

A Family-Centered Approach to Early Intervention

Emily, a child with Down syndrome, was just four weeks old when her parents began looking for support services for her, and their search led them to Mosey Mezaros and her colleagues at the First Steps Infant Program. “Because her parents got engaged with intervention services so early,” says Mezaros, a veteran early childhood special education teacher in California’s Yolo County, “we were able to help ensure Emily’s developmental challenges were well supported right from the start.”

Early intervention capitalizes on infants’ and toddlers’ rapid brain development and increases the likelihood that a child’s educational achievement, ability to live independently, and quality of life will be higher. “Emily was able to start very early with speech therapy, feeding therapy, and other targeted intervention services,” Mezaros reports. “She’s now five years old, and she and her parents have a very active life together.”

Emily is among tens of thousands of children served each year by California Early Start, a statewide system that provides intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. The system was created nearly two decades ago to comply with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and its services are reaching more children and families than ever. In 2009, the Early Start system supported 2.3 percent—or about 38,000—of the state’s infants and toddlers, up from 32,000 in 2005.

Funded by state and federal monies, Early Start provides families with free intervention services through a statewide network of family resource centers, regional centers, and local education agencies. To support early intervention professionals in effectively delivering these services, WestEd’s Center for Prevention and Early Intervention developed and coordinated Early Start’s distinctive system of personnel development, which emphasizes comprehensive, relationship-based care for very young children with disabilities.

Putting Families at the Center of Care

“Our personnel development takes a different approach to early intervention than other training models,” says Angela McGuire, Senior Program Associate with WestEd’s Center for Prevention and Early Intervention. “We take a relationship-based approach, stressing the importance of a strong partnership between the family and the service provider in supporting the development of the child.”

In this relationship-based approach, the early intervention provider collaborates closely with the family to develop a shared view of the child and his or her strengths and needs. Together, the

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interventionist and the family identify naturally occurring learning opportunities for the child within the **family's everyday routines, relationships, activities, places, and partnerships** (known in Early Start as ERRAPP). Rather than prescribing a standard set of activities solely based on a child's challenges, this approach takes into consideration each family's priorities and preferences in order to integrate intervention strategies into daily family activities. The collaborative method also helps ensure that families are empowered to support the specific developmental needs of their children.

"Relationships are key to successful early intervention work," says Mezaros, who has been involved in several of WestEd's Early Start trainings. "As providers, my colleagues and I got to know Emily's family, and we really encouraged them to engage in activities that were important to them and their daughter. Horseback riding is a big part of this family's life, and early on, Emily learned to sign the word 'horse' when she wanted her parents to take her for a ride with their horse. They also love swimming, so Emily and her parents got involved in a community swim class. These activities have been great for Emily's development."

Along with this collaborative, relationship-based approach, WestEd's Early Start trainings emphasize the need to provide intervention services in the context of everyday environments—anywhere that children and their families typically find themselves, such as the home, neighborhood park, grocery store, or homes of friends and family. McGuire notes that situating intervention services in dynamic everyday environments is particularly important because children tend to learn best in their own, familiar settings. For example, children learn about water when taking a bath, getting a drink of water, or going to a neighborhood pool—all of which offer a range of developmental learning opportunities.

McGuire says that another practical advantage of focusing on everyday environments is sustainability—families need to be able to support their children's development with the resources they already have. So, while it can be helpful for a child to go to a specialized clinic with access to new, state-of-the-art supports, McGuire notes that this often causes a disconnect once the child returns home and no longer has access to those same resources. Focusing on the families' naturally occurring routines and activities helps ensure a smooth, sustainable transition by allowing meaningful learning opportunities to occur even when the service provider is not present.

"I often hear that families don't know what they'll do to support their child once their service provider is gone," says Marie Pierre, an Early Start Program Coordinator in California's Santa Clarita Valley and a participant in several of WestEd's Early Start trainings. "One mother we work with initially felt very dependent on our help. However, after we worked closely with her to help her integrate developmental learning opportunities into her child's daily routines, she's become more willing and able to participate in her child's intervention activities. It's great because since she's become more actively involved, I can see a huge difference in the progress of her child."

Building Teams of Specialized Professionals

Providing these services requires highly specialized care, often from a number of different medical and therapeutic professionals. Because so many different fields of expertise must come together in early intervention—including occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, nursing, and family support—WestEd continually collaborates with experts across all these areas to deliver a comprehensive, interdisciplinary training program.



“Infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities are a very complex population to work with,” says McGuire. “Even a highly skilled occupational therapist who treats typically developing children will need to acquire new knowledge and skills to work effectively with infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities. WestEd’s early intervention trainings help professionals bridge these gaps in knowledge and experience.”

To ensure consistent, high-quality training for early intervention service providers, WestEd worked with the California Department of Developmental Services to develop a set of core competencies and created a three-tiered set of training institutes based on this core framework:

- **Early Start Essentials Institute:** Provides foundational information targeted toward Early Start service coordinators and early interventionists new to the field. This institute provides the knowledge base that all personnel involved in early intervention are expected to have in common.
- **Family Resource and Support Institute:** Provides training specifically for personnel working in Early Start family resource centers, which are staffed by parents who have children with special needs and offer parent-to-parent support.
- **Advanced Practice Institute:** Provides timely and critical information targeted toward deepening the skills of more experienced Early Start managers, supervisors, service coordinators, family support personnel, and service providers.

And, to reinforce how integral parents are to successful early intervention work, parents are featured presenters at a majority of the institutes.

Despite budget cuts over the last few years, these trainings continue to reach a growing number of professionals. In 2009, WestEd coordinated nine institutes throughout California, training more than 700 personnel—a 26 percent increase in participation over the previous fiscal year. And, as the demand for early intervention services grows, the need for knowledgeable service providers is as critical as ever.

“Many families have told me that when they first have a child with a disability or any kind of medical or developmental concern, they feel very isolated and uncertain,” Mezaros says. “They just don’t know where to turn. Connecting families to supportive early intervention service providers helps them feel less isolated. We help teach them not just to advocate for their children, but to dream for them.”

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