Early Intervention (EI): Supporting infants and toddlers

At some point almost all early educators work with a child who receives or needs early intervention (EI) services. Early intervention consists of services and supports designed to help children who have a developmental delay or special need, and their families. Through collaboration with families and related service providers, supportive practices for infants and toddlers who receive EI services can be implemented within existing routines and across environments.

Early intervention is a resource that increases the likelihood of long-term success as children transition into formal schooling and eventually move into the work force.

The IFSP as a guiding tool: Progress-driven vs outcome-focused

An Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is a document that accompanies a child with developmental delays/special needs from birth until the age of three. It summarizes the child’s present skills and abilities across the five basic areas of development (cognitive, physical, communication and language, social-emotional, and self-help/adaptive). The IFSP also articulates specific outcomes that a child works toward, with the support of early intervention professionals, family, and community. These outcomes are developed based on assessment, including observation and parent/guardian input, and are specific to the area or areas where a child is not performing as expected.

When early care and education (ECE) professionals observe a child using his IFSP as a guide, it is important for professionals to:

- Communicate often with the parent/guardian about the whole child and how she exhibits specific outcomes. For example, she uses key words or signs such as “please,” “thank you,” and “more” consistently during all meal times.

- Keep a running record of observations related to the whole child, not only to the outcome that he is working on.

- Utilize the early intervention providers working with the child, ask for support strategies or adaptations for the individual child and, as appropriate, with the whole class.

- Identify the child’s interests and motivators, including peers who are often the greatest model and motivator for young children.

- Do what works for as long as it works. Reassess often to ensure that supports progress as the child progresses.
Recognize opportunities to support growth and development

There are five primary developmental domains that early intervention services focus on: cognitive; social-emotional; physical; communication and language; and self-help/adaptive skills.

Each domain contains a number of subcategories, for example, the physical domain includes gross, fine, and perceptual motor abilities. And, although each area has specific target skills, the skills do not develop in isolation. A child's ability in the area of fine motor can have an impact on her ability to feed and dress herself, skills identified under the self-help/adaptive area.

ECE professionals can provide ample opportunities for skill practice and development in all domains through a child's typical daily routine.

Collaborate with early intervention providers

EI collaborations between the EI providers and the ECE provider can help to develop numerous quality outcomes and benefits, and is an ongoing process that results in effective ways to improve outcomes for children. Collaboration with the EI team helps the early childhood provider to gain knowledge and skill to support all children. Collaboration also enhances specific teacher-child interactions related to more specialized practices that encourage participation and meaningful engagement for children with developmental delays/special needs.

There are six suggested best practices for successful collaborations between early education and early intervention providers:

- build relationships,
- be informed,
- communicate,
- get involved,
- provide consistency of intervention, and
- create organization.

In addition to these practices, coaching is becoming a common practice across early intervention to support infants and toddlers. The concept of coaching is not new and was identified by Nancy Webb and Lynne Jaffe as “an interactive process between caregiver and practitioner that provides support and encouragement, develops new skills, and promotes self-assessment and learning.” (Webb and Jaffe 2006) The coaching strategy is a

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Observe early and often: Ability-focused observation

“Observing and recording is just as crucial to good teaching as providing the setting, structuring the day and planning the curriculum.” (Rencken 1996)

Observing children early provides information related to their interests, skills, and strategies for achieving personal objectives. It also shares a glimpse of their overall personality and temperament. This information helps to determine not only where children are developmentally, but what supports they may need, how to motivate and engage them, and even ways they may serve as models for their peers. Continual observation and data collection can support lesson planning and classroom management strategies, provide insight for adaptations or modifications, and support the home and school connection among other benefits.

Ability-focused observation means the goal is to observe what a child can presently do. Professionals can scaffold his learning experiences to support him as he achieves the next steps along his personal trajectory, while maintaining the expectation that he will achieve success.
supportive practice based on adult learning principles, and invites practitioners who work with families to identify what is working, and what the caregiver is putting into practice with their child.

This strengths-based approach invites the adults in a child’s life to engage, communicate, observe, identify, problem-solve, practice, reflect, infuse, and assess. When these same principles are applied to the early childhood education setting, successful collaboration between EI provider and ECE professional can be established. And, it is possible that with time, the coaching experience will flow comfortably between all involved in a child’s earliest learning experiences. This level of support is necessary to maintain a progress-based approach and to maximize opportunities for success.

For more information on early intervention services, check other resources from Better Kid Care:

- Early Intervention (EI): An Introduction
- Inclusion: Exploring the Meaning and the Mindset (On Demand lesson)
- Early Intervention: Supporting Infants and Toddlers – coming soon! (On Demand lesson)

Early Intervention (EI): Helping children to develop to their full potential (e-news article) [http://bit.ly/1QnpdhG]


References
