

HOW CAN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILD?

Key message

Professionals services are an important source of support for families of children with global developmental delay. It is important to know what they can offer and how to get the most from working with them.

Professionals services are an important source of support for families of children with global developmental delay. For children below school age, these services are known as early childhood intervention services. (See Topic x: [What are early childhood intervention services?](#)).

What types of professionals might you need?

The best specialist support services consist of multidisciplinary teams of professionals who provide tailored support to families according to their ongoing needs. The teams may include early childhood educators, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, social workers and paediatricians.

Where a child and family require the services of more than one professional, one of them will act as a **key worker** to coordinate the support that the team provides to the family. This ensures that the advice being given to the family is consistent and lightens the family's burden in communicating with professionals. For this reason, it is better for families to receive support from services that have multidisciplinary teams and key worker services rather than from single professionals operating separately.

What services can professionals provide?

Early childhood intervention and other specialist services may provide a range of support services to families. These include:

- **Support to parents and caregivers to help them learn how to provide their child with the experiences and opportunities they need to flourish.** This is the most important form of help that professionals can offer.
- **Direct therapy services to children.** This is rarely the most appropriate option for young children, but may play a role as children grow older.
- **Services for children with multiple health and care needs.** Some children have constant care needs for health reasons or because of behavioural problems.



- **Respite care services for families.** Caring for young children who need constant attention can be wearing for parents, and having access to respite services can be a lifesaver.
- **Equipment needs.** There are many different forms of specialist equipment available for children with developmental disabilities. Some children will need devices to help them communicate or mobility equipment to help them. Your early childhood intervention and other professionals can advise you on what will be most appropriate for your child.

How can professionals help you?

Professionals can help you in a number of important ways. ***The most important function of professional services is to help you and your family learn how to provide your child with the experiences and opportunities they need to flourish.*** The home is the most important learning environment, especially for young children. The core job of professionals is to help you learn what positive experiences and opportunities you can provide for your child in the course of everyday activities in the home.

Other ways in which professionals can help you include:

- helping you understand your child's needs
- helping you develop goals, both short-term and long-term, for your child, other family members (including yourself), and the family as a whole
- helping you track the progress that your child and family are making
- helping you and your child and their family develop the skills they need to be able to help your child
- working with you to identify strategies for meeting your goals, and supporting you while they try them
- helping you identify ways in which you can help your child develop the functional skills they need
- support your child's inclusion in early childhood programs and community activities
- informing you about resources and supports or services you might need, and helping you connect with these

Common myths about professional services

- ***The specialists will do the work.*** Many parents assume that the role of therapists and other professionals is to work directly with their child. But this is



not the most effective way of helping young children, or you and your family. For one thing, what a therapist can achieve by working with a young child in a clinic settings will not necessarily transfer to the other settings such as the home.

Moreover, the amount of time that a professional can spend with a child represents on a small fraction of the child's waking hours over the course of a week. Your child spends much more time with you and other caregivers than with any therapist, so it is what happens during the 'non-therapy' time that really matters for your child's development. (See [Topic x: What does your child need?](#)).

- ***The specialists know more about the child than the parents do.*** This is another myth you need to challenge. What specialists know about is how children *in general* develop, what promotes or hinders their development, how different disabilities can affect development, and how they can be ameliorated.

But they do not know *your* particular child – *you* are the expert on your child, what they can do, what they like or dislike, how they fit into the family. The best results for your child and family come when the your expert knowledge of your child is combined with the specialist team's expert knowledge of development and disability – the end results will be greater than anything either of you could do on your own.

- ***Children with disability need therapy to overcome their developmental challenges.*** Children with disabilities do not need 'therapy' – what they and you need is the support of a therapist to help you understand the nature of your child's learning challenges, and what you and other caregivers can do to help your child meet these challenges. It's about you deciding what your goals are and then drawing on the expertise of the therapist to help you work towards these goals

How you can get the most from working with professionals

There are best practice guidelines that professionals are meant to use when working with families. (See [Topic x: What is best practice in services for children with developmental disabilities and their families?](#)). However, it is also helps if the parents are clear about what they want and need.

Here are some tips on how to get the most from the professionals who work with you:

- Ask for a family support plan that not only addresses your child's needs, but also the needs of other family members (including your own) and the needs of the whole family.



- Make it clear to your workers what outcomes you want and what you need to know to achieve them – that will ensure that they focus on what is important to you, and will also give them the satisfaction of knowing they are being truly helpful.
- Get your workers to help you identify ways of promoting your child’s functional skills that can be incorporated into regular family routines
- Don’t allow workers to do things for you, like working directly with your child – get them to show you how to do it yourself
- Ask your workers to explain why they recommend particular strategies – the more you understand about how such strategies work, the easier it will be to implement them
- Don’t tolerate anyone with negative or judgmental attitudes towards you or your child
- Don’t allow too many demands to be made on you – you need to be the boss of your time.

Implications for NDIS participants and their families

In choosing service providers to support you, your family and your child, look for providers with the qualities just listed. In particular, make sure they are clearly focused on building your skills in supporting your child, and helping those in the other settings your child attends do the same.

If the provider you choose turns out not to be as supportive or collaborative as you hoped, or is not committed to helping your family learn how to support you and your child, find another one – that is what the NDIS encourages.

Resources for parents

- Stacey Touma (2019). *Our journey to a family-centred early intervention experience*. Welcome Reception presentation at ISEI Conference 2019, Sydney, 25 June, 2019.
<https://plumtree.org.au/our-journey-to-a-family-centred-early-intervention-experience/>
- *The beginning of a family-centred early intervention experience - learning there can be a different and better way*. The Family Voices Podcast, Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Vic/Tas), April 29, 2022
<https://familyvoices.podbean.com/e/family-centred-practice/>



- *Best Practice Information Sheets for Families* – Early Childhood Intervention Association (Vic/Tas)
<https://www.eciavic.org.au/resources/best-practice-information-sheets-for-families>
- Early Childhood Intervention Australia (WA/NT Alliance) (2017). *Choosing Quality Early Childhood Intervention Services and Supports for Your Child: What you need to know*. Sydney, NSW: Early Childhood Intervention Australia.
<http://www.ecia.org.au/documents/item/280>

Professional resources

Ensher, G. and Clark, D.A. (2011). *Relationship-Centered Practices in Early Childhood: Working with Families, Infants, and Young Children at Risk*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes.

Keilty, B. (2016). *The Early Intervention Guidebook for Families and Professionals: Partnering for Success (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Raver, S.A. and Childress, D.C. (2015). *Family-Centered Early Intervention: Supporting Infants and Toddlers in Natural Environments*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes.

Rush, D.D. and Shelden, M.L. (2020). *The Early Childhood Coaching Handbook (2nd Ed.)*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes.

Shelden, M.L. and Rush, D.D. (2022). *The Early Intervention Teaming Handbook: The Primary Service Provider Approach (2nd Ed.)*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes.

Rosenbaum, P. and Gorter, J.W. (2012). The 'F-words' in childhood disability: I swear this is how we should think! *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 38 (4): 457-463. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2214.2011.01338.x.