



frequently asked questions



Natural Environments

... where children without disabilities spend their time.

The Law says...

Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 says that to the maximum extent appropriate, early intervention services must be provided in natural environments, including home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate. Services can only be provided in a setting other than a natural environment when early intervention cannot be achieved satisfactorily in a natural environment. [Section 632 (4)(G) and Section 635 (a) (16) (B)]

Why are natural environments important?

It is a child's nature to learn throughout the day in whatever activity or place he or she is.

How is a child's natural environment identified?

Natural environments are the day-to-day settings and activities that promote learning for children. Children learn about "water" while playing in the bathtub, washing hands in the sink, getting a drink, splashing in a puddle, or swimming in a pool. In addition to understanding what water is, children are learning self-help skills like drinking from a cup, hand and face washing, or motor skills like walking and jumping. Natural environments are places where these everyday activities take place, including the bathroom, kitchen sink, backyard, and community pool. Natural environments are identified by the family as they talk about the activities or their life. They may see grandpa, walk to the store, get the mail, feed the dog, and do the laundry. These are opportunities for teaching and learning.

What isn't a natural environment?

Places children usually go because they have disabilities or medical issues, such as clinics, hospitals, therapy offices, or training centers are not natural environments. Segregation of children with special needs often leads to further isolation. It limits the opportunities for social interaction for both children and families. Children with special needs must have the experience of living, playing, and communicating in the "real world" so they can use these skills to lead to independent adult lives.

Who decides the natural environment for a child to receive early intervention services?

The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team, which includes the child's parent(s), decides the natural environments in which services will be provided. Very early in the IFSP process (intake), the service coordinator and other team members discuss details about the family's routines and activities, as well as their concerns and priorities. All of these things will be considered when developing the IFSP and, to the extent appropriate to the child's needs, services will be provided where the child lives, learns, and plays.

Why do services now have to be provided in a child's natural environment?

First, federal law under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has always required early intervention (Babies Can't Wait) to provide services in natural environments. The reauthorization of this law in 1997 strengthened this requirement. Second, this makes good sense for children and families. When services are provided as part of a family's routines and activities, the family has more opportunities throughout the day to encourage their child to learn and practice new skills, and the child is more likely to achieve desired outcomes. Third, providing services in natural environments will hopefully interrupt the cycle of isolation and segregation of people with disabilities.

A child previously received services in a clinic. What if the family wants to continue receiving services there?

A family can always choose to get services from a provider who does not offer services in a natural environment. However, those services will not be considered early intervention services. The Babies Can't Wait Cost Participation Scale will not apply and families will be financially responsible for those services.

What if I have more questions about natural environments?

Contact your BCW service coordinator, local Early Intervention (Babies Can't Wait) Coordinator, BCW Parent Educator, or the State Babies Can't Wait office (404-657-2726 or toll free 888-651-8224).

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