



Leading Focused Conversations with Families

for use with the Interim DRDP for Special Ed
(Preschool or Infant-Toddler)

Visit DRAccess.org/leadingconversations to access worksheets for organizing and leading focused conversations with families.

Leading focused conversations with families to help complete the DRDP is not new; this process has been an important part of the special education guidance for more than five years. During the COVID-19 pandemic assessors may have fewer opportunities to directly observe children and will increasingly rely on information provided by families.

The ongoing conversations that we have with family members during our typical interactions with them are rich opportunities for learning about their child. Notes of what the family shares during these conversations should be captured and included as documentation in the child's portfolio, home visiting notes, or other system of organizing information about the child. These kinds of general conversations should occur whenever we have contact with the family. Additionally, it may be useful to lead these conversations in a particularly focused manner during the two times a year when the DRDP is completed. When combined with what you know about a child, observations from family members help you gain a more complete picture of a child. Research findings suggest that parents' observations are reliable and valid sources of information and should be considered an essential component of a comprehensive assessment process.

In general, having conversations with families should always be an important part of completing the DRDP (2015), **but it is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when early intervention home visits are frequently delivered via video conferencing and many preschool services are provided through distance learning and tele-therapy.** In these situations, it is likely that assessors may not have adequate opportunities to observe the child to inform their ratings on *all* the Interim DRDP for Special Ed measures. Having a focused conversation with a family member may be a primary way to gather information about a child's skills to inform ratings on measures that you might not have as many opportunities to observe directly. During these conversations, focusing on routines and activities provides a very useful context for asking a family about their child's everyday learning opportunities and skills. Additionally, with the use of distance learning, family members are also more directly involved in their preschooler's special education and related services. For example, if you have not had the opportunity to directly observe the child interacting with peers (SED 4: Relationships and Social Interactions with Peers), the family can share observations of their child spending time with other children of about the same age (e.g., siblings, cousins).

Be sure that the families you work with are familiar with the DRDP right from the start. Here are some points you might share with them early in the service delivery relationship:

- The DRDP is based on ongoing observations of a child's skills in typical, everyday routines and activities with familiar people.
- The DRDP is completed twice a year, and after each time it is completed, an easy-to-understand report (the Detailed Child Report) will be available.
- There are many benefits to the DRDP. It provides service providers with up-to-date information that helps them plan and carry out learning activities. For families, the information helps them know more about their child's development and ways that they can support their child's learning.
- When family members share observations and information about their child, it helps assessors confidently complete the DRDP.



Four Steps to Leading Focused Conversations

The four steps below will guide you in planning and leading focused conversations with families to help complete the Interim DRDP for Special Ed.

Step 1: Take an initial pass at completing the Interim DRDP for Special Ed measures

- Gather together the materials that you will need:
 - The appropriate (preschool or infant-toddler) manual;
 - The “Worksheet for Leading Focused Conversations with Families to Help Complete the Interim DRDP for Special Ed”; and
 - Your documentation, which might include your observation notes, home visiting notes, portfolios, information gathered from conversations with family members and other providers, observations that you made to inform other authentic assessment tools, etc.
 - Interim DRDP for Special Ed Rating Record (Preschool or Infant-Toddler).
- Using the assembled materials, take an initial pass at completing the Interim DRDP for Special Ed.
 - For measures you are confident you can rate based on your current observations and other documentation: Assign a rating; you might jot this rating on the “Worksheet for Leading Focused Conversations” or on the Interim DRDP for Special Ed (Preschool or Infant-Toddler) Rating Record.
 - For measures that you need additional information/documentation to confidently rate: Identify those measures for which you want to make additional observations or have further conversations with the family (or others) to gather more information.

Step 2: Identify classroom or family routines and activities for observation

In the previous step, you identified measures for which you need more information. Following are some strategies for making additional observations.

- If you are seeing the child in-person in a classroom:**
Plan times to observe the child participating in *typical classroom routines and activities* in which you might observe the child demonstrating skills in those measures.
- If you are providing preschool or related services to a small or large group of children via video conferencing:**
Plan times to observe the child in the video conference participating in *group activities* in which you might observe the child demonstrating skills in those measures. Be aware that these situations may not be ideal for making accurate observations: children might not feel at ease in such situations nor may they have adequate opportunities to demonstrate their latest level of skill mastery.
- If you are providing home visits, preschool, or therapy services to an individual child/family via video conferencing:**
Use your knowledge of the child and family and discussions with the parents to identify *everyday family routines or activities* that might be opportunities for observing skills related to those measures during one of your video conferencing sessions. For example, if you need information about measures related to the Social and Emotional Development domain, you might focus on what happens when the child plays with his siblings, cousins, or other children with whom the child typically interacts. Table 4 provides examples of typical family routines and activities that children might participate in at home. You might observe skills in particular measures during video conferences where these routines and activities are observed.
- Other strategies:**
 - In accordance with your program’s policies, you might also ask the family to text or email you videos or photos of the child participating in selected routines and activities.
 - You should ask other teachers, related service staff, or child care providers to share their observations.

