

Natural Environments Support Early Intervention Services

All young children tend to thrive in a familiar environment, surrounded by the people and objects that are most dear to them. Reassuring surroundings are an essential part of early intervention services for young children with disabilities. Early intervention services build on the strengths of the family and other caregivers so that they are able to support and enhance their child's learning and development. These familiar surroundings are called "natural environments" where children can practice new skills and reap the full benefits of professional intervention services.

Providing early intervention services in the natural environment allows the child and family to learn new strategies, using the child's toys and surroundings, to develop and grow. Services in natural environments also help the family or other caregivers learn how to include the child in the community. Natural environments are more than people, places, and objects; they are an essential part of your child's right to inclusive early childhood special education services under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under Part C of IDEA, services are to be delivered in your home or other places in the community that you want to access with your child. Early intervention services are meant to reduce the isolation that many families feel when they have an infant or toddler with a disability. By delivering services in natural environments, families learn strategies to help them feel comfortable when they include their child in family and community activities.

Many parents wonder what natural environments are, how they can help their child, and what role the parent plays. Here are answers to some common questions.

What is a natural environment?

A natural environment is any place your child and family live, learn, and play. It includes:

- **Settings** such as your home, back yard, or place of work. Settings also include places such as a child-care site, relative's home, park, grocery store, or library
- **Materials** can include anything found in your child's physical environment: toys, rocks, books, swings, grass, spoons, a highchair, or a favorite wagon
- **People** such as parents, siblings, relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, or anyone else with whom your child might interact
- **Activities** that incorporate the interests and routines of your child and family. These might be daily activities, such as eating, bathing, and dressing; recreation, such as playing, reading, walking, camping, swimming, and going to the playground; and community participation, such as faith traditions, holiday celebration, cultural practices, shopping, and different forms of transportation.

Why are natural environments important?

Natural environments make every moment of your child's day an opportunity for inclusion, natural learning, and developing new skills. That's important because children learn best when they are engaged in activities and playing with objects, they are interested in. New skills are best learned from the adults and children involved in your child's daily life, part of helping your child develop and practice skills in the places where they live, learn, and play. When early intervention services are delivered in natural environment, services are individualized to support your family or other caregivers in trying new strategies throughout the day and observing what does and doesn't work. This can help you feel more confident and competent in enhancing your child's development as well as including your child in family and community activities. States must have policies that explain clearly when it is acceptable for a child not to receive services in a natural environment. Exceptions are allowed only if early intervention goals may not be achievable in such settings.

What role do you and other members of the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team play?

As a parent and IFSP team member, you will be asked to identify the natural environments for your child. The team may help you explore other natural environments in your community as well. Through the development of the IFSP, your primary provider or coach will provide individualized services that meet the unique needs of your child and family. You and the rest of the IFSP team play the key role of deciding services will be and where they will be provided.

Learn more

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