

Early Intervention

About Early Intervention

Early intervention is the process of providing specialist intervention and support services for a person who needs them, either early in the life course, and/or early in the development of an issue or problem. The term may be used in slightly different ways across different sectors.

Early intervention can be used to refer to interventions for infants and young children who are known to have additional needs because of a developmental delay, learning difficulties, a disability, sensory impairment (e.g. vision or hearing), or a specific risk or disadvantage. We will call this **Early Childhood Intervention**, because it specifically occurs in the early years of life.

The aims of early childhood intervention are to meet the child's additional needs and to promote their optimal development, wellbeing and community participation. Early childhood intervention may involve working with a range of professionals, e.g. paediatricians, speech therapists, audiologists, psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, special education consultants, family support workers and inclusion support workers.

Early intervention for mental health also involves providing specialist services and support. However the main focus of this type of intervention is to assess and deal with social, emotional or behavioural issues and to improve mental health outcomes either now or into the future.

This type of intervention occurs in the early stages of development of a potential mental illness or disorder, with the aim of preventing the illness or reducing its impact. Early intervention for mental health can occur at any age or stage of life. A focus on mental health interventions in the early years may be particularly valuable, because there is great potential to contribute to better mental health, physical health, learning and socio-economic outcomes throughout life.

This type of intervention could be undertaken with children who do not have an existing diagnosis or defined additional needs, but may need further assessment or support, or could be on a pathway toward mental health difficulties. Activities under this category might include:

- 1) Identification of infants or children with a higher risk of developing a mental health problem or mental illness in childhood, adolescence or adulthood, e.g. through trauma or abuse;
- 2) Identification of young children who are showing early signs of social, emotional or behavioural problems – for example withdrawn and fearful behaviour, anxiety or distress, aggression, or disruptive behaviour, in a way that is not developmentally appropriate;
- 3) Referral of the child and his or her family to specialist services for:
 - Assessment of the child's development, behaviour and wellbeing
 - Assessment of risk and protective factors affecting the child and family
 - Interventions designed to support positive developmental and mental health outcomes
 - Provision of treatment and support services if a mental illness or disorder is diagnosed.

These interventions usually involve working specifically with professionals who have expertise in mental illness, behaviour and family support, e.g. psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. A general practitioner (GP) is a good place for families to start if there are concerns about a child's development or behaviour. GPs can perform an initial assessment of the child and if necessary arrange referrals to specialist doctors or allied health professionals.

Some children need both types of early intervention and work with a team of professionals. For example, children with autism spectrum disorders have additional needs, may show difficult behaviours and can be at greater risk of secondary mental health problems later in life. They may be seen by a paediatrician, psychologist, speech therapist and other professionals to support their immediate needs and to optimise their future development and mental health.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Both types of early intervention are important for mental health and wellbeing. Early childhood intervention when a child has a disability or other additional needs will promote better health and wellbeing, community participation and social inclusion. This may help to prevent secondary mental health problems in children with additional needs, e.g. poor self-esteem and depression.

Early intervention specifically for mental health – with children who are at risk or are already showing signs of emotional or behavioural problems – may also contribute to prevention of some types of mental illness or disorder, or to reduced severity or duration of symptoms if a disorder does emerge. For example, it may be possible in some cases to prevent or limit the symptoms of conduct disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse disorders by working with children and their families to address early emotional or behavioural concerns.

What should I look for?

Early childhood intervention may be needed when a child's behaviour or abilities appear to be out of step with peers at a similar age and stage of development. For example, there may be differences in language acquisition or motor skills. Isolated incidents or temporary problems may not need intervention, but assessment should be considered if difficulties persist over time, interfere with the child's progress and further development, or cause concern for the family.

Early intervention specifically for mental health may be needed when there are early signs of emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties, or when a child has experienced difficult life events such as trauma or abuse. Refer to the handout *Identifying Emotional and Behavioural Problems* for more information about signs that suggest a need for further assessment.

What should I do?

If you are concerned about a child's behaviour or development,

- Observe the child during different activities, at different times of the day
- Write down specific examples of the problem or behaviour and when it occurs
- Write down any additional information about the child's health and family situation
- Speak with your supervisor, coordinator or service director.

Work with your supervisor, coordinator or director to develop a plan for supporting the child in your service and, if necessary, arranging for further assessment or referral to an external agency. The supervisor or director will often take the lead in managing family discussions and referrals, but your observations and knowledge of the child are important in this process.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

Early Childhood Intervention Australia website: <http://www.ecia.org.au>.

Kearns, K., & Austin, B. (2007). *Frameworks for learning and development* (pp 483-531). Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

Shonkoff, J., & Meisels, S. (2000). *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* (2nd ed.). Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.