

## How do we screen for healthy development in foster children?

### What you need to know:

Regularly assessing foster children's development and giving more care based on the results can ensure children grow up healthy. Standardizing developmental screening across Canada, including culturally-relevant screening tools, and involving multiple caregivers in assessments can ensure foster children are assessed regularly and receive support they need.

### What is this research about?

Universal developmental screening is standard testing for children's mental and physical development. The goal of screening is to quickly spot any developmental delays and find ways to help the child. In 2016, over 7000 children in British Columbia (BC) lived in foster care. Screening is crucial for foster children since they have higher rates of developmental delays and addressing delays early supports lifelong health.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers reviewed material on universal developmental screening from around the world. They also gathered information on screening practices across Canada from provincial government websites and phone calls with informants. Informants came from many backgrounds including child welfare agencies, public health regions, and government ministries.

The researchers focused on three questions:

- What areas are conducting universal screening of foster children?
- What program models are they using?
- What are the outcomes of universal early screening for foster children?



Researchers Devon Caldwell and Melissa Nauta present their findings to the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (Photo credit: UVic staff, with permission).



## What did the researchers find?

By reviewing developmental screening the researchers made a list of tools in use across Canada. They compared these tools with those used internationally. The two main tools in use were the Ages and Stages Questionnaire and the Nipissing District Developmental Screening. While the programs differ, provinces across Canada are using developmental screening. Screening targeted specifically to foster children is still rare across Canada.

There are two key challenges to foster children benefiting from universal screening programs. First, for screening to work the children need to be followed up with. With children moving between foster homes they may not be assessed or get follow-up care. Second, if only one foster caregiver assesses the child, they may miss symptoms.

Based on the best practices reviewed, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- Scale promising regional programs to entire provinces to ensure regular use
- Involve multiple caregivers in screening to improve assessment is accurate and complete
- Assess children when they come into foster care
- Re-assess when necessary, considering recent trauma and changes in a child's life
- Ensure caregivers and social workers act upon screening results
- Explore culturally-relevant screening tools

## How can you use this research?

Caregivers for foster children may find this research helpful in assessing the needs of children in their care and getting additional support. Decision-makers focusing on child welfare across Canada can refer to the recommendations and examples from this research to shape developmental screening policy and programs. Child welfare professionals can use this research to inform their work with clients as well.

## About the researchers

Devon Caldwell and Melissa Nauta are University of Victoria (UVic) graduate students. This project was completed as part of the [Graduate Studies \(GS\) 505](#) course. Facilitated by UVic [Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization](#), GS 505 is a partnership between MCFD and UVic. This project was prepared on behalf of MCFD.

## Keywords

Child and youth care; children in care; universal screening; developmental screening; Ministry of Children and Family Development; developmental assessment

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## Territory acknowledgement

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