

Establishing Procedures, Protocols, and Structures to Support Natural Environments



Overview

This resource provides leadership strategies for overseeing the effective delivery of early intervention (EI) in natural environments, as required under IDEA Part C. It focuses on the EI administrator's role in building programs that integrate services into families' daily routines, support peer interactions, and guide families for transitions to school-based services.

Summary

IDEA Part C requires that Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) teams, including families, make decisions about the appropriate setting for early intervention services that support identified child and family outcomes. Program leaders don't make these decisions for IFSP teams and are often not there when decisions about the service delivery locations are made. Still, leaders play a crucial role in promoting a system that maximizes the use of natural environments and ensures IFSP teams and early intervention staff understand and apply natural environments to the maximum extent appropriate when determining service locations in an IFSP, utilize natural settings to provide everyday learning opportunities for children and families, and recognize the central role families and caregivers play in children's lives.

Example Leadership Actions: Practical Strategies

Embed Services into Daily Routines, Activities, and Relationships

A leader's role is to develop procedures and protocols and provide capacity-building supports for their early intervention teams that integrate early intervention services into natural settings that represent the daily routines, activities, and relationships of infants and toddlers, such as playtime and mealtime, and their families.

- **Lead effective discussions:** Build the capacity of EI teams to have rich discussions and information gathering processes, setting the stage for providing early intervention services in the child and family's existing natural settings.
- **Enhance team engagement with data:** Share the current settings data with your team. Ask open-ended questions about their observations and dig deeper to understand the reasons behind the trends. Engage in a conversation about what the team believes would help improve their practice or the program to better support services in natural environments.
- **Build coaching capacity:** Build team capacity through training, mentorship, reflection, and feedback. Set clear protocols for early interventionists to engage families in joint planning, reflection, observation, practice, and feedback. Help families understand the purpose and process of joint planning for early intervention services.
- **Align case assignment with family needs and natural settings:** Review protocols for assigning early interventionists. Ensure case assignment decisions happen within the IFSP meeting and support service delivery in natural environments.
- **Analyze teaming structures:** Explore your area's service delivery structure and teaming structure to identify what is working, and where the gaps exist. Discuss obstacles or challenges in managing the specific territory and caseload with providers.

Strategize to Promote Services Alongside Peers

A leader's role is to establish structures that promote early intervention services in environments that provide for the child's participation in naturally occurring, developmentally appropriate activities with peers.

- **Expand use of assessment data to support natural settings:** Encourage early intervention teams to review both formal and informal assessment data and consider alternative settings that families mention that may offer peer interaction opportunities—such as library story time, playgroups, family gatherings, and parks. Include consideration of community-based resources beyond early intervention services that can support peer interactions.
 - **Establish multi-disciplinary problem-solving procedures:** Establish procedures for early interventionists to convene a multi-disciplinary team of providers to collaboratively solve problems and discuss possible actions, solutions, or alternatives to the current play group design.
 - **Train staff to support conversations about transitions:** Provide training and resources to EI staff to support conversations with parents about natural settings and future transitions to school-based or community settings.
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Engage the Family

A leader's role is to establish protocols and structures that actively engage the family and support the identified child and family outcomes.

- **Utilize data to mitigate family scheduling issues:** Utilize data to evaluate and mitigate local program factors that impact scheduling practices, such as caseloads, work hours, travel time/territories.
- **Build family understanding of early intervention participation:** Develop and/or use materials that help families understand what to expect from the early intervention program to support meaningful family participation in planning services. Emphasize the partnership role of the early interventionist, positioning the provider as a collaborator who supports the family in shaping individualized services for their child.
- **Set expectations for joint planning with families:** Establish clear protocols for early interventionists to engage families in joint planning, reflection, observation, practice, and feedback. Ensure families understand the joint planning process and their role in it.
- **Leverage multi-disciplinary teams:** Leverage multi-disciplinary teams to support scheduling services that fit into the daily routines and availability of families through teaming structures like weekly meetings or communities of practice.
- **Create coaching interaction protocols:** Create protocols that support the early interventionist's interactions with families and ensure information is gathered about who is familiar to and typically interacting with the child.
- **Engage families as partners:** Engage families, including other caregivers in the child's life, as partners in planning the IFSP and in service delivery to enhance families' capacity to support their child's development throughout the day. Create and use materials to support parents and other caregivers in understanding the early intervention approach.

Additional Resources

- [IDEA Part C Regulations at the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations \(eCFR\)](#)
- **Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA):** [Early Intervention Services: Key Principles and Practices \(leader oriented\)](#)
- **PACER Center Resource:** [Natural Environments Support Early Intervention Services \(parent oriented\)](#)
- [ECTA Descriptions of Models/Approaches to EI Service Delivery](#)
- [Encouraging Development in Everyday Spaces](#)
- [Natural Environments: Where All Children Belong](#)
- [Lead IDEA leadership essentials](#)

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