Practice Alert

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES — CHILDREN'S DIVISION

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Issued by: Alternative Care and Investigations/Assessment Units

First Steps Eligibility Criteria and Referral Requirements

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Practice Alert is to remind staff of the requirement to make a referral to the First Steps program for any child, birth through age three (3), who has been determined abused or neglected by a preponderance of evidence in a child abuse/neglect investigation. This requirement is pursuant to the federal mandate **Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)** (42 U.S.C. 5101 et seq.), and is a collaborative effort to facilitate early intervention services for children in need.

This is also a reminder to all staff that referrals can be made for children who do not meet criteria for CAPTA, but do meet the First Steps eligibility criteria listed below.

First Steps is Missouri's early intervention system for infants and toddlers, birth through age 3, who have delayed development or diagnosed conditions that are associated with developmental disabilities. The federal law governing First Steps is Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is the lead state agency responsible for implementing the First Steps program. First Steps is a voluntary program which provides families the tools they need to help their child be successful.

FIRST STEPS ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Children from birth through age 3 who meet at least one of the following criteria are eligible for First Steps:

1. A diagnosed physical or mental condition associated with developmental disabilities, including newborn conditions; or
2. A condition with a high probability of resulting in a developmental delay or disability; or
3. Are functioning at half the developmental level expected for a child of equal age in one or more of the following developmental areas: communication, adaptive, physical (including vision and hearing), cognitive or social/emotional.

If there is a reason to suspect the child has a developmental delay or disability, the First Steps System Point of Entry (SPOE) staff will conduct intake activities with the parent/foster parent to begin the evaluation process.

Note: First Steps cannot be mandated to complete an evaluation to determine eligibility.

Additional information on First Steps eligibility criteria can be found by accessing the First Steps Eligibility webpage.

Additional program information can be found on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's website and in the Missouri First Steps Program brochure.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING RESOURCES

A developmental screening is a formal process to determine if a child is meeting developmental milestones. It is completed by a healthcare provider, parent educator, or early childhood professional in collaboration with parents, foster parents and/or legal guardians.

The First Steps program does not conduct developmental screenings. The following resources are available to obtain a developmental screening:

- Missouri's Parent Education Program (*formerly Parents as Teachers*)
- Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services Directory of Public Health Agencies & Services by County
- Pediatrician

For more information on developmental screening, visit https://earlyconnections.mo.gov/developmental-screening.

FIRST STEPS REFERRAL PROCESS

1. Referrals to First Steps can be made by completing the referral form and submitting via mail, fax, or email, or by completing an electronic form online.

    a. **For Paper Referrals**

    The First Steps referral form is online at [Paper Referral Form](#).

    Referrals are submitted to the System Point of Entry (SPOE) according to the county where the child resides. [SPOE Contact Information](#) can be found here.

    If there was a preponderance of evidence of abuse/neglect, staff must indicate "CAPTA" under "Reason for Referral" and complete the section labeled "CHILDREN'S DIVISION USE ONLY." If this is not a CAPTA referral, the child must meet the eligibility requirements listed above. The parent/guardian listed should be the person with whom the child is residing (i.e., foster parent, parent/guardian). The Children's Division staff making the referral should list their contact information under "REFERRAL SOURCE INFORMATION".

    Including supporting documentation regarding who has educational decision making rights and any concerns related to the child's development is helpful to expedite the First Steps intake and eligibility process. [CD-21C First Steps Cover Letter](#) must be included.

    b. **For Electronic Referrals**
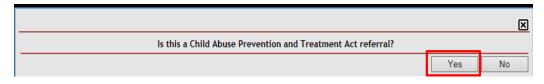
    The First Steps electronic referral is online at [Online Referral Page](#).

    Staff must complete the following steps:

    *   Select *Refer a Child.*
    *   Select Social *Service Agency/Children's Division.*

    *   Next, a pop-up window will ask if this is a CAPTA referral, select **Yes, if POE criteria applies.**

    *   Complete the *Child* section with requested identifying information. All fields denoted with a red asterisk must be completed.
    *   Complete the *Parent/Primary Contact* section using information for the person with whom the child is residing (i.e., foster parent, parent/guardian). Select this individual's relationship to the child in the *Relationship* field.

- The *Alternate Contact* section is optional, but may be used to identify Children's Division staff or another individual who could assist First Steps in locating the primary contact, if needed. The *Referral* section is completed using contact information for the staff making the referral (i.e., Children's Division worker). Include the referral source contact phone and email. First Steps staff will contact the referral source for additional information about the referral. Complete information and timely responses are important in order for First Steps staff to meet mandated timelines.
- The *Reason for Referral* section should indicate whether this is a CAPTA referral and any known concerns with the child's development.
- Click *Save*. A green message bar will appear at the top of the screen indicating the referral has been successfully saved and received by First Steps.

Enhancements to the online referral form are planned in 2024 for Children's Division referrals.

2. First Steps staff will then send notification to the referral source acknowledging the referral and review the referral information to determine if there is a reason to suspect the child has a disability or developmental delay. Once a referral is made, it is important that the Children's Division staff that made the referral stay in contact with the local First Steps SPOE to provide any necessary information for the intake, eligibility or Individual Family Service Plan processes.

   If the Children's Division staff <u>and</u> the parent/primary contact have no concerns about the child's current level of development, the parent/primary contact can decline continuing the First Steps referral process or the SPOE may refuse the referral. This is most likely to occur when a mandated CAPTA referral has been made.

   If the referral source <u>or</u> the parent/primary contact has any concerns about the child's current level of development then SPOE staff move forward with intake and evaluation activities.

   For children in CD custody, First Steps will notify the referral source (CD Case Manager) and the parent/primary contact of the eligibility decision.

3. Once a child is determined eligible for First Steps, the service coordinator will schedule an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) meeting with the educational decision maker (parent/ foster parent or educational surrogate). If the child is in CD custody, then a copy of the IFSP can be provided to the CD worker, noted on the education screen and uploaded into OnBase. If the child is not in CD custody, the educational decision maker must give First Steps written permission to share the IFSP with CD.