

Appendix to Delaware Birth To Three Early Intervention System grant  
award under Part C of IDEA

NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS GUIDELINES FOR THE DELAWARE  
BIRTH TO THREE EARLY INTERVENTION SYSTEM

*Revised October 2002*

**Definition:**

According to the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part C- Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, all early intervention services will be provided in natural environments to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the child. Natural environments refer to settings where a peer without disabilities would participate. These may include, but are not limited to, home and/or community settings such as: child care, gymnastics programs, play groups, toy lending libraries, library story hours, swimming pools, parents-day-out programs, and Early Head Start programs. The unique characteristics of the family within the community, together with the needs of the child, should be guiding factors in this process.

**Vision and Standards:**

The Birth To Three Early Intervention System has incorporated into its vision and philosophy a belief that services and supports should occur in settings most natural and comfortable for the child and family. The development of a natural system of supports within a family's community is promoted at all times. These settings should foster opportunities for the development of peer interactions with children without disabilities. Services should maximize the activities in the daily routine, reflecting the child's and family's schedule.

The Child Development Watch Program (CDW), which serves children under Part C and their families, has incorporated into its standards and indicators (*Standards for Early Intervention Services Delivery System as Provided by Child Development Watch*, adopted Nov. 1996) that services are provided in the child's natural environments.

**1. First Contacts:**

When parents learn that their child has a delay or disability, they may ask about the options for intervention, including the use of natural environments. The CDW Team members then discuss community resources, supports and programs. Through this discussion, the integration of the child's and family's needs are assessed and the concept of natural environments is reinforced. The preference is to have the first meeting in the family's environment.

## **2. Evaluations and Assessment Planning:**

When planning for the child's evaluations and assessment, the team, comprised of family members, the primary care physician, providers (as appropriate), the CDW service coordinator, and other assessment staff will consider the advantages and disadvantages of various locations. Emphasis should be put on providing the assessment in the context of the child's natural environments.

When families identify resources, priorities and concerns related to enhancing the development of their child, the team will consider the family's preference for the environment in which any personal interview may occur. The team will consider the family's perspective of natural environments for their child as part of the identification of resources, priorities, and concerns. The CDW service coordinator will support the family to ensure resources are located, priorities are established, and concerns are addressed.

## **3. Development of Outcomes/Initial Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) Meeting:**

When developing and prioritizing outcomes and identifying strategies to meet outcomes, the team will consider the advantages and disadvantages of various environments in which activities may be implemented. The team will recognize that all activities and services do not have to be provided in the same location.

The team will focus on identifying the child's activity settings and learning opportunities in each of these settings. Activity settings are where the child plays and learns. Learning opportunities build on existing capabilities. Understanding a family's routines is critical in identifying when learning opportunities occur in various settings.

The IFSP team identifies the unique needs of the child and family. Based on these unique needs, the IFSP team determines the frequency, intensity and locations in which services and supports will be provided. Frequency and intensity of services may be affected by the location in which services are provided. Opportunities for informal networking with other families may also be affected by location decisions. Families need to be aware of available options in order to make informed decisions while participating as members of the IFSP team. Interventionists will discuss these options with each family. Consideration of natural environments for child and family is an on-going activity, which begins with the first contact and continues through the entire IFSP process. In almost all cases, the IFSP process will result in services and supports that are embedded in the child and family's normal daily routines. If interventions cannot take place in natural environments at the initiation of the plan, the IFSP team will pursue moving services to the natural environments as the plan is updated.

Written documentation in the IFSP indicates that natural environments were discussed with the family. What constitutes a natural environment is unique to each child and family. Only when the outcomes cannot be met by providing services and supports in natural environments, then the IFSP team will consider the use of other environments. The IFSP team shall include on the IFSP a written justification of which services will not be provided in natural environments. In these cases, written documentation will indicate that the services will be provided to meet the unique needs of the child and family in another environment.

#### **4. Periodic Review and Transition Planning:**

When reviewing outcomes and strategies, the team will consider whether the previously identified activities, supports, and service locations remain appropriate. The team will again focus on identifying the child's activity settings and learning opportunities in these settings. The team will strive to adjust plans in order to engage interventions in natural environments. When developing a transition plan to Part B and other programs, the team will consider the least restrictive environments.

In order to facilitate communication among school districts, families, providers, CDW service coordinators, child care, and community programs, Delaware has established Sequenced Transition to Education in the Public Schools (STEPS) Early Childhood Transition Teams. Transition planning occurs for all children, including a discussion of options for services and supports in natural environments.

Recommended practice suggests the following questions be asked of families, professionals, primary care physicians, child care, and others providing services at each decision point throughout the IFSP process and during transition:

- What are the child's strengths, interests, and needs?
- What are the family's strengths interests, and needs?
- What does the family identify as natural environments?
- Where are the child's activity and learning opportunities occurring?
- What are the identified activities and outcomes?
- What are the supports and services needed to conduct activities and attain outcomes?
- Can these activities, supports, and services be provided in the identified natural environments?
- If not, what are the barriers and what are the strategies to overcome these barriers?
- Does documentation support how services best meet the needs of the child and family? (Including the use of natural environments or barriers to its use)

#### **5. Provider Training Contracts:**

Formalized provider training will include understanding the definition of natural environments, identifying the child's activity settings and learning opportunities in these settings, strategies for securing and incorporating natural environments, including how to implement the IFSP and deliver services in natural environments. Training will be for family members, early intervention personnel, teachers, parents, child care professionals, and therapists. All provider contracts, as they are renewed, will support the options of services in natural environments and attendance reporting to allow providers to describe a broader range of settings for service delivery.

The transdisciplinary model of service delivery model promotes consultation and early intervention in natural environments. Ongoing technical assistance and consultation are offered in support of training received through provider contracts. This support can occur from CDW or through mentor relationships.

### **Data Collection and Capacity Building:**

As a prelude to the development of the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), the CDW Service Coordinator will review “natural environments” with the family and the IFSP Team. The intent of the review is to provide full consideration for development of outcomes, which incorporate early intervention services into family and child routines and addresses the full range of options for locations, natural learning environments, and learning opportunities. Subsequently, a review of natural environments will be incorporated into Peer Review and Quality Assurance IFSP reviews. The IFSP reflects utilization of natural environments. The CDW Service Coordinator will indicate this in the IFSP. Data will be analyzed from monitoring of IFSPs.

Data regarding natural environments will be obtained through the Birth to Three ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities such as surveys of families, child care professionals, service providers, and focus groups. If the data identifies geographic areas where there are limited or no options for support and services in the natural environment, the Quality Management Coordinator will work to develop new providers and partnerships within the identified communities. If the data identifies a service provider group unable to provide services or support in a natural environment, additional training and technical assistance will be delivered by a team from the Birth to Three office.

The State Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC) will assist in building capacity within communities through its Transdisciplinary Committee, Building Capacity in Natural Environments Committee, and local children's advocacy groups. The State ICC will advise and assist on improving community linkages by including members such as Early Head Start, Head Start, the Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP), the child care community, libraries, playgroups, and the faith community who focus on services to all young children. The State ICC will advise and assist on financial barriers to providing services within natural

environments, including barriers with private and public health insurance. In addition, the State ICC will assist in providing training to family service providers and early care and education providers, including child care professionals, on family-centered practices, early intervention services and natural environments.

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