

ACADEMY OF PEDIATRIC PHYSICAL THERAPY

Natural Environments in Early Intervention Services

What Are Natural Environments?

Natural environments are:

- A variety of settings where children live, learn, and play
- Home and community settings that are natural and typical for all children of the same/similar age and their families
- Settings where the child, family, and care providers participate in everyday routines and activities that are important to them and serve as important learning opportunities
- Settings that incorporate family life and community life activities and events:

Family Life:

Daily routines, play activities, household chores, entertainment, rituals, celebrations, and social activities

Examples of family-life environments: Kitchens, bathrooms, playrooms, bedrooms, backyards

Examples of family-life activities: eating, bathing, playing, reading, walking, gardening, birthday parties, visiting families and friends

Community Life:

Family activities and outings, going on errands, play activities, community events, outdoor activities, participation in church/religious groups and/or community organizations, sports activities/events

Examples of *community life environments*: Playgrounds, parks, libraries, places of worship, childcare facilities, neighborhoods, stores, restaurants, and transportation to and from activities (car rides, bus rides, train rides, etc.)

Why Are Natural Environments Important?

Natural environments are important because they:

- Are the expected location of early intervention service delivery in the law (Part C of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act)
- Support families in promoting their children's development, learning, and participation in family and community life
- Emphasize the abilities of children, families, and care providers during everyday activities, rather than teaching skills out of context
- Focus on function and socialization with a potential indirect benefit of raising awareness of disability, empathy, and promoting friendships
- Promote learning in the same locations where the child will use the new skills
- Enable families and therapists to identify facilitators, barriers, and constraints to skill acquisition in the typical setting in which the child is expected to use this skill
- Enable children to learn by modeling siblings, peers, and other people around them
- Provide children with opportunities to practice skills throughout their day
- Strengthen and develop lifelong natural supports for children and families
- Recognize family members and care providers as the primary influence for nurturing growth, development, and learning

How Do I Make Sure I Am Using Natural Environments for Early Intervention?

- Establish rapport and a relationship with families
- Ask families and care providers what activities, routines, and important people are part of their daily lives
- Invite and encourage families and care providers to identify their priorities and outcomes as an initial step in the planning process
- Observe children engaging in real-life activities with families and care providers across natural settings
- Provide families with emotional, informational, and material resources to support the achievement of Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) outcomes
- Provide physical therapy within the context of family and child routines and activities
- Be a resource for families to network with other families in the community
- Learn about your community, especially formal and informal activities for young children
- Seek out additional resources, supports, and networks by contacting regional resources through the APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy Early Intervention Special-Interest Group (information is located online at www.pediatricapta.org under Professionals and then Special-Interest Groups)

Services Provided Under Part C of IDEA Must Be in Natural Environments

Other environments (not the natural environment) may be used for early intervention services only when:

- Alternate options for intervention services in natural learning environments have been explored and will not be successful or possible
- The IFSP team can justify that IFSP outcomes cannot be achieved satisfactorily in any natural learning environment
- Justification includes an explanation of how the desired outcomes will be generalized into typical daily routines for the child, family, and care providers. Justification is child focused and is not for the convenience of the program or the provider
- A need exists to bring families together to network or to provide other family support as identified on the IFSP

Exception to the use of natural environments should be short term, and alternate options for providing services in natural learning environments should continue to be explored. Justification should include a plan with criteria for outcomes and a timeline for further exploration of service delivery in natural learning environments.

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Resources from the Internet

- 303.126 Early intervention services in natural environments. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 2004, Pub. L. 108-446, 20 USC §1400 (2004). h <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2013-title34-vol2/CFR-2013-title34-vol2-sec303-126>.
- Division for Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children <https://www.dec-sped.org/>.
- Natural Environment Support Early Intervention Services, Pacer Center Champions for Children with Disabilities <https://www.pacer.org/ec/early-intervention/>.
- Providing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments, Center for Parent Information and Resources. <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/naturalenvironments/>.
- Creating Inclusive Environments and Learning Experiences for Infants and Toddler, Infant/Toddler Resources Guide, Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System. <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/creating-inclusive-environments>.
- The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTAC). <http://ectacenter.org/>
This web site provides numerous resources with practical suggestions related to implementation of services in natural environments in addition to offering comprehensive information about Part C programming (search Natural Environments)
- Results Matter Video Library – Just Being Kids https://www.cde.state.co.us/resultsmatter/rmvideoseris_justbeingkids.
Video clips offer therapists practical illustrations of providing early intervention services in natural environments.

For More Information:

If you have additional questions, would like to order additional copies of this fact sheet, or would like to join the Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy, please contact the Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy of the American Physical Therapy Association at: APTA Academy of Pediatric Physical Therapy, 1111 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 or visit the Academy's Web site at www.pediatricapta.org.

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