

Intervening Early for a Better Future

BY WENDY BULAWA WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ELLEN WADDILL (PCCD)

"I think your child could benefit from early intervention."

For parents that hear this statement from a physician, an educator, or child care provider, the first reaction may be, 'huh?' I was one such a parent after the birth of my daughter two years ago. While in Beth Israel's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, several physicians and social workers threw the term 'early intervention' (EI) at my husband and me, when all I could think about was getting my newborn safely home to her nursery decorated grandly in pink bows and tiaras.

Our assigned team of medical professionals recognized that our precious princess was born with a diagnosis associated with developmental delays and therefore would be in a position to leverage early intervention. We quickly learned that the benefits of EI far outweighed our fear of the unknown.

"Early intervention incorporates services that help maximize the growth and development of babies and toddlers. Parents and professionals who have concerns about a child's development due to a diagnosis, a delay, or risk of a developmental delay, are often referred to EI," said Ellen Waddill, parent and community liaison for The Professional Center for Child Development (PCCD) in Andover.

WHAT IS EI?

Mandated by a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), EI is a systematic program of therapy, exercises and activities designed to address developmental delays. Services are provided by

RESOURCES:

- The Professional Center for Child Development, Andover MA; www.TheProfessionalCenter.org
- First Signs, Merrimac, MA; www.firstsigns.org/
- Global Early Intervention Network: www.atsweb.neu.edu/cp/ei/

the state to children who qualify. In Massachusetts, EI services are available to eligible children from birth to three years of age.

The primary reason intervention programs begin early in the life cycle is that experts agree that the rate of human learning and development is most rapid in the preschool years. While sliding-scale payments may be required by EI for some families, there is frequently little or no cost to parents.

Services offered through EI are comprehensive and integrated across six areas of development including social/emotional, self-help, gross motor, fine motor, cognition and expressive and receptive language. Specialists in the areas of physical, speech or occupational therapy work alongside educators, nurses, social workers and nutritionists to combine talents and establish a strategic program of care.

GETTING STARTED

To initiate an EI program, the very first step is called a development assessment, during which three specialists visit a child to review those six areas of development, and discern where services may be of most benefit. After establishing eligibility for EI, the team will write an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). In this

document, a list of strategies and outcomes are established to maximize the child's potential. Services and the amount of intervention (number of times a week the child will be seen by a particular specialist and for what length of time) are then determined. Therapeutic visits then take place in the family home, a childcare center, in the park, or just about anywhere that would be considered a child's natural environment.

"For example, a family may meet their specialist at the local playground to work on gross motor skills such as climbing or jumping. Or, if a child has a delay in language development, a playgroup may be suggested as group interaction encourages children to express wants and needs," said Waddill.

EI programs also allow parents to learn new skills and techniques which carry over into daily routines—often reinforcing what is done during therapy sessions with EI team members.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

After nearly 50 years of research, both quantitative and qualitative evidence proves that EI increases the developmental and educational gains for the child and improves the functioning of the family. In addition, EI helps by requiring fewer special education services later in life and in some cases, having delays that are indistinguishable from non-handicapped classmates.

Ultimately, family is the core and most valuable teaching component in a child's life. Yet, together with

the family, EI helps children acquire skills and reach milestones that will result in a happy and healthy individual. I, personally, would have to agree with the experts as my daughter, after two

years of early intervention, doesn't show many signs of a delay at all. In fact, she's now teaching sign language to her speech therapist while aggressively working on the proper pronunciation of 'puzzle.'

More than 60 early intervention programs exist in Massachusetts with each serving a particular geography. Some areas, in fact, have more than one program available leaving families with a choice of program and location. The central directory for early intervention program listings is Family TIES of Massachusetts, www.MassFamilyTIES.org.

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