

Services and supports in the early years

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What are early childhood intervention services (ECI)?

We use the term 'early childhood intervention' to refer to early childhood support services, as this is the current language used in the sector and in the NDIS, who use the term 'early childhood early intervention' for the pathway that supports children aged 0–6. CYDA strongly feels change is needed in this area and advocates to update the language used in this space.

Specialist services for children with disability are known as early childhood intervention services (ECI). ECI services aim to support families of young children with disability as early as possible in their lives. In ECI services, the term 'intervention' means taking action early while children are still developing in order to give them the best possible start.

When a family has a child with a disability, they can need more support than other families. They need the same services as other families, but they may also need specialist support through ECI services.

ECI services involve teams of professionals who support families of young children (from birth to school age) with disability. The teams can include many different professionals including teachers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, psychologists and social workers, and may also include paediatricians and dieticians.

Having several different professionals involved can be demanding for children and families. Extra appointments can make schedules feel crowded and leave less time for other activities. You may work with a case manager, family support worker or keyworker to help you manage appointments and work with the whole support team.

Some children have multiple health and developmental needs, and lots of different specialists may need to be involved. For such children and their families, a team-around-the-child approach may be needed. This involves gathering a small team of support people, not necessarily all professionals, who commit themselves to providing families with the additional support they and their child need.

What is the goal of ECI services?

The goal of ECI is to ensure that families and caregivers can help children gain the skills they need to participate meaningfully in all the key environments in their lives. Rather than trying to change children directly through various forms of therapy, ECI services seek to support the capacity of families and others to support children's learning and development.

Most of a child's time is spent in settings when ECI professionals are not with them, so ECI professionals generally work with rather than with the child directly. Since children are always learning, it is important that the social and physical settings in which they spend their time can provide them with the learning opportunities they need. ECI services usually work in the natural setting of the home rather than in clinics or 'therapy' spaces.

Why are ECI services important?

The early years are when children are most affected by their experiences and exposures – by the care they are given, the food they eat, the safety of their environment, the opportunities to play and explore, and the range of social experiences they have. What happens in the early years is the foundation of all later development and wellbeing. For more information on early childhood development, see Fact Sheet 2: Supporting the development of children and young people with disability.

The early years are just as important for children with disability as for other children. To support the crucial early years of learning, it is important to identify any developmental disabilities and to act early to support the child. The aim is to provide the child with experiences and environments that will offset the impact that their conditions might have on their development.

The early years are also critical for the whole family. This is when families begin to learn how to support and nurture their child, how to meet their child's needs, and how to adapt to having a child with disability or developmental delay. ECI services are there to support you to learn and adapt.

What do ECI services do?

ECI services work with families and caregivers in many ways. ECI services might support you with:

- understanding the needs of your child
- developing goals, both short-term and long-term, for your child, other family members (including yourself), and the family as a whole
- tracking the progress that your child and your family are making

- developing the skills you need to be able to support your child
- identifying strategies for meeting your goals, and supporting you while you try them
- identifying ways for you to support your child to develop the functional skills they need

They also may support your child and family by:

- supporting your child's inclusion in early childhood programs and community activities
- informing you about resources and supports or services you might need, and helping you connect with these supports and services

Myths about ECI services

Myth: The specialists will do the work.

Many families assume that the ECI team will work directly with your child, but what a therapist can achieve by working with a young child does not necessarily transfer to other settings. The amount of time that a professional can spend with a child is also only a small amount of the child's waking hours over the course of a week. For these reasons, ECI services generally work with families and caregivers instead of directly with children.

Myth: Specialists know more about the child than families do.

They don't. What specialists know about is how children in general develop, what helps or hinders development, how different disabilities can affect development, and how they can be worked with. But they do not know your child. You are the expert on your child, what they can do, what they like or dislike, and how they fit into the family. The best results for the child and family come when the family's expert knowledge of their child is combined with the specialist team's expert knowledge of development and disability.

Myth: Children with disability need therapy to overcome their disability.

Children with disability do not need 'therapy'. What children and families need is the support of therapists to help them understand the nature of the child's disability and the impact it could have on development. Therapy is about families deciding what their goals are and then using the expertise of the therapist to help them work with their child towards these goals.

How can I get the most from ECI services?

- Ask for a family support plan that not only supports your child's needs, but also the needs of other family members (including your own) and the needs of the whole family.
- Make it clear to your ECI workers what outcomes you want and what you need to know to achieve them. This will help make sure that they focus on what is important to you.
- Get your ECI workers to help you identify ways of supporting your child's functional skills that can be incorporated into regular family routines.
- Don't let workers do things for you, like working directly with your child – get them to show you how to do it yourself.
- Ask your ECI workers to explain why they recommend certain strategies. The more you understand about how the strategies work, the easier it will be to use them.
- Don't tolerate anyone with negative or judgmental attitudes towards you or your child.
- Don't allow too many demands to be made on you – you need to be the boss of your time.

For more information on working with early childhood intervention, see CYDA's Fact Sheet 4 on family-centred practice.

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Key points for NDIS participants and families

- In choosing service providers to support you, your family and your child, look for providers who will work with you in the way that you want.
- Make sure service providers are clearly focused on building your skills in supporting your child and helping those in the other settings your child attends do the same.
- If the provider you choose turns out not to be as supportive or collaborative as you want or is not committed to helping your family learn how to support you and your child, find another one. The NDIS encourages this and you are not 'stuck' with someone if they don't fit with your goals.

Disclaimer: CYDA's In Control Our Way resources have been created to support families of children and young people with disability to self-manage their NDIS plans. Information provided is intended as a general guide and may not contain the most recent information and updates. CYDA is not responsible for decisions made by the NDIA or its partners in the community. For the most current information on the NDIS, refer to the NDIS website. These fact sheets are current as of September 2020.

View the full set of In Control Our Way resources at: cyda.org.au/

