

Part C of the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act says, “to the maximum extent appropriate, early intervention services are provided in natural environments.”

Both parents and providers have questions about this provision. “What are “natural environments? Where and how are early intervention services to be provided?”

The Role of the IFSP Team

The basis for all services and supports to children and families participating in Infant-Toddler Services is the development of the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The focus of early intervention services is to increase the family’s competence and capacity to meet the needs of their child. Outcomes are designed from the family’s perspective: what is important to them and what happens in their daily routines. The team that creates the IFSP should follow the family through their day, and develop an IFSP that supports the child’s developmental activities across environments. The team must also evaluate the child’s and family’s strengths, concerns and resources. Services are then identified and delivered within the context of the family’s life and community.

Early intervention services are most effective when routines, materials, and people familiar to the family and child are used. The location selected to provide these services should be one that maximizes the child’s and family’s opportunity to learn. Some reasons for this are:

- All children learn from one another.
- Familiar environments allow children to focus on targeted learning.
- Interactions with children without disabilities are linked to the child’s ability to interact in adulthood with other adults.
- All children need to develop a sense of belonging.

- Children with disabilities have a right to access the same environments as other children.

The Community Inclusion Project says in *The Steps to Creating a Better IFSP* that in natural environments, “instruction occurs spontaneously through naturally occurring routines and activities. Opportunities are provided for children to practice skills that are functional for them. Each child must be permitted to direct the activity and make choices. The early interventionist can target many learning objectives during one activity. For example, a coloring activity can lend itself to the observation of communication skills, social/sharing skills, motor skills, creativity and practical knowledge.”

Children with disabilities should receive services in community settings and places where normally-developing children and their families are found, so that they will not be denied opportunities that all children have - to be included in all aspects of our society.

The natural environment may be very different for a baby who is two months old than for a two-year-old. The baby’s environment may be only home and grandma’s house, while the two-year-olds natural environment may have expanded to include childcare/playgroup, the grocery store, the mall, the nursery at church, playing with cousins at family gatherings, and attending a sibling’s sports events. There are many opportunities for learning in every environment.

The family and early intervention team can look at the different daily routines and activities and find where best to work on the targeted skills. For instance, with a child for whom the targeted skills are acquiring sitting balance and increased vocalizations, the time a team may choose to work with the child is play time, and the tool they may choose is a riding toy. The environment may be at home and/or at day care, and the person providing assistance and encouragement may be the early intervention teacher, a physical or speech therapist, the childcare provider or the parent.

Where Should Services Be Provided?

For a young baby whose natural environment is mostly at home with mom, the early intervention team may teach mom ways to provide stimulation during diapering and bath times to reach the targeted skills of increasing muscle tone and encouraging eye tracking. Mom may be taught ways to move the baby’s arms and legs or move a bright toy through the child’s visual fields.

Another way of looking at natural environment and the child’s daily routine is with a child whose mother owns a business and her young baby spends his days with her at her shop. There are many opportunities for stimulation in this environment. The early interventionists can provide services at the shop, showing mom, and perhaps other employees, ways of working within this environment and doing certain activities that are enjoyable for the child and will meet targeted outcomes.

Childcare environments are obvious places for many children to receive early intervention services because so many children now spend time at childcare. The early interventionist may get all the children involved in an activity, which meets targeted goals for the child with a disability and is fun for all the children.

Questions Parents Can Ask:

When choosing a natural environment setting for their child, parents can ask these questions:

- Is this a program in which my child would participate if he/she did not have disabilities?
- Does this program offer social interaction with non-disabled peers?
- Is the program located near our home in the community in which we live?

To identify whether their child can participate fully in the program, parents may want to ask:

- Is the primary intent of the activity the treatment of disability or to meet the needs of all the children?
- Are children with and without disabilities participating in the same activities?

- Are children with and without disabilities interacting with the same adults?
- Are all children using the same toys and materials?
- Are there any physical barriers between the area children with disabilities use and the area used by the rest of the group?

Providing services in natural environments:

- Decreases a family's sense of isolation by connecting families to natural sources of support such as friends, neighbors or church members.
- Encourages and assists families in identifying their child's strengths and talents.
- Helps families to build relationships that do not focus on their child's disability or difference.
- Increases the social and language competencies of children with disabilities.
- Provides services to infants and toddlers in settings that are more stimulating and responsive to their needs than segregated settings.
- Provides normally developing children opportunities for positive interactions with children with disabilities.

Providing services in natural environments does **NOT**:

- Place children in settings without appropriate supports and services.
- Keep families from networking with other parents of children with disabilities.
- Only provide home-based services.
- Ignore individual needs and family concerns.
- Place children in unsafe environments.
- Create separate programs for young children with disabilities.
- Compromise the quality of early intervention services.
- Place unreasonable demands on early childhood professionals or families.

For more information about Natural Environments

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**The Places Where Young
Children Learn Best**

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