

# Questions and Answers for Families about Services and Supports in Natural Environments



**Early Intervention Programs** have undergone tremendous change in the past few years to promote the family's role in their child's development. Services such as Education, Speech, Physical or Occupational Therapy are no longer provided directly to the child in hospitals or clinics or even in the family home. Rather, the family identifies priorities and concerns for their child with a team of professionals and together a support plan is developed.

What do these changes mean to you? First, it means that you as the family are the decision makers about your child's program. However, you are not alone. A team of professionals will share information and help you identify resources that will be beneficial. The support plan will be tailor made for your family. Second, the supports and services will be provided where you and your child are... or as the early intervention legislation describes it, your "natural environments." This paper has been written for families to address many of the most common questions that families have asked as they are introduced to their early intervention program.

## What are natural environments and why are they so important?

Natural environments are the typical places where children and families live, work and play, such as home, child care or community settings. The wording is used in the Federal legislation, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2006) as a contrast to more traditional interventions such as educational or

medical based programs or those provided at facilities specifically designed for individuals with disabilities.

The use of natural environments as the location for early intervention services is based on current scientific evidence and social policy. Research has shown us that young children learn in their day to day interactions and that caregivers are effective at teaching their children. Learning within everyday routines, activities and places is efficient for the child. They are able to use the skill in practical and meaningful ways. Consider the child requesting a drink or a favorite toy. When the child raises his hand toward the desired object and squeals, he is likely to get his parents' attention and the desired object or at least an explanation. The child learns that reaching and vocalizing to communicate is effective and is likely to try again the next time. We know that young children with delays or disabilities have difficulty taking skills they learned in a therapy room or special classroom and transferring them to places like the

park or their living room or church nursery. It becomes a longer and more complicated process.

As you can see from that example, natural environments are more than just the places where teaching and learning occur. It is the process of how children learn in all the places they go and things that they do. Children learn in multiple places. Getting a drink or snack and then washing up afterwards may occur in the family kitchen, at McDonalds, or at Grandma's. Children learn how to participate with their family in all their daily routines and activities.



## Just what are everyday activities and routines?

Routines are the chores and activities of every day life organized to help us get things done. An activity becomes a routine when it has a predictable sequence, occurs on a regular basis, is repeated frequently, and has a purpose for those participating. Routines are often so predictable that they are completed in a rote manner, without much thought about what to do next. The sequence is a habit. Common routines include getting up and dressed, having breakfast and going to work or school in the morning. Chores such as doing laundry, taking out the garbage, getting the mail, or picking up toys can be routines too. Routines such as attending religious services, gardening, hiking, watching siblings at sports or music events or walking and feeding the dog reflect families' interests and priorities.

Where do child and family routines come from? Each family is different. Many are associated with chores or daily activities, e.g. meals, laundry while others come from personal interest such as music, and gardening. Almost any activity or event has learning opportunities and can become a teaching and learning routine. Routines provide a supportive framework for the child to learn new skills. While routines do not need to be rote or scheduled, the predictability enhances the child's ability to anticipate opportunities to participate.

For some activities, such as diapering or snack the "routineness" or predictability is easy to identify. How-



ever, more unique activities may also be positive learning opportunities for both the care provider and the child. Watering the flowers, playing peek-a-boo,

dropping brothers and sisters off at school, or feeding the dog all have the potential of becoming a positive teaching and learning interaction. Just because activities are different or not associated with typical care giving patterns does not mean they aren't or can't be good routines for teaching and learning.

Remember, the term "routine" is used because it is a concept most care providers recognize. It is not intended to imply that every interaction, event, or activity that occurs between a care provider and child should become a routine. The family's preferences provide the foundation. Intervention is added when and where it is most comfortable and compatible. The family chooses the routines they want to work with.

### **This looks a lot like play.**

### **What good is it doing my child?**

Looking like play is a good thing for young children. Children like to play and will spend extended time playing with the toys or activities they enjoy. Parents should view play as work for young children and encourage it by joining their child in play. Children learn many new or more sophisticated knowledge and skills while they are playing such as the names of people and objects, how things work, concepts like size and shape, object functions, what rolls, stacks, marks, bounces, and snaps.



As they grow older, they also learn about other people, about sharing, persistence, their likes and dislikes, and about problem solving.

Play looks simple, but it is actually a very complex interaction of a child's interests, energy, feelings, experiences, curiosity, and opportunities. It is the process that provides the child with opportunities to practice the skills necessary to become an independent

adult. Children can learn just about any skill within various play activities and what's even better, children like to play so they will master new learning through practice. Studies show that children play longer with the toys and activities they like and therefore get more practice learning new skills. Our job is to help them play to promote learning, to reduce stress, to gain self-esteem and to include us as their play partners!

