

The Home Field Advantage in Early Intervention



Have you noticed that “home field advantage” plays a major role in who wins a sporting event? A football team from Minnesota has more practice making a touchdown in the snow than a team from Florida. Basketball games on the home court include loyal fans and familiar locker rooms. Baseball players have a favorite bat to use when they need a hit. These sports examples illustrate the importance of the “natural environment” for athletes striving to perform their best.

The concept of “natural environments” can be applied to early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorder and their families. Children are most secure and learn best when they are with familiar adults, using typical toys and materials to complete their everyday activities and routines. When an early intervention provider comes to the child’s home or childcare center and joins the normal, everyday routines, the child has the “home field advantage” for learning.

The concept of natural environments is more than the place where the activities and routines occur. “The home field advantage” includes building on the family’s priorities, incorporating the the child’s preferred activities, toys and routines, and most important, how the

caregiver and child participate in them. Learning opportunities occur throughout the day as children play, eat, get dressed, chase the dog, wave good-bye, read books, and help with chores.

Early intervention providers help family members learn how to promote their child’s development. Adults can “coach” the child by gaining attention, repeating actions, naming objects, or providing more practice on any of these outcomes in a variety of activities.

Learning new skills in daily routines such as bath time or outdoor play is an effective and time saving way that providers help parents teach their children

There are more advantages to the home field. Because the child is learning within everyday activities, the learning is immediately useful and meaningful. Further, the practice occurs where the skill is needed rather than in another setting that requires more practice for use at home or child care. The family does not have to purchase special equipment either. The child and family use their everyday materials and toys to accomplish the tasks of the day. The EI provider may simply guide the caregiver to select objects or toys that the child is already used to, and incorporate them into the things the family does—watching football, cooking, or working in the yard so the child can “perform” like a professional!

