



Information for Parents

Early Intervention

A Primer for Parents of Premies

What is Early Intervention?

Early Intervention (EI) is a state-funded program that provides services for young children (birth through age 3) and their families to identify and help with delays in development as soon as possible. Services may include physical and occupational therapy; speech therapy; developmental education; social work; nurse; hearing and vision screening; and feeding support.

How Do I Sign My Child Up?

Before your baby is discharged from the hospital, the NICU staff will make a referral to your community Early Intervention Program. If the NICU staff does not make this referral, we suggest that you consult your pediatrician to see if a referral is appropriate. Although you can refer yourself, it is a good idea to get the guidance of your pediatrician as he or she may have a relationship with a specific agency. It often takes a few weeks before they have available time for an "evaluation" to determine the services that your child will need (if any).

How Does Early Intervention Work?

After you schedule your initial appointment, a team of specialists will come to your home to evaluate your child and talk with you about his/her developmental needs. The team may consist of a physical and/or occupational therapist; a speech therapist; a nurse; an educator; and a social worker. Together, they will assess your child using standardized testing techniques, observation, and physical evaluation. For an infant, they may look at muscle tone; facial expressions/response; movement; and other visual signs. They will also talk to you in depth about your child's NICU stay and health history.

From this evaluation, the team will often give you immediate verbal feedback on what (if any) services your child will qualify for and how often. A detailed plan, called an IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan) outlining goals, will be developed, and a dedicated team will be assigned to work with your child. The evaluation process should take less than 30 business days and it may take a few weeks beyond that for treatment to start.

Once a team has been assigned, home visits or visits at another location will be arranged at a convenient time for you and your child. Typically, you will have the same therapist(s) each time. Frequency can range from several sessions a week, to one or two sessions each month, depending on your child's needs. Sessions usually last from 45 minutes to an hour.



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What Do Therapists Actually Do During a Session?

The Early Intervention staff may use different techniques to work on specific areas of development outlined in your family plan (IFSP). They may use developmental play, do strengthening or stretching exercises, or show you how to use a specific toy to achieve a developmental response.

In many cases, the therapists work closely with the parents, teaching them techniques and skills to help their own child continue to develop and achieve developmental milestones.

How Much Does It Cost?

In Massachusetts, cost for Early Intervention services is covered by the state and private/state health insurance. There is no cost to families for this service.

Does My Premie Really Need Early Intervention?

Babies who are born prematurely (before 37 weeks gestation) are more inclined to have developmental delays. Early Intervention is free of charge, and can give you a clearer picture of whether your child needs services or not. Typically, children that are born under 32 weeks gestation with a prolonged NICU stay will qualify for EI. Other situations or risk factors also make a child eligible, such as a specific neurological or orthopedic diagnosis or if a child is at risk for developmental delay due to a genetic diagnosis.

Where can I learn more?

Here are a few helpful links with more information:

- Commonwealth of Massachusetts Early Intervention:
<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/family-health/early-intervention/family-info/>
- Family Ties of Massachusetts: This site has links for all Early Intervention offices by town/city. <http://massfamilyties.org/ei/eicity.php>

What if I still have a question or need help advocating for my child?

If you have additional questions, you can call or email BIDMC's NICU Family Cares Program:

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