Once you have exhausted your opportunities to make additional observations move to the next step.

Step 3: Lead a focused conversation

- Using the everyday routines and activities that you identified in Step 2, plan a focused conversation to have with the family. Jot down some general questions you will ask the family about those routines or activities. For example, if Max has a sibling around his age, you might ask, "Please tell me what happens when Max and his brother play together." If the child does not have siblings you might ask, "Does Max ever interact with children around his same age? If so, what happens?" You can jot down these questions in the appropriate column on the "Worksheet for Leading Focused Conversations."
- At the beginning of the conversation, remind the family about the things you've previously shared about the DRDP. Describe, in family-friendly language, the general domains or measures you want to focus on (avoid reading the exact wording of the measures). For example, if you want to focus the conversation on measures within the Social and Emotional Development domain, you might say, "Let's talk about how Max interacts with familiar people."
- Ask the family to describe what their child does when involved in everyday routines or activities. For example, related to the feeding measure of the Physical Development and Health domain you might ask "Please tell me what Max does during mealtime." As the family describes what Max does, use follow-up questions as needed to get more specific information.

Examples of General Follow-up Questions

- You said that he [does this], tell me more about what that looks like.
- What changes have you observed in mealtime over the past month or so?
- What parts of mealtime does he need help with?
- What have you been doing to help him?
- Does he use any special equipment or other things during mealtime? If so, what does he use? Is it working?
- How does he let you know what he wants and doesn't want during mealtime?

If the kinds of general follow-up questions listed above don't help you get the information you need, try the additional strategies on the next page.

Additional Strategies for Asking Follow-up Questions

Ask More Focused Questions In some cases, you might ask more focused questions that will help you understand the child's latest level of mastery on specific measures, e.g., "Tell me what he's like when he plays with his brother?" However, avoid asking close-ended questions based on comparing two descriptors or examples. For example for ATL-REG 4: Self-Control of Feelings and Behaviors, avoid asking questions that simply repeat a descriptor verbatim, such as "When Max is upset, does he seek out an adult for comfort or does he calm himself?" Rather, ask more open-ended questions, such as, "All children get upset from time to time - what happens when Max gets upset?"

Ask Wondering Questions You might use "wondering questions" to help identify the latest level of mastery. For example, you might ask a family member, "On our last video conference, I saw Max pick up his toy phone. I was wondering, when he plays with the phone, what does he usually do with it?" After the family member answers, you might follow with more specific follow-up questions, such as "Does he ever pretend to talk on it?"

Narrow the Choices If you are able to narrow down your choices of the child's latest level of mastery to two adjacent descriptors, then you might ask the family, "Does he do it more like [this] or [that]?" Reviewing the examples from the two adjacent descriptors may help you come up with wording for the "this" and "that." For example, for PD-HLTH 2: Gross Locomotor Movement Skills, if you're thinking that the child's latest level of mastery is either Responding Earlier or Responding Later, based on your review of the examples from these two descriptors you might ask, "When Max sees something interesting, does he look at it and does he also reach for it?"

Discuss Recorded Video or Photographs You might ask the family about a video clip or photo that they sent. You can each share what you observed and talk about whether this documentation is consistent with what the family sees at other times.

Ask the Family to Plan for More Observations If the family says they are not sure what their child does during a particular routine or activity, think about other ways to ask questions to help clarify what you want to know. If they still say they are not sure, ask if they can watch for specific skills during routines or activities; you might plan strategies with the family for how and when they might focus their observations. Make sure the family understands the need for authentic observations, rather than setting up artificial situations. For some families, you might ask if it would be useful to write down the questions you're hoping to answer, or you might offer to schedule a video conference observation during a particular activity or routine.

Summarize After every conversation, summarize with the family what you've talked about and how the information helped inform your ability to complete the DRDP. For example, "Thanks for letting me know more about how Max interacts with others. I learned more about what he does when he gets upset, and how he acts around children his age. This really helps me understand his development better and will help us track his progress on the DRDP"

Repeat these kinds of conversations with other routines or activities you have identified until you have enough information to confidently rate the measures in question.

Step 4: Take another pass at completing the Interim DRDP for Special Ed (Preschool or Infant-Toddler)

- Take another pass at completing the instrument, using the additional observations that you have made and information that you gathered from conversations with the family.
- As you complete the measures that were in question, also double-check the measures for which you assigned earlier ratings. Keep in mind that talking about routines and activities with families often leads them to share information about not only skills that appear in one measure but skills that might appear in other measures. For example, by asking what Max does during mealtime, the family might describe what Max does related to self-feeding and also how he interacts with others during mealtime.

If there are still measures that you still cannot confidently rate, repeat the steps above. If after repeating the steps, you still cannot confidently rate a given measure, you may use Unable to Rate, **but ONLY in extreme cases when you have exhausted all ways of gathering information.**