

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, 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.

When we say 'child', we mean children younger than 7.

When we say 'we', we mean the NDIA.

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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, 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 children younger than 7 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 [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, 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 our definition of 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. A child younger than 6 with developmental concerns can be supported by an [early childhood partner](#) with connection to early supports. They may also be supported by mainstream and community services. Learn more about [early connections](#).

When we talk about [developmental delay](#), we are talking about children younger than 6 who are likely to meet the NDIS [developmental delay criteria](#). This means they are 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. If your child is younger than 6 with developmental delay, your early childhood partner may recommend that you consider applying to the NDIS on your child's behalf. If you decide to apply to the NDIS, your early childhood partner can support you to apply.

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 the [Access to the NDIS](#) guideline.

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
- increase your child's inclusion and participation in mainstream and community settings like playgroup, childcare, kindergarten or preschool
- give you information about, and referrals to, other support services, like parent support groups – to meet other people with similar experiences or situations, if you want to.

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, connections to mainstream and community 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 supports. We call these supports [early connections](#). Our early childhood partners will connect you to the services that best meet the needs of your child. For some children, this may include connection to early supports, for others it may be help to apply to the NDIS. If your child meets the eligibility 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 delays in their development or with 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 do we mean by early connections?

Early connections are for children younger than 7 with delays in their development or with disability. It's all about giving quick access to supports that meet your child's needs. Early connections can help you support your child's development regardless of whether they're eligible for the NDIS.

Your early childhood partner will talk with you about the different ways you and your child can receive early connections. This might include:

- Understanding the goals you have for your child.
- Connecting you with activities in your local community such as playgroups and parent support groups.
- Connecting you with mainstream services including health services such as a child health nurse, community health, and education settings such as childcare, kindergarten or preschool.
- Connections to practical information to help you understand your child's development and their needs.
- Connections with other families for peer support.
- Connections to early supports, to build capacity in you and your child to promote everyday learning, if your child is younger than 6 and has developmental concerns.
- Support to apply to the NDIS, if you decide to apply on your child's behalf.

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

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

Learn more about [early connections](#).

Example

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. The early childhood partner identifies Noah has developmental concerns. Noah and his family are offered a short period of early supports.

The early childhood partner helps Noah's family and childcare staff apply strategies in the home and childcare centre 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 period of early supports, childcare staff report Noah's interactions with other children have improved. 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. Noah and his family no longer require early supports, however Leanne and John know they can connect back with the early childhood partner if needed.

The program of early support delivered by the early childhood partner and their connection to the parent support group has supported Noah and his family, without Noah needing access to the NDIS as a participant.

What is an NDIS plan?

Children who have met access criteria and become a participant of the NDIS can get an NDIS Plan. If your child becomes a participant, 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 NDIS and maintain linkages with mainstream and community services
- continue receiving supports through a local area coordinator or planner when your child turns 7.

Example

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, Chau and Steve missed the parents' groups run by the 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 NDIS, ensuring all supporting evidence, such as diagnosis and hospital discharge reports, is included.

Kim's access to the NDIS 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 skills 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 in [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:

- connect you to your local mainstream and community services such as community or child health service, playgroups, childcare, parent support groups, education options and recreation
- give you practical information about child development
- use observations and information from any screening tools, assessments or reports to understand the impact of your child's delay or disability – but they don't complete assessments for diagnosis
- identify if your child is likely to benefit from early support and, where appropriate, provide a short period of early supports to help you and your child to work towards goals
- support you to apply to the NDIS, if you decide to apply on your child's behalf, including support to put together information and evidence to help work out if your child is eligible
- 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 if there are no early childhood partners in your area?

Early childhood partners are not located in remote and very remote areas. If you live in an area that doesn't have an early childhood partner, and you have concerns about your child's development or disability you should first speak with your doctor, child health nurse, early childhood educator or other health professional.

You can also [contact us](#) for further information.

Reference list

¹ NDIS Act s 34(1)(a).