

# EARLY INTERVENTION



Pennsylvania  
Partnerships for Children

*For children with special needs, the earlier help comes, the better. Early Intervention helps young children meet the challenges of their developmental delays and disabilities and maximize their learning power.*

## Early Intervention in Pennsylvania

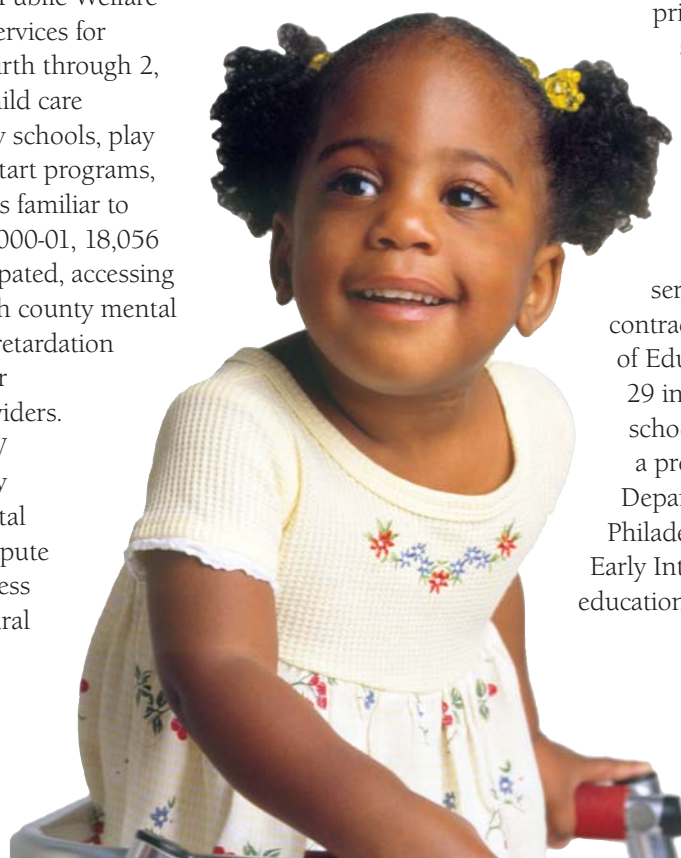
Early Intervention offers timely attention to the educational and physical needs of young children with developmental delays or disabilities, working with parents to maximize their child's abilities and help families manage their unique challenges.

Early Intervention is available in two phases, both governed by state Act 212 of 1990, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and – when services are funded by Medicaid – by Medicaid rules:

- Birth through 2:** The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) offers services for children ages birth through 2, in the home, child care centers, nursery schools, play groups, Head Start programs, or other settings familiar to the family. In 2000-01, 18,056 children participated, accessing services through county mental health/mental retardation offices and their contracted providers. Currently, DPW regulations only delineate parental rights and a dispute resolution process called “procedural

safeguards,” managing other areas through policy bulletins. DPW has been developing regulations to comply with federal rules for several years and plans to release proposed regulations by late 2002.

- Ages 3 to 6:** The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) serves children from 3 years old until they enter school – usually at 5 years old, but available to age 6 – when special education begins. Children can get services in the same settings as children from birth through 2, plus regular preschools, specialized Early Intervention classes, clinics, hospitals, and approved private schools, which receive state exemptions from licensing to provide free, appropriate education for students with severe disabilities. In 2000-01, 28,924 children participated, accessing services through providers contracted by the state Department of Education – 27 of the state's 29 intermediate units, six local school districts, and Elwyn, Inc., a provider retained by the Department of Education to serve Philadelphia. The PDE operates Early Intervention under special education regulations.



A governor's advisory council, the 15-member Pennsylvania State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) for Early Intervention, offers recommendations on Early Intervention system operations to the state Departments of Health, Education, and Public Welfare. Statewide, 49 local Interagency Coordinating Councils (LICCs) also discuss their concerns and share recommendations on parent training, technical assistance and other matters with state and local agencies to assure continued, comprehensive services.

