



2500 Red Hill Ave, Ste 290B
Santa Ana, CA 92705
T 949.267.0300
F 949.221.0048
www.helpmegrowoc.org

FEDERAL GRANT RESPONDS TO A POIGNANT NEED TO IMPROVE CARE COORDINATION AND DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AT RISK OF DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS

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For More Information: Rebecca Hernandez, MEd
Program Manager, Help Me Grow Orange County
949-267-0300, rhernan2@uci.edu

ORANGE COUNTY, Calif. – Early detection is key in helping children overcome developmental delays, but a recent study found that too few Orange County children receive the screenings they need to identify delays and address them while there is still adequate time.

Help Me Grow Orange County, the local pillar of a national early childhood organization, has received a five-year federal grant to improve the care coordination and screening services for young children at risk of developmental delays and help connect them to needed early intervention programs.

“Our goal is to reach, at a very early age, Orange County children identified as at-risk for developmental delays,” said Maria Minon, MD, vice president for medical affairs and chief medical officer at Children’s Hospital of Orange County. “In the first year alone, we plan to screen more than 400 children who would not have otherwise received a developmental screening, and connect every one of those children who need follow-up with the care they need.”

Early identification of developmental delays significantly improves outcomes for at-risk children and their families, and results in higher rates of children receiving developmental services for treatment.

The grant to Help Me Grow Orange County was awarded through a Healthy Tomorrows Partnership for Children Program. It provides \$235,566 to support a developmental screening network and registry to improve physician engagement and cross-sector collaboration, link electronic health records among Orange County service providers, and reach out to pediatricians to encourage them to regularly use developmental screening tools and refer children for treatment when needed.

The Healthy Tomorrows Partnership for Children Program is a collaborative effort between the American Academy of Pediatrics and Maternal Child Health Bureau that distributes grants to promote community planning and problem solving at the local level.

Children who would benefit from early-life developmental services often don’t receive them due to a simple lack of awareness among parents and health care providers alike of the availability of such services. In fact, a survey of Orange County physicians found that a small minority of pediatricians routinely incorporate



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developmental screenings into their practice. Those who do, report that they provide referrals to children with atypical screening results only 20% of the time.

Help Me Grow Orange County will connect families with developmental services in Orange County to ensure children – like Adrianna Courette’s son, Amare – receive the early interventions they need.

When Amare was a 3-year-old preschooler, Courette noticed he was exhibiting several telltale signs of autism: walking on tiptoes, referring to himself in the third-person, speaking robotically, and getting easily frustrated if toy blocks were put together “wrong.”

Her pediatrician assured her that his behavior was normal for a boy his age and didn’t recommend a development screening. But Courette, who says she’s “a crime-scene investigator when it comes to Amare,” took matters into her own hand and contacted Help Me Grow in March.

Since then, Amare, now 4, has been diagnosed with autism, placed in a special program at the Mitchell Developmental Center in Santa Ana and is learning the skills he will need to start a mainstream kindergarten in the fall.

Courette is pleased with Amare’s progress and the level of help her family is receiving, but said he would have made even more progress through earlier screening, diagnosis and treatment.

Courette said she is thrilled that the partnership will mean more parents will likely receive earlier answers to their questions.

“Help Me Grow connected me to the resources we needed,” she said. “I’m seeing improvements. He’s learning things, and he’s happy.”

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