

# identifying disabilities

## Infants & Toddlers

# The Importance of Early Intervention and Support

By Susan L. Fitzgerald and Carmen Sanchez

**B**irth to age three are crucial years for every child. Your child is developing faster, and in more ways, than at any other time in his or her life. And as parents, we're quickly falling in love with our kids and watching them like at no other time. We can talk about their development and accomplishments for hours.

It's during this time, when we are so in tune with our children, that we may become concerned about our children's development. In the commonwealth of Virginia, free developmental screenings and evaluations are available to all infants and toddlers who are suspected to have developmental delays. A network of 40 local agencies throughout the state offers these screenings and evaluations as part of the services they provide in accordance with Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Part C is also known as Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers and Their Families.

### Who is Eligible?

A team of professionals evaluates a child to see if he or she is eligible to receive other early intervention services. Children under the age of three with a diagnosed condition that is likely to affect development, who are developing in a way that is considered 'atypical' for most children of the same age, or who have a delay of 25 percent or more in one area of development are eligible to receive addi-

tional early intervention services. To begin receiving the early intervention services a child needs, the professionals and family, acting as a team, write out an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) that lays out the child's strengths, weaknesses, family's concerns and priorities, outcomes (goals) that the team wants for the child, and what services will be provided to help meet those outcomes.

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### Which Services Can Help?

Children can receive a wide variety of services in order to meet the outcomes identified on the IFSP. The focus of most of the services is to help the family help the child develop to the best of his or her abilities within the family's daily routine. Some of these are as follows:

- Audiology services to help with your child's hearing and communication skills;
- Health, medical or nursing services to prevent, diagnose, or treat medical problems;
- Nutritional services to help families figure out how to improve their children's diets;



- Occupational, speech, and physical therapies;
- Social work or psychological services for the child or the family;
- Special instruction to make the most of a child's mental development;
- Service coordination to help families manage services and access the resources they need;
- Vision services;
- Assistive technology devices and services;

Federal law requires that all services to the child be provided in natural environments. That means not in medical or early intervention centers but places where the child would be if he or she didn't have a developmental delay, such as in the home, day care center, or other places.

### Who Pays for Services?

Screenings, evaluations, and service coordination are free for families. Most other early intervention services are provided at a cost to the family, but no family is denied early intervention services because of an inability to pay for services with fees.

If your family has public insurance – such as Medicaid, Medicaid HMO, or FAMIS – all services are free. Families with private health insurance may choose to bill insur-

ance for the services they receive. Families with the state employees' health insurance and some other health insurance policies are covered under a state law that requires that insurance pay up to \$5000 for early intervention each year. Families can also get on the Ability-to-Pay fee scale that often greatly reduces the amount a family has to pay out of pocket for early intervention services, even if they have no insurance, they choose not to use health insurance, or insurance covers few of the costs of early intervention.

### How Can I Educate Myself?

Don't underestimate your role as your child's advocate and teacher.

*Just as important, try not to become overwhelmed with the task of raising your child, especially if he or she is eligible for early intervention.*

### Early Intervention Issues

For more information contact the resources below or refer to the Early Intervention resources on p. 96.

Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia  
P.O. Box 1797  
Richmond, VA 23214  
(804) 786-0992  
www.infantva.org

Parent Educational Advocacy  
Training Center  
PEATC  
6320 Augusta Drive, # 1200  
Springfield, VA 22150  
703-923-0010 (Voice/TTY)  
1-800-869-6782  
(VA parents only)  
www.peatc.org.  
Para mayor información en español, comuníquese con PEATC al 703-923-0010.

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*Each state has a Parent Training and Information Center to help you better understand the nature of your child's special needs.*

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Just as important, try not to become overwhelmed with the task of raising your child, especially if he or she is eligible for early intervention. Each state has a Parent Training and Information Center to help you better understand the nature of your child's special needs. PEATC, Virginia's center, can help you become educated about early intervention, the IFSP, and special needs. PEATC can also help you communicate more effectively with all the professionals who may now enter your child's life. If your child continues to be eligible for services after he or she has transitioned from early intervention, PEATC as well as many other organizations (see Advocacy and Education resources in Gen. Resource Section on p. 76) can provide information and resources to assist you in understanding special education and participating in the development of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). PEATC can also provide you with information about numerous programs, services and resources available to your child.

### NOTES

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The Web site for the Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia (the statewide early intervention system) can be found at [www.infantva.org](http://www.infantva.org) and is a valuable tool. (See page 54 for a telephone listing of your local Central Point of Entry office.)

Talking with other parents is a great way to get advice, ideas and simply make friends. The Arc of Virginia's Family Involvement Project's Parent to Parent can help with those "introductions." Contact them at 1-888-604-2677 or go to their Web site at [www.arcfip.org](http://www.arcfip.org).

### Where Do I Start?

Families with specific questions about Virginia's early intervention system, such as how to access services, should contact "First Steps," Virginia's toll-free central directory hotline, at 800-234-1448. You will be directed to an individual in your locality who can assist you. ■

*Susan L. Fitzgerald is the editor of Northern Virginia Parent. She has worked in publishing for more than 10 years and her work has appeared in numerous consumer, association and corporate publications.*

*Carmen Sanchez has served on numerous state and local workgroups involving early intervention. Currently, she is employed by Disability Services Planning and Development.*