To meet the needs of individual children and their families, parents and human service professionals develop an Individual Family Service Plan (birth-2)

or Individual Education Plan (3-6) that can include instruction and services in:

- Speech and language therapy.
- Occupational therapy.
- Physical therapy.
- Hearing and vision.
- Social work and service management.
- Psychological testing and services.
- Orientation and mobility training.
- Parent counseling and training.
- Transportation.

Families pay no fee for the services.

## Fact Box

### Early Intervention

- **Definition:** Full-year diagnostic, intervention, and remediation services that build the learning potential of children with developmental delays of 25 percent or greater, or 1.5 standard deviations from the mean in any one of the cognitive, communicative, physical, social/emotional and self-help developmental areas, or informed clinical opinion.
- **Eligibility:** Children birth to age 6 with special needs due to developmental delays or disabilities.
- **Participation:** 18,056 children, ages birth through 2, and 28,924 children, ages 3 to 6, enrolled in 2000-01.
- **Availability:** For children ages birth through 2, services are offered through county mental health/mental retardation offices, and for children ages 3 to 6, through local school districts, intermediate units, or contracted private agencies. Early Intervention is a 12-month program, normally with scheduled breaks during the year.
- **Oversight:** Office of Mental Retardation, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) administers services for children from ages birth through 2, and the Bureau of Special Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) administers services for children from 3 years old until beginning school at 5 or 6 years old.<sup>1</sup>
- **Funding:**
  - \$87.6 million for DPW's Early Intervention in 2001-02, including \$58.2 million in state funds, \$14.7 million in federal and state Medicaid, \$12.5 million in federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds, and \$2.2 million from the federal Social Services Block Grant.
  - \$103.66 million for PDE's Early Intervention in 2001-02, including \$102.44 million in state funds and \$1.22 million in federal IDEA funds. Another \$30 million in Medicaid federal funds and \$25 million in Medicaid state funds were budgeted for special education, but PDE does not break out Early Intervention spending.
- **More information:** The CONNECT Helpline, 1-800-692-7288, or [www.dpw.state.pa.us/omr/omrei.asp](http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/omr/omrei.asp) (DPW), or Accessible PA, [www.accessiblepa.state.pa.us/accessiblepa/cwp/view.asp?a=2&q=24643](http://www.accessiblepa.state.pa.us/accessiblepa/cwp/view.asp?a=2&q=24643) (PDE).

## Resources for Professionals and Consumers

Qualified professionals, such as state-licensed or certified speech pathologists, audiologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists, special education teachers, and social workers, must deliver Early Intervention services. County mental health/mental retardation service coordinators for the birth-2 program are subject to state and county civil service requirements. Some professional development opportunities are available through the state’s Early Intervention Technical Assistance program (see below), and through professional and trade associations.

Providers can access two programs for technical assistance and information on meeting the needs of children with developmental delays and their families:

- The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) helps local educational agencies provide appropriate services for special education students.
- The state’s Early Intervention Technical Assistance (EITA) program offers providers and parents training, including help on finding appropriate child care.

Parents can find consumer information through:

- The Special Kids Network, operated by the state to help parents find targeted therapies, counseling, education and training, social services, and recreation for their children.

- Parent to Parent, also a state program, connects families in similar situations to share experiences and advice.
- The Parent Education Network (PEN), a statewide coalition, provides educational resources for parents of children with a range of disabilities and the professionals who serve them. Services are designed to promote mutual respect among parents and professionals for the benefit of children and adults with disabilities.
  - Local Interagency Coordinating Councils (LICCs) often determine parent training needs and communicate them to county MH/MR offices, providers, and trainers.

**Early Intervention helps young children with developmental delays and disabilities build their capabilities and take full advantage of later educational opportunities. Implemented when children are young — and, according to brain development research, most receptive to learning — Early Intervention can have a lasting impact for students, their families, and the community.**

## Funding

Funding for Early Intervention in Pennsylvania comprises:

- \$87.6 million for DPW’s Early Intervention in 2001-02, including \$58.2 million in state funds, \$2.2 million from the federal Social Services Block Grant, \$14.7 million in federal and state Medicaid, and \$12.5 million in federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding.
- \$103.66 million for PDE’s Early Intervention in 2001-02, including \$102.44 million in state funds and \$1.22 million in federal IDEA funds in 2001-02. Another \$25 million in Medicaid state funds and \$30 million in Medicaid federal funds were budgeted for special education, but PDE does not break out Early Intervention spending.

