

Early childhood approach

Quick summary: Early childhood intervention is about giving your child the best possible start in life. If your child is younger than 7 you may be able to access our early childhood approach. Our nationally consistent early childhood approach is for children with developmental delay or disability. Children who do not fully meet the definition of developmental delay and have developmental concerns will also be supported through the early childhood approach. If you have concerns about your child's development your first point of contact will usually be your doctor, maternal and child health nurse, or other health professional. They will help you work out what supports you and your child might need and they may connect you with our early childhood partners. Our early childhood approach is about helping you support your child to learn new skills. It will also help your child to develop and take part at home and in the community. Your child doesn't need a diagnosis to get support.

This guideline explains our current early childhood approach and will be updated as we implement recommendations from our early childhood early intervention review.

When we say 'you', we mean anyone responsible for the care of a child. You may be a parent, carer or legal representative.

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You might also be interested in:

- [Our Guideline – Access to the NDIS](#)

What is early childhood intervention?

Early childhood intervention is all about giving children with developmental delay or disability, and their families, supports to enable the child to have the best possible start in life. Through early childhood intervention, infants and young children as well as their families, can get specialised supports and services. These services aim to promote the:

- child's development
- family and child's wellbeing
- child taking part in their community.

The NDIA funded the development of the national guidelines on [Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention](#). These guidelines support early childhood intervention providers across Australia to apply best-practice approaches to early childhood intervention.

These guidelines tell us that children and families benefit the most when we base early childhood intervention on the following:

- **The family is at the centre of all services and supports**

The family and early childhood professionals work together in partnership. Services and supports are based on the family's needs and choices.

- **All families are different and unique**

Services and supports are delivered in a way that is respectful of a family's cultural, language and social backgrounds, and their values and beliefs.

- **The child is included at home and in the community**

The child takes part in home and community life, with supports as needed, to create a real sense of belonging.

- **The child practises and learns new skills everyday**

The child learns and practises skills in the activities and daily routines of their everyday life.

- **Early childhood professionals and family form a team around the child**

A family works together with early childhood professionals to form a team around the child. They share information, knowledge and skills. One main person from this team, called a key worker, may be allocated to work with the family.

- **Supports build everyone's knowledge and skills**

Building the knowledge, skills and confidence of the family and the important people in a child's life will have the biggest impact on a child's learning and development.

- **Services and supports work with the family on the goals they have for their child and family**

Early childhood professionals focus on what parents or carers want for their child and family, and work closely with the family to achieve the best outcomes for their child.

- **Early childhood professionals deliver quality services and supports**

Early childhood professionals have qualifications and experience in early childhood development, and offer services based on sound evidence and research.

Best practice recognises that children learn and develop in natural, everyday settings. This includes their own home, and other places, such as childcare, playgroup or at kindergarten or preschool, where they play with family or friends. This means the adults they are with need information, tools and support to help the child's development and participation. Being included in these everyday activities gives children with developmental delay or disability the same opportunities as all children. It provides them with opportunities to develop friendships, interact with others and be a part of their community.

Best practice not only takes into account broad early childhood intervention research, but also evidence relating to the needs of children with a specific diagnosis, such as autism spectrum disorder or cerebral palsy.

How do we work with young children and their families?

We call our nationally consistent approach to working with young children and their families the 'early childhood approach'. We developed our approach from evidence-based research with the help of leading experts in early childhood intervention. We've explained the theory of [What is early childhood intervention?](#) that we use in our approach. Our early childhood approach focusses on being both family-centred and strengths-based. We do this by acknowledging that as parents and carers you know your child best. We concentrate on understanding what your child can do.

We know that the early childhood years are critical. They set the foundations for how children learn and develop. We want to support you and your child early to improve their outcomes later in life.

To deliver our early childhood approach, we have partnered with organisations called early childhood partners. They are well established in communities and have experience in working with families to connect with available support. Learn more about [early childhood partners](#).

Who can access our early childhood approach?

If you have concerns about your child's development, or your child has a disability, you can contact an early childhood partner to access our early childhood approach. Usually, you would've already discussed your concerns, or your child's disability, with your doctor, maternal and child health nurse, or other health professional. You do not need a referral or diagnosis from a medical professional to access support through our early childhood approach.

You will hear us use different terms including development concerns, developmental delay or disability.

When we talk about [developmental concerns](#) we mean that there are delays in your child's development that don't fully meet developmental delay. These delays may impact the everyday activities your child can do when compared with children of the same age. But it may be unclear if support is required from a team of professionals or for more than 12 months. Children with developmental concerns can be supported by an [early childhood partner](#) with short term early intervention. They may also be supported by mainstream supports, community and other services.

