



Natural Environments Support Early Intervention Services

All young children tend to thrive when they're in familiar surroundings and with the people and objects that are most dear to them. For young children with disabilities, those reassuring surroundings are an essential part of their early intervention services. Called "natural environments," they're where children can practice new skills and reap the full benefits of professional intervention services.

Natural environments are more than people, places, and objects. They're an essential part of your child's right to inclusive early childhood special education services under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Many parents wonder what natural environments are, how they can help their child, and what role the parent plays. Here are answers to some common questions.

What is a natural environment?

A natural environment is any place your child and family live, learn, and play. It includes:

- **Settings**, such as your home, backyard, or place of work. Settings also include places such as a child-care site, relative's home, park, grocery store, or library.
- **Materials**, which can be anything found in your child's physical environment— toys, rocks, books, swings, grass, spoons, a high chair, or a favorite wagon.
- **People**, such as parents, siblings, relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, or anyone else with whom your child might interact.
- **Activities** that incorporate the interests and routines of your child and family. These might be daily activities such as eating, bathing, and dressing; recreation such as playing, reading, walking, camping, swimming, and going to the playground; and community participation such as going to worship, celebrating holidays, taking part in cultural practices, going to the grocery store, and riding in different forms of transportation.

Why are natural environments important?

Natural environments make every moment of your child's day an opportunity for inclusion and for developing new skills. That's important because when children are engaged in activities and playing with objects in which they are interested, they learn best. Natural environments help your child model the behavior and skills of family and peers. They also make it more comfortable for your child and family to practice new skills to determine what does and does not work.

What law supports natural environments?

The idea of using natural environments comes straight from Part C of IDEA. The law says:

- "Early intervention services must be provided in natural environments, including the home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate, to the maximum extent that is appropriate." (Sec. 303.12)
- "[Natural environments are] those settings that are natural or normal for the child's age peers who have no disabilities." (Sec. 303.18)

States must have policies that explain clearly when it is acceptable for a child not to receive services in a natural environment. Exceptions are allowed only if early intervention goals may not be achievable in such settings.

What role do parents and the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team play?.....

Through the development of the IFSP, the team must provide individualized services that meet the unique needs of your family and your child with disabilities. Deciding on what those services should be and where they should be provided is a key role of the team, which includes the parents.

As a parent and IFSP team member, you will be asked to identify the natural environments for your child. The team may help you explore other natural environments in your community as well.

Learn more.....

More information about natural environments, see the summer 2008 issue of PACER’s “Early Childhood Connection” newsletter. Written for Minnesota families who have young children with disabilities, it’s online at PACER.org/newsletters/ec/summer08.pdf.