## Why Early Intervention Matters

Early Intervention helps young children with developmental delays and disabilities build their capabilities and take full advantage of later educational opportunities. Implemented when children are young – and, according to brain development research, most receptive to learning – Early Intervention can have a lasting impact for students, their families, and the community:

- **Reduced need for special education:** Fewer than half of the preschoolers who received Early Intervention were classified as special education students by age 8.<sup>2</sup>
- **Reduced demand for residential schooling:** Of those children who did receive special education, more than 80 percent went to their own neighborhood schools, and fewer than 1 percent were in residential facilities.<sup>3</sup>
- **Eased family strain:** Families of young children with developmental delays and disabilities often feel disappointed, socially isolated, stressed, frustrated, and helpless, creating compounding stresses that hamper the child's development. Families of disabled children have higher rates of divorce and suicide, and disabled children are more likely to be abused. Early Intervention can enhance parents' attitudes about themselves and their child, help parents become better teachers, and create more time for leisure and employment.<sup>4</sup>
- **Reduced costs:** Every dollar spent on Early Intervention can save from \$4 to \$7 in special education or institutionalization later.<sup>5</sup> The total cost of services begun at birth can be much lower than interventions initially delivered at age 6, when developmental problems are ingrained and more difficult to correct.<sup>6</sup>



## State of the States/Best Practices

The U.S. Department of Education cites several best practices for effectively delivering Early Intervention to children from birth to 2: multi-media outreach campaigns – known as “Child Find” – that provide easy-to-read, culturally appropriate information in many languages; providing services in natural environments, in the home and wherever non-disabled children are typically located; delivering services that focus on the entire family and not just the child; and creating a smooth transition process into the service system for children from 3 to 6 years old. For 3- to 6-year-olds, best practices also include promoting parent involvement and providing a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.<sup>7</sup>

However, the federal government gives states leeway in determining other service delivery practices. Though they save money, they can also restrict availability, and Pennsylvania – commendably – has declined to adopt them:

- Seventeen states define developmental delay more stringently, and more restrictively, than Pennsylvania. New York and New Jersey define developmental delay as 33 percent in one area of development or 25 percent in two or more areas. Connecticut requires a 44 percent delay in one area for eligibility. If Pennsylvania implemented New York’s more stringent eligibility requirements, the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee estimated in 1996, 20 percent of the children receiving services would become ineligible.
- Some states, including Massachusetts and Connecticut but not Pennsylvania, require insurance companies to pay part of the costs for medically necessary Early Intervention treatments, such as nursing care, psychological testing and services, and occupational, physical and speech therapy.
- The federal IDEA allows states to charge fees, based on family income, for Early Intervention services. Twelve states, including Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio, have fee schedules, but Pennsylvania does not.

## Situation Analysis

In the mid 1990s, Early Intervention in Pennsylvania was threatened by an administration proposal to save state funds by withdrawing from an optional part of the federal IDEA for children from birth through 2 – and eliminating many protections for children and their parents. An outcry from parents, providers, advocates, and state legislators blocked the proposal’s implementation.

Pennsylvania’s investment in Early Intervention – and in the future ability of young children to learn to their full potential – has risen considerably, from \$18.8 million in state funds on the DPW side in 1989-90 (when the state first enacted an Early Intervention statute) to \$54.5 million in 2000-01, and from \$14.8 million for Department of Education services in 1989-90 to \$94.7 million in 2000-01. A 2001 law requiring hearing screenings and, if needed, Early Intervention referrals for newborns will open services to more children.

With growth, Early Intervention’s fiscal health, and its ability to service all eligible children, remains tenuous. Federal funds, plus the release of Medicaid dollars for Early Intervention, have helped: From using no Medicaid dollars in 1989, Pennsylvania enhanced Early Intervention by utilizing \$14 million from Medicaid for DPW in 2000-01 and \$20.6 million for Education in 1998-99.

