

What is Early Intervention?

In the field of disability, early intervention refers to planned and organised efforts to enhance the development of children who have a disability or are at risks of developing it.

OR,

Early Intervention helps the child in acquiring a number of skills and prevents her condition from deteriorating further and prevents secondary disabilities.

All children with disabilities or those who are at risk of developing it, receive support at the earliest possible. This will minimise delays in development.

(Early Intervention focus on children from birth to six years of age)

EARLY INTERVENTION INCLUDES:

- Health: Health Checkups, immunization, referral services therapy, medication, treatment of illnesses.
- Nutrition: Providing supplementary nutrition in the form of mid day meal and vitamins supplements.
- Stimulation and preschool education/early childhood special education inputs which include providing developmentally appropriate meaningful experience that foster development in various areas.

These experiences must be provided to the child through the child's activities and play and not through formal education.

Early childhood intervention cannot be limited to providing the services to the child in a centre for a few hours. The child requires intervention throughout the day. Therefore, family members have to be actively involved in the early intervention services.

The primary objectives of early intervention are as follows:

- 1) To help the parents and family members to become the child's first and best teachers by providing support, training and guidance to the family.
- 2) To foster the child's development in all areas by providing appropriate stimulation, education and therapy (such as speech therapy, occupational therapy or physiotherapy) - to minimize delays and help the child reach developmental milestones.
- 3) To provide health and nutrition inputs to the child.
- 4) To detect early and prevent secondary disabilities.

The ultimate aim of early intervention is to improve young child's capacity to develop and learn by providing the right opportunities and right learning environments at the right time.

AREAS OF EARLY INTERVENTION:

- Developing physical and motor skills
- Using the senses
- Developing language and communication
- Developing thinking, reasoning and problem solving
- Learning to interact with people
- Carrying out activities for personal care

Why Intervene Early?

- Research in the field of child development has established that the first years of life are critical for development in all areas. The rate of learning and development is most rapid in this period for all children with or without disabilities.
- In fact, many research studies have shown that when the child is young, especially during the first two years of life, there is 'plasticity of the brain'
- Early Intervention activities can be carried out at home by parents and family members, if they are given training by the professionals regarding how to do so.
- An important purpose of providing early intervention is also to provide emotional and psychological support and assistance to the family.
- Early Intervention/ECSE programme prepares the child for primary school by strengthening her abilities and developing new skills.

TYPES OF EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

- **Home-Based:** Initially, early intervention was home-based, mainly for the benefit of rural families as they were far from health facilities. The key persons in home based programmes are the home visitor. They need not be professionals. In fact, if they receive intensive training in early intervention over a period of 10 weeks and have good supervision and guidance, then they do equally well. The home visitors is the active agent who takes the planned system of skills based sequentially, to the home and fulfils the role of a counsellor and friend to both mother and child. The mother teaches the suggested activities based on the skills to her child and reports the progress to the home visitor at each visit. She in her turn, reports back to the supervisor regularly. In this way, the child's progress can be constantly monitored and the skills adjusted as necessary.
- **Centre Based:** Centre based early intervention is usually carried out in a children's hospital, a clinic or a centre for children or a rehabilitation centre for disabled children.

If such programmes are in hospitals they are part of OPD and are conducted daily.

In centre based early intervention, the services of units like Physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy are also available and are provided as part of the programme. In addition, a Children's hospital has other units like Department of Neurology Cardiology, ENT, Ophthalmology etc, where centre-based children can be referred for tests and consultation.

For multiple disabled children, centre-based programmes become imperative. However, the affects of early intervention can only be gauged(assess/measure) over a long-term and in our experience, mothers who are overburdened, or have other young children or who have to travel over long distances, usually are unable to continue unless there is family support.

In centre-based the supervisor can be a paediatrician or a public health nurse, therapist or a special educator with knowledge in child development and experience in early intervention.

- **Mixed (Center and home based) Intervention:** There are some agencies which offer both home based and centre based early intervention. This is offered to those families who are far away from centres offering early intervention and where health services are lacking.

It is also offered to those infants who are multiple disabled and who need both paramedical and other services at the same time.