



# The Importance of Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and their Families

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The Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities Program (Part C) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was created in 1986 to **enhance the development** of infants and toddlers with disabilities, **minimize potential developmental delay**, and reduce educational costs to our society by minimizing the need for special education services as children with disabilities reach school age.<sup>1</sup> Part C provides early intervention (EI) services to infants and toddlers aged birth to three with developmental delays or a medical condition likely to lead to a developmental delay. Part C is not intended to be a stand-alone program. The intent is to **build interagency partnerships** among state agencies and programs in health, education, human services and developmental disabilities.

## WHY INTERVENE EARLY?

Decades of rigorous research show that children's earliest experiences play a critical role in **brain development**. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has summarized this research:<sup>2,3</sup>

- Neural circuits, which create the foundation for learning, behavior and health, are most flexible or "plastic" during the **first three years** of life. Over time, they become increasingly difficult to change.
- Persistent **"toxic" stress**, such as extreme poverty, abuse and neglect, or severe maternal depression can damage the developing brain, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.
- The brain is strengthened by **positive early experiences**, especially **stable relationships** with caring and responsive adults, safe and supportive environments, and appropriate nutrition.
- Early social/ emotional development and physical health provide the foundation upon which **cognitive and language skills** develop.
- High quality early intervention services can **change a child's developmental trajectory** and improve outcomes for children, families, and communities.
- Intervention is likely to be **more effective** and **less costly** when it is provided earlier in life rather than later.

## WHY ARE SERVICES ESSENTIAL?

Positive early experiences are essential prerequisites for later success in school, the workplace, and the community. Services to young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays have been shown to **positively impact outcomes across developmental domains**, including health,<sup>3</sup> language and communication,<sup>4,7</sup> cognitive development<sup>8,9</sup> and social/emotional development.<sup>8,10</sup> Families benefit from early intervention by being able to better meet their children's special needs from an early age and throughout their lives.<sup>8,11</sup> Benefits to society include reducing economic burden through a **decreased need for special education**.<sup>8,9</sup>

## WHAT ARE THE UNMET NEEDS?

There is a **high need** for good quality Part C early intervention programs.

- **More children are in need of services** than are currently being served. In 2009, Part C served 348,604 children nationally, which represents 2.67% of the general population of children aged birth to 3.<sup>12</sup> However, research indicates that as many as 13% of birth to 3 year olds have delays that would make them eligible according to criteria commonly used by the states.<sup>13</sup>

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- There is a need to **serve children earlier**. Research has shown that at 9 months of age, only 9% of children who have delays that would make them eligible receive services; at 24 months of age only 12% of children who would be eligible receive services.<sup>14</sup>
- Research also suggests that there are **racial disparities** in the receipt of EI services,<sup>13,14</sup> with black children who would be eligible at 24 months of age being up to five times less like to receive services than white children.<sup>14</sup>
- Young children experiencing **homelessness** are more likely to have lower birth weights than other children, learning disabilities, developmental delays, emotional problems and behavior issues,<sup>15-18</sup> yet they are greatly **underrepresented** in early childhood programs.<sup>15</sup>
- There is a significant shortage of **well-trained professionals** with expertise in serving very young children with **behavioral or emotional** (e.g. depression, anxiety) problems<sup>19,20</sup> that negatively impact early learning, social interactions, and the overall well-being of an estimated 9% to 14% of children aged birth to five.<sup>21,22</sup>
- Approximately **10-11% of all newborns have prenatal substance exposure**,<sup>23</sup> a risk factor for poor developmental outcomes. An estimated **90-95% of these infants are sent home at birth without being identified or referred for services**.<sup>23</sup>
- In 2009, 702,000 children experienced **substantiated abuse or neglect**; 40% of these children received no post-investigation services; **one third were under age four, and infants under the age of one were the most likely to be victims**.<sup>24</sup> These young children often have **high rates of physical, cognitive, social-emotional, relational and psychological problems**.<sup>25,26</sup>

## TAKE HOME MESSAGE

- There is an urgent and substantial need to identify as early as possible those infants and toddlers in need of services to ensure that intervention is provided when the **developing brain is most capable of change**.<sup>1</sup>
- High quality early intervention programs for vulnerable infants and toddlers can **reduce the incidence of future problems** in their learning, behavior and health status.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Intervention is likely to be **more effective and less costly** when it is provided **earlier in life** rather than later.<sup>2,3</sup>


IDEA requires referral to Part C for any child under the age of 3 who is identified as affected by illegal substance abuse, or is involved in a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect.<sup>1</sup>

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