

WHAT ARE EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION SERVICES?

Key message

What happens in the early years of children's lives lays the foundation for future development and learning. For children with developmental delays, specialist early childhood intervention services can help families give their children the best possible start in life.

Why is it important to act early?

The early years are when children are most shaped by what they experience – by the care they are given, the food they eat, the safety of the environment, the opportunities to play and explore, and range of social experiences they have. What happens in the early years lays the foundation of all later development and wellbeing.

The early years are just as important for children with disability as for other children. To capitalise on the crucial early years of learning, it is important to identify any developmental problems children might be having and to act early to help the child. The aim is to provide the child with experiences and environments that will offset the impact that their conditions might have on their development.

The early years are also critical for the whole family. This is when families begin to learn how to support and nurture their child, how to meet their child's needs, and how to adapt to having a child with disability or developmental delay.

What help is available?

When a family has a young child with a developmental disability, they usually need more support than other families. While they need the same services as other families, they may also need specialist support. These are called *early childhood intervention* (ECI) services.

The term 'intervention' can give the wrong impression – it seems to suggest that specialists are going to 'intervene' in the life of your child and family, or try and fix the child. But this is not what these services do. Instead, they aim to *support* – not intervene or interfere in – your family and child from as early as possible in their lives. The term *early intervention* means taking action early while children are still developing in order to give them the best possible start in life.

What are early childhood intervention services?

ECI services involve teams of professionals who support families of young children (from birth to school age) who have developmental disabilities. The teams typically



include early childhood educators, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, psychologists and social workers, and may also include paediatricians and dieticians.

Having several different professionals involved can be demanding for the child and parent alike – their schedules can become crowded and leave less time for other activities. Hence, a *keyworker* is often allocated – one of the team who is the person the family usually receives support from and who channels the expertise of the full team. (A keyworker is not just a case manager whose job is to help the parent coordinate the services they need. They can perform that role, but their main job is to be the key person representing the team who works directly with the family to help them meet their child's needs.)

Some children have multiple health and developmental needs, and lots of different specialists may need to be involved. For such children and their families, a *team-around-the-child* approach may be needed. This involves gathering a small team of support people – not necessarily all professionals – who commit themselves to providing families with the additional support they and their child need.

What are the aims of early childhood intervention services?

The overall aim of ECI is *to ensure that the parents and other key caregivers are able to help the children gain the skills they need to participate meaningfully in all the key environments in their lives*. In other words, rather than trying to change children directly through various forms of therapy, ECI services seek to build the capacity of parents and others to promote children's learning and development.

The reason that ECI seek to work with you rather than directly with your child is simple: the vast majority of a child's time is spent when the ECI professionals are not there. Since children learn all the time in whatever setting they are in, we need to make sure that the social and physical environments in which they spend their time are able to provide them with the learning opportunities they need. That is why ECI services usually work in the natural environment of the home rather than in clinic settings.

How do early childhood intervention services work with families?

ECI services use an approach known as *family-centred practice* that has been found to be most effective and most acceptable to parents.

The key features of family-centred practice are:

- Addressing the issues that are most important to the family
- Respecting family values and priorities
- Professionals work with parents as partners
- Focussing on goals for child, parents and families
- Building parental capabilities
- Building on existing family strengths and resources



What should you look for in choosing an ECI service?

In choosing an ECI service, here are some key points to keep in mind:

- Choose a service that has a team of specialists who work together to provide you with integrated support, not separate
- Choose a service that will work with you as partners and that that will focus on the issues that are of most concern to you
- Choose a service whose workers you trust, who believe in you and your child, and who do not judge you or make you feel inadequate
- Choose a service that helps you build your confidence and help you develop skills to meet your child's needs better
- Choose a service that can help you adapt you home environment and routines to best meet your child's needs
- Choose a service that works on goals for you and for the family as a whole and not just goals for your child

What comes after ECI services?

Early childhood intervention services are available to support you and your child up to the time they start school.

See Transition topics

Resources for parents

Early Childhood Intervention Australia (2019). *Your child, your family and early childhood intervention: Family perspectives*. An ECIA Parent video. Sydney, NSW: Early Childhood Intervention Australia. <https://youtu.be/DbuV4isNLDI>

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Children and Young People with Disability Australia (2020). *Early Childhood Intervention Fact Sheets*. Collingwood, Victoria: Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA):

- ECI Fact Sheet 1: *Understanding ECI language*. <https://cyda.org.au/resources/details/227/understanding-eci-language>
- ECI Fact Sheet 2: *Supporting the development of children and young people with disability*.



<https://cyda.org.au/resources/details/228/supporting-the-development-of-children-and-young-people-with-disability>

- ECI Fact Sheet 3: *Services and supports in the early years.*
<https://cyda.org.au/resources/details/229/services-and-supports-in-the-early-years>
- ECI Fact Sheet 4: *About family-centred practice.*
<https://cyda.org.au/resources/details/230/about-family-centred-practice>
- ECI Fact Sheet 5: *Building strong families.*
<https://cyda.org.au/resources/details/233/building-strong-families>

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Resources for professionals

Early Childhood Intervention Australia (2016). *National Guidelines: Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention*. Sydney, NSW: Early Childhood Intervention Australia. <http://www.ecia.org.au/resources/best-practice-guidelines/national-guidelines-for-best-practice>

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http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/profdev/ECIA_National_Conference_2012.pdf

Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments (2008a). *Agreed upon mission and key principles for providing early intervention services in natural environments*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Centre, Office of Special Education Programs, US Department of Education.

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Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments (2008b). *Seven key principles: Looks like / doesn't look like*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Centre, Office of Special Education Programs, US Department of Education.

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