

Developmental Screening in Mahnomen County

Introduction

Wilder Research and Olio partnered with the Minnesota Interagency Developmental Screening Task Force on a project to better understand the causes of low rates of developmental screening and to identify recommendations for increasing screening rates. This includes six statewide screening programs that are implemented locally by counties and school districts.

For this project, Wilder and Olio engaged community members in each of the following three counties: Lake, Mahnomen, and Ramsey. Insights and feedback were gathered through family advisory groups (one in each county). The Mahnomen County advisory group had between five and eight advisors at each meeting, with five advisors attending all meetings consistently.

Wilder also requested interviews with providers and partners from Mahnomen County; however, only one person, a representative from a Head Start program serving families from White Earth Nation, responded. We are not reporting this individual's responses here to protect their confidentiality.

This report summarizes feedback from families in Mahnomen County.

Feedback from Mahnomen County families

Meeting 1: Developmental screening experiences

The focus of this first advisory council session was to introduce caregivers to the project and learn about their background and experiences with developmental screening.

Family advisors noted many positive experiences with screening. Mahnomen County advisors mentioned learning about their child's development and getting connected with resources to support their child.

> We had evaluations done at his daycare. ... He is basically normal; he is on track with milestones. He does calming things as all children do. I would kinda worry. ... The screening helped give me peace of mind. – Mahnomen County advisor
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> My positive was that we were able to get into speech therapy. I felt supported being given options and choices for what I felt was best for my grandchild, specifically for him as an individual. – Mahnomen County advisor

Family advisors also noted some negative experiences with screening, including a lack of community relevance, unclear explanations, and a lack of follow-up after screenings. Mahnomen County advisors talked about negative experiences more frequently than positive experiences.

> I was worried if things would be … relevant [to me]. My daughter saw me beading since she was a baby. She was able to pick up beads with a needle at 1.5 years but couldn't throw a ball. Some of those questions, when filling them out, she can't do that ,but she can do these other things that are also fine motor skills.
> – Mahnomen County advisor
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> Our language is verb-based. English is a noun-based language. ... What takes 3-7 words to say in English is just 1 word in Ojibwe. How many words they're saying is really hard to answer when they're speaking Ojibwe, since full sentences are just one word. The screening tools should take into consideration not just Ojibwe but other languages, world languages. – Mahnomen County advisor
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> They would mail the milestones for where my kids were at the time. They just said, "Here, you have to do this." No explanation about why it was being done.
> – Mahnomen County advisor
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> I remember the clinic telling me that I could have my child tested for different things, but they didn't connect me with the places to do so. – Mahnomen County advisor

Meeting 2: Connecting with families about developmental screening

The focus of the second session was to identify key messages for reaching families by exploring optimal communication formats, and determining important places in each county to connect with families.

Family advisors identified a key message for reaching out to families, especially families who have not previously engaged with screening. The main message suggested by advisors is that screening is a checkup that benefits both you and your child.

> I would tell the story about how my son's speech came to light through the screening, and catching it early helped him to be able to get more help and get into speech therapy early. – Mahnomen County advisor
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> Screening helps to educate parents on things that are going on, whether it's speech, occupational, anything. It just helps you be a better parent. – Mahnomen County advisor

Family advisors preferred two communication formats for families: print materials and social media, with some preferring videos shared via social media.

> We get a flyer that comes in the mail that says, “Hey, your child is X years old and a well-child visit is coming up.” – Mahnomen County advisor
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> Around here, Facebook for the middle-aged group and Snapchat for young adults and teenagers. Some people use Instagram. Those are the biggest ones around here. – Mahnomen County advisor

When asked about where to connect with families, family advisors most often mentioned community centers and community gathering spots, such as the casino in Mahnomen County and other places or businesses that host family events.

> We have a family movie night at the casino. It’s free for everyone. It's capped at 100 people, but I wish we could do more. There's a free meal and some education. At the last one, we did a cooking class with wild rice. There's a [community] activity every month. Last month we did quilling on birch bark and made earrings. This month we’re doing wrapped quilling on hide. – Mahnomen County advisor
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> Doing screening at Head Start brought value to my family by helping my boys be ready for “big school” and the chance to socialize with other kids their ages. The screening there did show some advances and some minor concerns. – Mahnomen County advisor

Meeting 3: Feedback on materials

The materials created for this project included a board book about developmental milestones that encourages screening and freestanding panels intended to be installed at libraries, daycare centers, or other places that families gather. The book and panels included a QR code to schedule a screening. In the final family advisory group meeting, we asked about aspects of the materials they liked, those that could be improved, and other ideas or concerns that they wished to share. Overall, Mahnomen County advisors said they liked the materials, including the book and panels, but some wished it was more meaningful for their community.

> I liked how inviting the language was. It wasn't like, you need to do X, Y, and Z. ... The language itself is more inviting and more suggestive than demanding somebody do something. I also liked the graphics of it. – Mahnomen County advisor

> I wish there was Ojibwe language on there or pictures of more Native families, that type of thing. Native imagery specific to our Ojibwe [community]. – Mahnomen County advisor

Considerations for Mahnomen County

The following are considerations for partners and providers in Mahnomen County that may help increase screening participation.

- **Provide screening where families are, literally.** The most effective models bring screening to places families already inhabit and trust. This includes not just traditional locations like libraries and clinics, but grocery stores, playgrounds, or temples. This breaks down the need for transportation and builds off the success programs like Head Start have. Nearly 100% of their children are screened because the screening is done as part of the child's school day.
- **Shorten the distance between awareness and action.** Given parents' busy lives, asking them to take many steps takes them away from their most important job – parenting. Instead, collapse the developmental screening journey into a single moment. Calls to action should be "do this now, here, with this person" rather than "go find out more."
- **Work through trusted messengers and relationships.** Materials can help support people who are working to build trust with families, but materials cannot communicate the value of screening on their own. Families who have their child screened are often referred to screening by someone they trust or have an existing relationship with a screening provider. This could include more opportunities for families to share their screening stories so parents hear from their peers. They infrequently access screening because of a flyer or bookmark.
- **Address parent concerns directly.** Revise communications and work with partners to directly address the fear, alignment with values, and confusion that often surrounds screening. It is important to also articulate why screening matters and how it benefits parents (not the program). Parents are very invested in their child and will typically do whatever it takes to ensure their child is developing well. It is important to ensure that the approach to communications makes parents feel empowered to do the best thing for their child rather than focus on their need to fill out a form.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the "Developmental Screening in Lake, Mahnomen, and Ramsey Counties" report.
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September 2026

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