The funding increase has helped the state comply with a federal IDEA requirement for delivery of Early Intervention services for children from birth through age 2 in “natural environments,” such as in their own homes and in child care facilities where children without disabilities are educated. The effort – which has attracted criticism from some service providers and some parents who want more intensive center-based programs – is still being implemented and has not been evaluated for its effectiveness in Pennsylvania.

Early Intervention providers serving children from birth through age 2 face other stiff challenges: staff recruitment and retention, training, turnover, and, sometimes, low wages and salaries. The situation could require additional state and county resources to raise wages and salaries, develop new training programs, and provide additional financial incentives to providers and staff.

Like Pennsylvania, most states' Early Intervention programs follow the federal IDEA's blueprint. In 1997, the IDEA allowed states to extend the identification of "developmental delay" until age 9, and 16 states are expanding services within the 6 to 9 range. Another 10 states are exploring the option. Pennsylvania is not taking that route, saying that delays should be identified earlier, when children are infants, toddlers, or preschool age. The early identification prevents cost shifting into special education, according to state officials, and saves money with timelier attention to learning disabilities and delays. The state also decided to forgo the extension because special education services fill the need when children enter kindergarten.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) commended Pennsylvania for compliance with the IDEA in some critical areas:<sup>8</sup>

- Providing more Early Intervention services in natural environments.
- Assuring Interagency Coordinating Councils that function in every county.
- The Pennsylvania Early Intervention Technical Assistance system (EITA), which provides technical assistance to parents, programs, and state and local staff.

However, OSEP determined Pennsylvania was out of IDEA compliance in other areas:

- DPW could do more to identify and refer eligible children, and its public awareness activities do not always reach families, physicians, and traditionally underserved populations.
- DPW assessments don't always adequately identify family needs or the child's educational needs.





- DPW's steps for transitioning children to services for 3- to 6-year-olds are inadequate.
- PDE sometimes excludes its 3- to 6-year-olds from the regular educational environment for inadequate reasons.
- PDE does not always ensure availability of extended school year services.

Pennsylvania is developing a plan to correct the issues raised by OSEP. In the meantime, the federal IDEA law is scheduled to expire September 30, 2002, and lawmakers will consider some major issues during reauthorization, including additional federal funding to help states implement special education mandates, and whether to keep the requirements that infants and toddlers get Early Intervention services in natural environments and in a family-centered manner.

Since its adoption in 1990, Early Intervention has seen few legislative changes, but a bill that passed the state House in 2002 would codify in state law a practice already required by federal rules – the acceptance of “informed clinical opinions” by licensed therapists, pediatricians, psychologists or other qualified professionals to determine eligibility for the birth-2 program when standardized procedures can't determine a child's levels of functioning. The change would also expand the state and local Interagency Coordinating Councils, specifically including parents.

## POLICY DIRECTIONS

Pennsylvania recognized the proven, long-term benefits of early identification and services for children with delays and disabilities with its commitment to Early Intervention in 1990. Since then, the program has expanded rapidly and continues to be a proven investment in the education and well-being of children with delays and disabilities. Children in Early Intervention get timely attention to their physical and educational needs, while families receive help in managing their unique challenges. Pennsylvania should continue to:

- Fund services for all eligible children who need them.
- Provide technical assistance and support to families, providers, counties, school districts and intermediate units.
- Apply best practices to identify and serve children and their families.
- Assure a smooth transition to school, with services and supports appropriate to young children's needs.

# ENDNOTES

## Early Intervention

<sup>1</sup> Early Intervention Services are governed by Pennsylvania Act 212 of 1990 and the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its Revisions of 1997 (PL 105-17) and federal IDEA part B and C regulations.

<sup>2</sup> Zigmond and Koppell, 1998. Referenced on PDE Web site, [www.pde.state.pa.us](http://www.pde.state.pa.us).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Barbara J., *Does Early Intervention Help?*, ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, Reston, VA, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> McNulty, B., et al. *Effectiveness of Early Special Education for Handicapped Children*. Colorado Department of Education, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Wood, M. E. "Costs of Intervention Programs," *Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs and Their Families: Findings and Recommendations*. University of Washington, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, *Monitoring and Assessment of States IDEA Implementation*, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



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### Mission Statement

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a strong, effective and trusted voice for improving the health, early education and well-being of the Commonwealth's children.

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