

# *When You Have A Concern About First Steps Services*

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*Part of the "Facts at Your Fingertips" Series of Informational Materials for Parents and Families  
Enrolled in the First Steps System in Vigo County*

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In a previous edition of "Facts at Your Fingertips", we shared information about the rights and responsibilities of families who are enrolled in the First Steps system. In this follow-up edition, we will be talking about what happens if you feel your rights have been ignored and how we hope you avoid ever getting to that point. If, however, you feel your rights have been violated, we hope you will let us know and give us the opportunity to correct whatever concerns you have. If that doesn't work, we want you to know how to file a complaint that will ensure your concerns are addressed. More about filing a complaint will be explained later in this packet.

**Concerns happen.** Throughout your child's time in the First Steps system, you will be dealing with many issues. In addition to the concerns you have about your child's ongoing health and growth and development, you will also be dealing with receiving services within Indiana's First Steps service delivery system. As is true with any system, the potential exists for conflict to come up. Whenever conflict or concerns happen, it's best to deal with it as quickly as possible. This prevents the situation from getting worse. Sometimes, it may be as simple as building a stronger system of communication. Other times, it may mean that you will want to change your service provider. All of these options are available to you.

**What kinds of concerns can happen?** As is true with any situation, lots of things can cause concern. In First Steps, your concerns may be about:

- the amount of service your child is receiving
- the service provider who is providing your service
- your child's eligibility
- the records that are kept on your child.

Whatever your concerns are, it is best to discuss them as quickly as possible with the appropriate person.

**Where do I begin if I have a concern?** The best place to begin this discussion is with your child's service coordinator. Your service coordinator is the person who links you to all your child's services and keeps everyone working together. Sometimes, it feels as if your child is following the 'map' of their individual plan. If that's the case, then the service coordinator is the person helping you to direct traffic. If you have a concern, talk to your service coordinator first. Explain openly and honestly what your concern is and ask for their help. Ideally, the service coordinator will help you think of

all the options that will make you feel better about your child's services and then together you will take the steps necessary to resolve whatever conflict has come up.

There are times that you may have a conflict with a particular service provider. These things happen and it's often through no one's fault. If you would like to change from one service provider or therapist to another one, that can easily be arranged by talking to your service coordinator. They will gladly begin the process of making this change by helping you use the Provider Matrix to identify another service provider.

**What if my concern is my child's service coordinator?** There may be times that you have concerns about your service coordinator. When this happens, you may be confused about whom to talk to in order to resolve the conflict or concern. First Steps makes this easy by always making the intake coordinators at the System Point of Entry (SPOE) available to assist you in dealing with your concerns about a service coordinator. If you need to reach the SPOE coordinator, feel free to call her at (812) 231-8337. The SPOE coordinator will help you go through the Service Provider Matrix and identify a different service coordinator who will be a better match for you and your child.

**Do I have other options?** Each county in Indiana has a local planning and coordinating council that deals with the local issues around First Steps. The coordinator of this council is also available to help should you have a concern about the First Steps system or your child's First Steps services. Feel free to contact the coordinator if you have questions or concerns at any time. She will be more than happy to help you in whatever way she can, including helping you to file a more formal complaint. In Vigo County, the First Steps coordinator can be reached at (812) 231-8342.

**What if just talking doesn't work?** Sometimes, you need to express your concerns in a more formal manner, or you feel as if your concerns aren't being addressed. There are various options to do this within the First Steps system. Federal law and state regulations have created a process for you to file a formal complaint.

Your options for filing a more formal complaint don't have to be scary. It just means you put your concerns in writing and you send those concerns to someone who can make a real difference. Each community has a regional consultant who works within the Bureau of Child Development. This consultant acts as a "go-between" from the local level to the state First Steps office. By working with your local First Steps Council coordinator, you can get the address or phone number for the county consultant. You are free to call or write the regional consultant with any concern you might have.