When we talk about [developmental delay](#), we mean that the child is considered to have a substantial reduction in functional capacity. This means that the everyday activities the child does or can do is at a significantly lower competency level or is substantially different when compared with children of the same age. The support that is required for the child to do the activity would also be significantly greater compared to children of the same age. A child younger than 6 with developmental delay may meet the NDIS developmental delay early intervention requirements.

When we talk about a child with a disability we mean that they have an impairment that's likely to be permanent. The impairment could be intellectual, cognitive, neurological, sensory or physical. You can read more about the early intervention and disability requirements in our [Operational Guideline – Access to the NDIS](#).

What is the aim of our early childhood approach?

Our early childhood approach recognises, as parents and carers, you are central in supporting your child's development.

Our early childhood approach aims to:

- provide timely support to ensure that you are able to access the supports you need
- give you information about best-practice early childhood intervention supports and how you can help your child
- increase your confidence and capacity to manage and respond to your child's support needs
- increase your child's ability to do activities they need or want to do throughout their day
- increase your child's inclusion and participation in mainstream and community settings like childcare or recreation
- give you information about, and referrals to, other support services if needed, like parent support groups.

What does the early childhood approach look like?

Our early childhood approach is about supporting you and your child as an individual. There are many different types of supports available, starting with providing you with information, referring to other community and mainstream services, and receiving support from allied health professionals. You can also get support and advice from our early childhood partners. Your child doesn't need a diagnosis to get these initial supports. Our early childhood partners will connect you to the services that best meet the needs of your child. For some children, this may include help to apply to become a participant. If your child meets the access criteria and becomes a participant, our early childhood partners will help you and your child with your NDIS plan.

Our early childhood approach also includes community capacity building. This means we work with community and mainstream services, like childcare, to increase their awareness and ability to support children with developmental concerns, developmental delay or disability. We focus on this because early childhood education and the opportunity to interact with other children is a critical factor in child development and wellbeing.

What does initial supports mean?

Initial supports are time limited for a short period, and can include one or more of the following:

- Linking you with activities in your local community such as a playgroup and other recreational options.
- Linking you with mainstream supports including health services such as maternal and child health nurse, community health, and education settings such as childcare, kindergarten or preschool.
- Helping you understand your child's development and their needs.
- Helping you develop goals for your child about the activities they want and need to do.
- Building your child's skills, and yours, in the everyday settings where you spend time together.
- Delivering short term early intervention for children with developmental concerns. These may be individual or group sessions, for up to 12 months, with an early childhood professional such as a speech pathologist, physiotherapist or early childhood teacher.
- Supporting you to apply for NDIS access, if your child is likely to require longer-term supports.

An [early childhood partner](#) provides these initial supports with the funding we give them. They complement what is already available in your local area through [mainstream supports](#) such as health and education.

Initial supports are available to you without the need for a medical diagnosis or confirmed developmental delay.

Case study 1

Noah is 3 and lives with his parents, Leanne and John, and his sister. He goes to childcare 3 days a week. Leanne and John are concerned about Noah's speech and his emotional regulation. The childcare centre also reports that Noah is regularly yelling and hitting out at other children. During a recent visit, their paediatrician noted some delays in Noah's language and communication skills. These delays could be affecting his behaviour. She suggested that Leanne and John contact an early childhood partner in their local area for support.

Leanne, John and Noah meet with an early childhood partner at their home. The early childhood partner reviews the paediatrician report and observes Noah. The early childhood partner discusses Leanne and John's developmental concerns and their goals for Noah's

development. Leanne explains they would like Noah's speech to improve, so people can better understand him. They would also like support to help Noah with his behaviour and emotional regulation at home and at childcare. The early childhood partner observes Noah during his everyday routines and activities at home and childcare to get a clear understanding of Noah's interactions with others and the support he requires. It is unclear if Noah needs extended support. Noah and his family get short term early intervention.

The early childhood partner helps Noah's family and works with staff at his childcare centre to apply strategies to improve Noah's language, communication skills and emotional regulation. After a few months, Noah's communication skills and behaviour are better. Leanne and John also start going to a parent support group at a local community centre and have developed friendships with other parents in the support group.

