

WHAT IS BEST PRACTICE IN SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES?

Key message

The most effective services and practitioners use a family-centred approach that involves partnering with families to address the issues that are of most importance to families, and helping families develop the capacity to meet the needs of their child and family.

Family-centred practice is the umbrella term for a set of practices that early childhood intervention and other practitioners use when working with families of children and young people with disabilities. These practices describe the way that practitioners work with families rather than *what* they do.

Family-centred practice is an approach that avoids doing things *to* families or *for* families, but instead seeks to work *with* them and *through* them to benefit their child.

What are the key features of family-centred practice?

- Family-centred practice involves a **partnership** between parents and professionals in which knowledge and information is shared equally. Rather than professionals determining what the parents and their child needs, their role is to work with parents to help them decide what matters most to them.
- Family-centred practice involves recognising the **parents as the experts** regarding the child and family, while the professionals are experts on children and young people with disability in general and the impact that particular conditions can have on development. The best results are gained when these two sets of expertise are brought together.
- In family-centred practice, **families decide what goals they want to work on** and what outcomes they want to achieve. The professionals share their expert knowledge, and support the families in determining what outcomes are most important for them, but the families make the final decisions.
- Families also make the final decisions about **what form of service they want**, based on what works best for them. The strategies that are chosen to help the child have to be acceptable to families and able to be carried out by them in their particular circumstances.
- Family-centred practice is a **relationship-based way of working** – it depends on the mutual respect and trust that develops between parents and professionals. Both parties have to learn to be open and honest with each other.



- Family-centred practice ***builds on family strengths and resources***. Professionals who work in this way acknowledge what families are doing well and help them use the resources that they have available to them to achieve the outcomes they want for their child and family.
- Family-centred practice aims to ***build the capabilities of parents and families***. This means helping them learn new skills and strategies to meet their child with disability's needs, as well as promoting their belief in their ability to shape the lives of their child and family.
- Family-centred practice is a ***whole-of family approach***, which addresses the needs of all family members and of the family as a whole, as well as those to the child with developmental disabilities.
- Family-centred practice is ***an individualised approach***, in which all the support provided is tailored to meet the needs and circumstances of your child and family.

Choosing a service provider

Here are some pointers to keep in mind when you are choosing a service provider to work with you, your child and you family.

- ***Choose workers you can trust***, who listen carefully, are respectful and non-judgmental about your values and lifestyle, and who understand what is important to you
- ***Choose workers who treat you as a partner***, who want to know what you know about the child and family, and who base their support on that knowledge
- ***Choose workers who recognise what you are doing well*** and take every opportunity to help you become more competent in promoting your child's development
- ***Choose workers who believe in you*** and your capacity to learn how to meet your child's needs.
- ***Choose workers who will teach you what you can do*** to promote your child's functional skills and ability to participate in family and community life
- ***Choose workers who can show you how to build learning opportunities for your child into daily family routines***, rather than expecting you to do exercises with the child that will add to your work load



- **Choose workers who can provide you with information** about services, sources of support, and the nature and impact of your child's disability on their development
- **Choose workers who give you high expectations for the future for your child** and help you understand what to expect and what the possibilities are

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>

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>

Melbourne Disability Institute (2019). *Early Intervention - A Whole New Language*. Episode 6 of *One in Five* podcast series. Melbourne, Victoria: Melbourne Disability Institute, University of Melbourne. <https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/media/one-in-five/episode-6-early-intervention>

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/>



Early Childhood Technical Assistance Centre (ECTA). *Professional Roles in Early Childhood Intervention: A Practice Guide for Families*.

https://ectacenter.org/decrp/topic-family.asp#PGF_FAM1

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>

Division for Early Childhood (2015). *DEC Recommended Practices: Enhancing Services for Young Children with Disabilities and Their Families*. Los Angeles, California: Division for Early Childhood.

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Centre (ECTA). *Practice Improvement Tools: Family Practice Guides for Practitioners*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Early Childhood Technical Assistance Centre, FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://ectacenter.org/decrp/topic-family.asp>

- *Practitioner Family-Centered Practices for Working With Families*
https://ectacenter.org/decrp/topic-family.asp#PGP_FAM1
- *Supporting Family Member Informed Decision Making*
https://ectacenter.org/decrp/topic-family.asp#PGP_FAM2
- *Involving Families in Obtaining Supports and Resources*
https://ectacenter.org/decrp/topic-family.asp#PGP_FAM3
- *Family Capacity Building in Early Childhood Intervention*
https://ectacenter.org/decrp/topic-family.asp#PGP_FAM4

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.

Fialka, J. M., Feldman, A. K. and Mikus, K. C. (2012). *Parents and professionals: Partnering for children with disabilities*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

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

Keilty, B., Kosaraju, S. and Levine, H. (2017). *Seven Essentials for Family–Professional Partnerships in Early Intervention*. 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.

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.