan how to explain unfamiliar terms in plain language.
- Arrange language access or a qualified interpreter when needed.
- Know your program's referral procedures before meeting with the family.

Source: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Start With Strengths

- Name what the child enjoys
- Describe successful interactions and routines
- Share progress the family can feel proud of
- Connect strengths to learning and development



“I really enjoy having Maya in our classroom. She is curious, loves music, and connects quickly with familiar adults.”

Source: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Invite the Family's Perspective



Ask before you tell:

- "What are you noticing at home?"
- "How does your child communicate when they need something?"
- "What situations seem easiest or hardest?"
- "Is there anything about your child's development you've been wondering about?"
- "What would you most like help with right now?"

Source: CDC,Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Partnering, Not Diagnosing

Your role:

- Get to know the child in everyday routines.
- Share specific observations and strengths.
- Provide accurate information about available options.
- Partner with the family to identify next steps.



Source: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Providing Support Before Making a Referral

Collaborate with families to identify strengths, share strategies, and support the child's success.

- Share strategies already being used. Explain the classroom supports and interventions being implemented, how the child is responding, and what you are learning.
- Invite family perspectives. Ask what families notice at home, what strategies work for them, and what additional supports they suggest.
- Develop a plan together. Identify strategies to try, how progress will be monitored, and when you will reconnect to discuss next steps.

Source: California Legislative Information. California Education Code Section 56303: General education resources and special education referrals

Describe Observations

What I see:

> “During group time, Mia points or takes an adult’s hand. I have not yet observed her using spoken words to request materials during this activity.”

Avoid suggesting a diagnosis:

> “Mia has a language disorder.”

Invite the family's perspective:

> “How does Mia usually communicate what she wants or needs at home?”

Next step:

> “Would you be open to discussing whether a developmental evaluation might be helpful?”



Source: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Language Matters: Say This, Not That

Instead of: “Your child is behind.”

Say: “I've noticed some areas where additional support may be helpful.”

Instead of: “I think your child has autism.”

Say: “An evaluation may help us better understand your child's strengths and needs.”

Instead of: “Something is wrong.”

Say: “Let's explore what your child needs to participate and learn successfully.”

Instead of: “You should've noticed this earlier.”

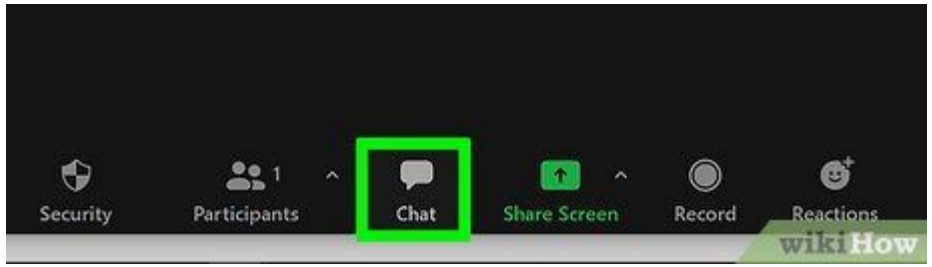
Say: “Families notice different things at different times. We can explore next steps together.”

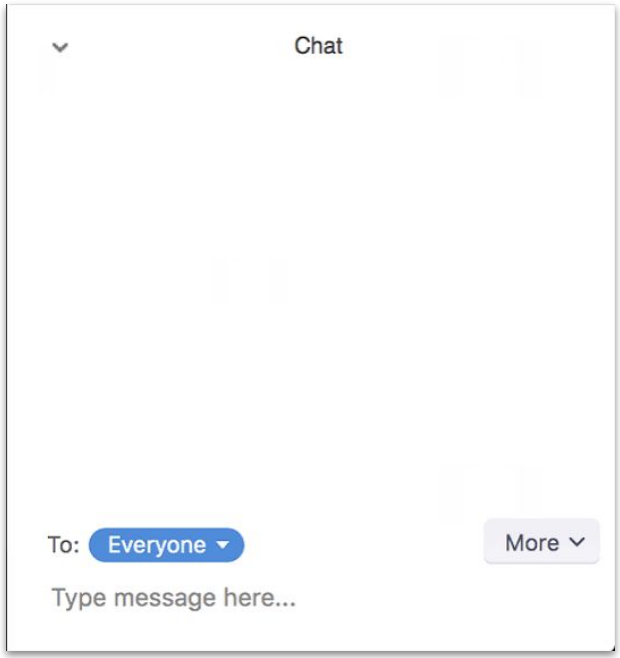
Activity: Flip the Deficit-Based Phrase

Practice rewriting deficit-based statements using objective, strengths-based language.

1. Read the “Not This” statement displayed on the screen.
2. Rewrite the statement using strengths-based language in the Zoom chat.
3. Focus on:
    - Objective, observable behaviors
    - Language that avoids assigning a diagnosis or label
    - A calm, supportive, and respectful tone
4. Do not press enter until the facilitator says, “Go!”
5. Review and discuss responses together.
6. Reflect: What made the statement easy or challenging to rephrase?

Activity Start





"Not This" phrases:

1. "Your child is behind."
2. "I think your child has autism."
3. "Something is wrong."
4. "You should've noticed this earlier."