### **How can I do what professionals do? I'm not a trained therapist.**

The Early Intervention (EI) program doesn't expect or want you to do what professionals or service providers do. What you do already is so much more important... you are your child's parent. As the parent, you provide opportunities for teaching and learning throughout every day activities making you your child's first and most lasting teacher. Children learn best during typical interactions with familiar adults... the things you do and talk about everyday. EI also doesn't expect you to help your child alone. EI service providers are there to support you to help your child develop and learn, to share information and resources, and to work with you and your child to achieve the goals you have



identified. The goal is not to turn you into a teacher or a therapist but to help you do what you are already doing in ways that help your child learn.

watch a video, to make lists or to draw diagrams. Sometimes we want someone to show us how and then practice with us. There is no one right way to learn about your child or to help you support your child's learning. The good news is there are many effective

strategies. Your team will support your learning in the ways you feel are best for you and for your child.

You already know so much about your child.

### **Do I need special equipment or materials?**

No, not generally. Sometimes you may want to purchase a toy or book that your child likes but that's just typical parenting. If your child does need some type of adaptive support, your EI provider will share ideas for using everyday materials and objects to help meet the outcome. For example, children can practice stair climbing using special wooden steps or stools or the actual stairs to your house. A little bit of creativity with your everyday materials and the need for most special equipment is eliminated.

However, resources are available to share with you when creative adaptations are not adequate. Excellent progress has been made with assistive technology and augmentative communication devices. Your EI provider will help you support your child's needs.

Early Intervention supports you to support your child with special needs. Supporting you may include demonstrating strategies to help you play with your child, adapting the high chair so your child is sitting



in a stable position, problem solving ideas to make car travel more enjoyable, listening to you share what works in the bath tub or helping you interpret and respond to your child's communication signals. As adults, we all have ways we prefer to learn and use new information. Some of us learn by doing, from watching someone else, working side by side or from talking and experimenting. Others prefer to read or to make lists or to draw diagrams. Sometimes we want someone to show us how and then practice with us. There is no one right way to learn about your child or to help support your child's learning. The good news is there are many effective strategies. The team will support learning in the ways you feel are best for you and for your child. You already know so much about your child.

### **Wouldn't my child act better outside our home or working with someone else?**

Well, maybe, but is that what you want for your child and family? Many parents think their child acts better with others (and yes, sometimes they are right!) However, "acting better" doesn't mean that the child is learning or will be able use the skill anywhere or with anyone other than in the therapy session. One of the major disadvantages of services delivered in isolation of familiar people and settings, is that the skills will need to be re-learned or generalized to home and other natural environments with family and familiar persons. So why do that? Learning in the location with the materials that are used everyday saves that extra "transfer of learning" step to the child's real world. What's more, if behavior is a priority concern for your child, the EI provider will help you learn methods that support your child's positive behavior and gain confidence in your ability to interact with your child.

### **What happens if I don't have time? Do I have to have a schedule?**

That's one of the biggest advantages of intervention within routines and activities. Intervention occurs throughout the day as opportunities arise; it doesn't require a special therapy time or schedule. By using everyday routines for intervention such as snack, bath time, car travel, story time or dressing, you are doing the things you need to do for your child and family while simultaneously helping your child learn. Of course, there will be times when the bath gets skipped and your child falls asleep before bedtime stories are read. That's ok. You will work with your EI provider to



plan a variety of daily routines, play and community activities for intervention so that missing a few due to illness, a time crunch, or simply a "bad day" will

not be detrimental to your child's progress. And as you become more confident with this approach, you will find yourself embedding teaching as opportunities arise even without planning. It will just become a part of your interactions with your child whenever you choose to do them. And remember, your team will be working with you to monitor your child's progress to make sure learning occurs as expected.

### **How will other family members be involved?**

Any way they want! There are many different routines and activities that provide opportunities to interact with your child. You and the team may want to problem solve who can do what, when and how much. It's a great way to make sure your child not only has multiple opportunities but also many familiar and preferred partners for practice. Mom may prefer to join into the caregiving routines while dad or big brother participate in outdoor or play routines. Grandma may baby-sit in the afternoon and interact during afternoon snack, video time, and getting ready for supper. There are many flexible options that can change easily as the family's schedule and priorities change.

Friends, neighbors, child care providers, play groups, churches, libraries, and other community supports enhance the quality of every family's life. Services provided in natural environments support and encourage families to find and strengthen natural supports outside the early intervention system. These supports, established when the child is young, are likely to remain throughout his/her school career and into adulthood.