In addition to contacting the local First Steps coordinator or the regional consultant, parents are free to contact the state First Steps Director. The state director welcomes letters, phone calls or e-mails from families who participate in the First Steps system.

**How to contact the state First Steps Director.** You can contact the state office by writing:

First Steps Director  
Family and Social Services Administration  
Division of Family and Children  
Bureau of Child Development  
402 West Washington Street, Room W. 386  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-2739

Or calling: (317) 232-1144

Or toll free in Indiana: 1-800-441-STEP (7837)

**What happens when I express concerns or file a complaint?** Ideally, what happens is that concerns get addressed quickly and easily. A complaint may be dealt with in one of three ways.

- The complaint can be dealt with through informal discussions, as we wrote about earlier in this packet.
- A Due Process Hearing can be held. This is somewhat like a legal action, where each party presents their side of the “case”. A “Hearing officer” will listen to your presentation and that of the other party and then rule on the issues. This ruling is a binding agreement.
- Mediation can be used. Over the last few years, the federal government has developed another, less complicated system for dealing with complaints. Indiana was one of the first states to develop this system of mediation. In mediation, the process is a bit more formal than just contacting a coordinator or regional consultant, but not as formal as a Due Process Hearing. An impartial mediator will hear the issues of both sides and together with the parties involved, develop an agreement that can be accepted by all parties. Sometimes, families file for a Due Process Hearing, but proceed with mediation in the meantime. Mediation costs are paid by the state and all sessions are scheduled at a time and place that is convenient to you.

**How often are complaints really filed?** We’re lucky here in Indiana that most concerns and issues can be dealt with in a more relaxed and informal way, meeting the needs of parents and children and allowing the First Steps system to do what they are supposed to be doing. In fact, with almost 14,000 children receiving First Steps services last year, only 3 complaints were filed! That doesn’t mean there weren’t more issues and concerns expressed by parents, but it does mean that strong communication between families and service providers dealt with the majority of issues that came up.

**Communication and Conflict Resolution.** Open communication is the best way to resolve any and all concerns that might come up. By speaking up, you let other people know what you're thinking or how you want something to be done. Without communication, First Steps services just don't work as well as they could.

Lack of communication can lead to misunderstandings that take time away from providing the best possible services for your child and your family. By speaking up and calmly discussing concerns, you can often resolve whatever issues there are.

**Five Steps to Successful Problem Solving.** By following these steps, you can help to resolve any concerns you might have about your child's participation in First Steps Services.

- **Define the problem.** Sometimes, this is harder than it seems on the surface, but if you sit down and carefully look at the issues, you'll find out what your real concerns are.
- **Summarize all the causes of the concern and identify the basic causes.** Don't try to solve the problem immediately without really looking at the causes. In doing that, you may overlook a larger concern.
- **Identify all the possible solutions and then decide which ones might work best.** This is sometimes hard to do. You have to be open to all sorts of possibilities. Some of them may seem off track, but it's important to be open and listen to every possibility. Once you have all the ideas on the table, then you can work to decide which ones really work best.
- **Analyze the potential solution.** In this step, it's important to take those possible solutions and decide which ones will work best for your child and your family. At this step, it's good to think about how each solution will resolve your concern and prevent other concerns from coming up.
- **Select the best solution and act on it.** Make sure all parties agree to this best solution and then start working together to make it come true. Keep an eye on everyone's participation in making this solution a reality. It's a good idea to write down what everyone intends to do. Be specific. And then be happy about how you found an answer to your concern.

### **Summary**

Don't hesitate to identify concerns you have about your child's participation in First Steps. Talk to your child's provider if that is the point of concern. Remember that your service coordinator or the local First Steps Council coordinator can help. If you can't solve the issue, don't hesitate to contact someone in the state First Steps office and express your concerns to them. Remember that open and honest communication is the best way to solve any concern you might have so that your child receives First Steps services that can really make a difference!