Center for Disease Control (CDC) Milestone Tracker

- Free application and printables
- Tracks developmental domains: speech and language, social-emotional, cognitive, motor, and adaptive behavior
- Families and providers can use the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Learn the Signs. Act Early. resources to learn about developmental milestones and monitor children's development



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Video Discussion: Sharing Concerns

Watch the video: Active Listening: Concerns (YouTube)

Watch an early childhood provider engage in a conversation with a parent about developmental concerns.

As you watch, consider:

- How does the provider demonstrate active listening?
- What language helps build trust and support the family?
- How does the provider acknowledge the parent's perspective?
- What strategies might you use in your own conversations with families?

After the video: What did the provider do well? What might you approach differently?

Source: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Make Room for Emotion



Listen, validate, pause, and offer the next step.

- Pause and give the family time to process.
- Recognize and validate emotions without making assumptions about how the family feels.
- Listen before explaining.
- Offer information in small pieces.
- Ask what questions they have.
- Respect the family's pace while keeping the door open.

Sources: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development; Office of Head Start, Talking With Families About Their Child's Development

The Message Families Should Hear



"You know your child best. We see your child's strengths. We can explore what you are noticing together, and you do not have to navigate the next step alone."

- Listen before labeling
- Describe before diagnosing
- Partner before prescribing
- Connect families with accurate information and supports such as their pediatrician, local regional center, or school district.

Source: CDC, Watch Me! Training, Module 4: How to Talk With Families About Their Child's Development

Formal Referral Process: **Birth Through Under Age Three**

Birth Through Under Age Three

Early Start (Early Intervention)

Families may call or submit a referral to their local regional center to request an evaluation for their child.

- Within 45 calendar days of the referral, the regional center or LEA must obtain parental consent and complete the evaluation and assessment to determine eligibility and identify the child's needs.
- If the child is eligible, an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is developed within the 45-day timeline.
- For infants and toddlers with solely visual, hearing, or severe orthopedic impairments, or any combination thereof, referrals are made to the LEA.

Sources: California Department of Developmental Services. What is Early Start?

U.S. Department of Education. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act regulations, Section 303.321

Formal Referral Process: Age Three and Older

Age Three and Older

Special Education

Families must submit a written request for evaluation to their local school district.

- The school district is obligated to respond to a written request for assessment within 15 calendar days (with the exception of school vacation in excess of five days).
- Once parent/guardian consent is given an assessment of the child and determination of eligibility via an initial eligibility meeting within 60 days of the consent (excluding days between regular school sessions or terms and school vacations exceeding five schooldays).
- If the child is eligible, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed.

Sources: California Legislative Information. California Education Code Section 56321: Assessment plans and parental consent.

California Legislative Information. California Education Code Section 56344: Individualized education program development timelines.

Resources for Families: Developmental Concerns and Next Steps

- Developmental information: Share the CDC Learn the Signs. Act Early. developmental roadmap brochure (PDF) and developmental milestones resources to help families understand and monitor their child's development.
- Pediatrician: Encourage families to discuss developmental concerns with their child's pediatrician, who can help identify next steps and connect them with appropriate resources and services.
- Regional centers: Help families find their local regional center by county through the California Department of Developmental Services (DDS) website.
- Family support: Connect families with a Family Empowerment Center (FEC) or Family Resource Center (FRC) for no-cost information and assistance navigating the individualized family service plan (IFSP) and individualized education program (IEP) processes. Families can find FEC contact information through Seeds of Partnership.

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Before You Leave the Meeting



- Ensure the family has time to share its perspective.
- Summarize specific observations and strengths.
- Avoid assigning a diagnosis outside your professional role.
- Confirm that language-access needs have been addressed.
- Discuss available options and agree on next steps.
- Identify a follow-up plan.

Let’s Practice Turning a Concern Into a Partnership

Scenario:

A 30-month-old child rarely uses spoken words during classroom routines. The child often points or guides an adult by the hand to communicate and sometimes becomes frustrated when peers do not understand. The family has not expressed concerns.

Discuss:

- How would you begin with the child's strengths?
- What would you ask the family?
- What specific observations would you share?
- What language would you avoid?
- How could you explain the Early Start referral process without creating pressure?

Debrief:

What would help the family feel respected, informed, and empowered?

Questions

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Communities of Practice: Join the Conversation

Discuss and Discover. Share and Strengthen. Connect and Inspire.

View the full schedule of communities of practice (CoPs) on the CalECSE Communities of Practice webpage

Join a regional, job-alike, or statewide Community of Practice (CoP) to share ideas, solve problems of practice, exchange successful strategies and tools, and strengthen early childhood special education across California.

Interested in joining a community of practice (CoP)? Scan the QR code below or complete the CalECSE Community of Practice Interest Form

Communities of Practice
California Early Childhood Special Education Network

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Share Your Feedback for a Chance to Win CalECSE 2027 Symposium Registration

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Please help us improve our practice and complete the Zoom survey following this session.

After doing so, you will be entered into a raffle to win a free registration to CalECSE's 5th Annual Symposium to be held at Paradise Point in San Diego, October 19–20, 2027.

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Growing Knowledge. Building Capacity. Changing Lives.

Thank you for joining us today! We appreciate your participation and hope to see you at a future training. Explore our full schedule of no-cost professional learning opportunities on the [CalECSE Training Calendar]

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