

Embedding Therapy into Early Childhood Settings: What does this mean? How do we do it? Whose responsibility is it?

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As inclusion of all children into mainstream Early Childhood programs has become the norm, there is a multitude of external therapists and other consultants who are available to support the child's program within early childhood services. One of the principles of this consultation is that they "Embed" therapy into the existing program.

Children learn best when provided with multiple opportunities to practice developmentally appropriate and functional skills in real life settings. The key to promoting the acquisition of such skills by children with developmental disabilities lies in what happens to children in the times and settings when the specialist Early Childhood Intervention staff are *not* there, i.e. In the family home and in the early childhood services that the child attends. The older clinical service model is being replaced by a natural learning environments approach, in which specialists seek to identify and utilise natural learning opportunities that occur in the course of children's everyday home and community routines. (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2003). (Moore, T. 2008)

- *'The essential features of the environment that influence children's development are their relationships with the important people in their lives – beginning with their parents and other family members, and extending outward to include child care providers, teachers, and coaches – within the places to which they are exposed – from playgrounds to libraries to schools to soccer leagues.'* (Shonkoff and colleagues. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004)

There is solid research evidence that children with disabilities enrolled into mainstream settings make at least as much developmental progress as they do in non-inclusive settings. There is also evidence that children who are enrolled in mainstream settings actually have greater progress in the areas of social competence and communication. There is some limited evidence to suggest that inclusion does not impede learning for typically developing children.

What do we mean by natural environments?

- **"Natural Learning Environments** are everyday family and community activity settings providing children learning experiences and opportunities strengthening and promoting child competence and development." **Carl Dunst**

The practice of embedding therapy by the ECI workers into mainstream settings:

The principle is for the ECI worker to attend the service, and both observe and ask questions about any challenges that the staff may be having including the child. A simple example of this is if the child has Cerebral Palsy Quadriplegia, then the therapist may offer advice on lifting, toileting or use of

supportive equipment that allows the child to participate in the program with the other children. The therapist may also organise some adaptive equipment to provide maximum opportunities for the child to participate, play and learn. The ECI worker is available for visits to the service and for phone or email consults to follow up with any questions directly relating to the child and his participation in the early education program.

Perhaps if we look at the contrast of the 1970s model of consultation, and how the ECIS worker would work today, we can see the model of embedding intervention in practice and how much more relevant and useful it is for both the child and the early childhood staff.

	Previous Model	Embedding Model
Child with CP	<p>ECI worker gives a list of activities that should be completed by staff during the session time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take child out of chair and stretch his leg muscles • ECI worker takes child into the office to do a series of exercises 	<p>ECI worker observes the session in conjunction with the services staff, then may give suggestions for adding to activities for all children that will enhance the functioning of the child with a disability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive equipment provided so that the child can join in the sand pit and stretch his leg muscles at the same time • ECI worker looks at the program, and adds ideas as to how the child could join in, and how to incorporate his exercises into the games that all the children are playing. • The workers together adapt an obstacle course so that all the children can participate
Child with sensory issues	<p>ECI worker gives a list of activities that should be completed by staff during the session time:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Apply deep pressure to the child's joints 2. Take child into separate room and use a brushing or pressure technique for periods during the day. 	<p>ECI worker gives suggestions for adding to activities for all children that will enhance the functioning of the child with a disability. E.G.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. starting the day with deep pressure into the joints by digging in the sand pit 2. utilising the swing as a calming activity 3. ideas for songs that incorporate sensory feedback 4. obstacle course that all children can join that includes a variety of

		<p>sensory experiences</p> <p>5. Get children to carry their own back packs to add some deep pressure into their joints.</p>
<p>Child with a communication delay</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECI worker comes regularly to work with the child one on one in the room or the hall • ECI worker gives a list of activities that the staff should conduct on a daily basis • ECI worker brings special games that the child should play at the service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECI worker consults with the staff on where the main challenges within the program are being found • ECI worker adds strategies into the program that are achievable and helpful to all staff and children. Such as the introduction of a simple augmentative communication system like Board maker • ECI worker utilises the existing toys and equipment, and adds ideas for games that would enhance communication. EG putting a tea set into the water play to encourage social interaction and language. • ECI worker supports the ideas of the staff in the room to support communication

This model of embedding therapy and intervention into everyday routines and everyday environments has several major benefits:

- ❖ Instead of 1 hour therapy a week, the child has therapy goals and activities within every waking hour of every day.
- ❖ Children's service staff feels that the programs are achievable and relevant to them. They work with the children more often as it is meaningful to them and part of everyday activities.
- ❖ Staff feels more empowered to take on ideas as they have genuine input into the programs. They often feel happy to show others ideas of how to enhance the child's development.
- ❖ There is more consistency of approach with the child as everyone is using the same ideas. I.e. Parents, grandparents, aunts, neighbours, kindergarten teachers and child care workers. Everyone is using the same words or signs or lifting techniques

Activities should be Fun.

Embedding therapy into an Early Childhood program should be fun. Activities should be part of play, and part of a play based curriculum.

"If it is not play, it doesn't stay" (Ann Slater, Inclusion, is it child's play? 2010)

The role of the early Childhood Intervention worker is to provide parents and the child's other caregivers with information and assistance to help to make it possible to learn in everyday environments. Professionals should use their specialised knowledge and techniques to help the family and children's services staff support the child's learning. By using naturally occurring learning opportunities, the skills and behaviours being supported are functional and meaningful for the child and the family. (Spiker, Hebbeler and Mallik 2005)

Summary:

We know that just "being there" in a mainstream setting is simply not enough for a child with a disability. For inclusion of all children to be meaningful, we must aim for full participation of all children in the activities of the service. It is a vital partnership between the early childhood educators, the parents and the ECIS visiting staff to ensure that there are strategies in place to support the genuine participation of all children into a quality program.

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