Towards the end of the short term early intervention, childcare staff report Noah's interactions with other children is better. He takes part more positively in the childcare program. Noah's family and childcare staff feel more confident to support his ongoing learning and development. The early childhood partner repeats their observations and confirms with the family that noticeable progress was made. As a result of progress the early childhood partner confirms Noah doesn't need more early intervention and is likely to successfully transition to school.

Short term early intervention from the early childhood partner and mainstream education services has supported Noah and his family, without needing access to the Scheme as a participant.

What is an NDIS plan?

Children who have met access criteria and become a participant of the Scheme can get an NDIS Plan. If your child becomes a participant of the Scheme, we use the NDIS funding criteria to determine reasonable and necessary supports.¹ You can read more about how we make decisions about your NDIS plan in Our Guidelines – [Creating your Plan](#), [Your Plan](#) and [Reasonable and Necessary Supports](#).

We will regularly check in to understand your child's progress. This will also include talking about transitions that will happen throughout your child's early years. Whether that is support to either:

- leave the Scheme and maintain linkages with mainstream and community supports
- continue receiving supports through a local area coordinator or planner when your child turns 7.

Case study 2

6 month old Kim was diagnosed with Down Syndrome in the week following her birth. Kim spent the first few months of her life in hospital with health complications associated with her disability. During this time her paediatrician and hospital allied health team helped with feeding supports. After talking with Kim's parents, the paediatrician refers Kim to an early childhood partner. The referral includes a copy of Kim's diagnosis and discharge reports from the hospital allied health team.

Kim's parents, Chau and Steve, meet with the early childhood partner and explain they feel overwhelmed by Kim's diagnosis. They report the hospital physiotherapist showed them how to support Kim during tummy time on the floor. As she has progressed since then, they would like more ideas. Due to Kim's time in hospital, Steve and Chau missed the parents' groups run by the Maternal Child Health Centre. They want Kim to interact with other children but are unsure where to take her.

Through the early childhood partner, Chau and Steve connect to a local parent support group, library story time sessions and playgroups. The early childhood partner also helps Chau and Steve request access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme ensuring all supporting evidence, such as diagnosis and hospital discharge reports, is included.

Kim's access to the Scheme is approved as she meets early intervention requirements evidenced through the diagnosis and hospital reports. An NDIS plan is then developed for Kim and her family. The early childhood partner provides information and support for Chau and Steve to use the supports in the plan and find service providers of their choice.

Kim's early childhood partner checks in with Chau and Steve to see how Kim's plan is going. Chau and Steve are feeling better equipped to support Kim.

What is an early childhood partner?

Early childhood partners are local organisations we fund to deliver the early childhood approach. Our early childhood partners have teams of professionals with experience and clinical expertise in working with young children with development delay or disability and their families. We chose them as partners for their specialist skill-sets in early childhood intervention. They focus on delivering family-centred supports using a best-practice model. You'll find them in most communities around Australia. If [an early childhood partner is not in your area](#), we will support you to connect with alternative options depending on where you live.

Easy Read information is available:

- [Help for your child \(PDF 1.9MB\)](#)

It explains how to connect and work with an early childhood partner. It also includes details of how you can access The Telephone Interpreting Service, Teletypewriter (TTY) options and The National Relay Service

[Find an early childhood partner](#), or for further information use the [Contact Us](#) page or call 1800 800 110.

What do the early childhood partners do?

Early childhood partners can:

- give you information about early childhood intervention supports and providers in your local community
- connect you to your local mainstream and community services such as community or maternal and child health service, playgroup, childcare, parent support group, education options and recreation
- use observation and assessment, with parent report, to understand the impact of your child's delay or disability, but they don't complete assessments for diagnosis
- identify if your child will benefit from short term early intervention and, where appropriate, provide some short term early childhood intervention supports to help you and your child to work towards goals
- identify if your child needs long-term specialised early childhood intervention supports, and then help you to request access to the NDIS and submit the required information and evidence
- help you connect with best practice early childhood intervention service providers
- monitor your child's progress and support them to transition from the early childhood approach.

Early childhood partners also work to build the capacity of community and mainstream services such as childcare, to increase their awareness and ability to support children with developmental delay and disability. They focus on this because early childhood education and the opportunity to interact with other children is a critical factor in child development and wellbeing.

What happens if there are no early childhood partners in your area?

In some areas, we don't have early childhood partners to deliver our early childhood approach.

Where partners are not available, you can speak with your doctor, maternal and child health nurse, or other health professional.

You can also contact your nearest NDIA office. For further information use the [Contact Us](#) page or call 1800 800 110.

Reference list

¹ NDIS Act s 34(1)(a).