The digest presents the background and reasons for early intervention with children at risk for handicaps. Early intervention is defined, and three primary reasons for intervention are cited: (1) to enhance the child's development, (2) to provide support and assistance to the family, and (3) to maximize the child's and family's benefit to society. Research on the effectiveness of intervention is briefly reviewed, and it is stated that despite research problems, qualitative and quantitative data show that early intervention increases the developmental/educational gains for the child, improves the family's functioning, and provides long-term benefits to society. Long-term cost savings are noted from three research studies. Three factors important in effective intervention are noted: intervention as early as possible; involvement of parents; and programs featuring a high degree of structure, intense services, and an individualized approach. A list of references and resources concludes the digest. (CL)
THE ARGUMENT FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

What is Early Intervention?

Early intervention means discovering that a child between birth and school age has or is at risk of having a handicapping condition or other special need that may affect his or her development and then providing services to lessen the effects of the condition. Early intervention can be remedial or preventative in nature—remediating existing developmental problems or preventing their occurrence. Early intervention may begin at any time between birth and school age; however, there are many reasons to begin as early as possible.

Why Intervene Early?

There are three primary reasons for intervening early with an exceptional child—to enhance the child’s development, to provide support and assistance to the family, and to maximize the child’s and family’s benefit to society.

Child development research has established that the rate of human learning and development is most rapid in the preschool years. Timing of intervention becomes particularly important when a child runs the risk of missing an opportunity to learn during a state of maximum readiness. If the most “teachable moments” or readiness stages are not taken advantage of, a child may have difficulty learning a particular skill at a later time.

Early intervention services have a significant impact as well for the parents and siblings of an exceptional infant or young child. The family of a young exceptional child often feels disappointment, social isolation, added economic stress, frustration, and helplessness. The compounded stress of the presence of an exceptional child may affect the families’ well-being, as well. The family of a young exceptional child often feels that early intervention may be prevented by early identification and appropriate programming.

Is Early Intervention Cost Effective?

The available data emphasize the long term cost effectiveness of early intervention. The highly specialized, comprehensive services necessary to produce the desired developmental gains are often, on a short term basis, more costly than traditional school-aged service delivery models. However, there are significant examples of long-term cost savings that result from such early intervention programs.

A longitudinal study of children who had participated in the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980) found that when schools invest about $3,000 for one year of preschool education for a child, they immediately begin to recover their investment through savings in special education services later in life. Benefits included $688 from the mother’s released time while the child attended preschool; $3,353 saved by the public schools because children with preschool education had fewer years in special education and were retained for fewer years in grades; and $10,798 in projected life-time earnings for the child.

A three year follow-up in Tennessee showed that for every dollar spent on early treatment, $7.00 in savings were realized within 36 months. This savings resulted from defer-
Are There Critical Factors That Affect the Success of Early Intervention Programs?

While there have been too few attempts to determine critical features of early intervention programs, there are three recurrent factors present in most effective programs. These include the age of the child at the time of intervention, parent involvement, and the intensity and/or the amount of structure of the program model.

1. Many studies report that the earlier the intervention the more effective. With intervention at birth, or as soon after the diagnosis of a disability as possible, the developmental gains are greatest and the likelihood of developing problems later is reduced. (Garland et al., 1981)

2. The involvement of parents in their child's treatment is also important. The data show that parents of both handicapped and gifted preschool children need the support and skills necessary to cope with their child's special needs. (Beckman-Bell, 1981)

3. Highly structured programs appear to be the most successful (White, 1984). That is, maximum benefits are reported in programs that clearly specify and frequently monitor the child's and family's behavioral objectives, precisely identify teacher behaviors and activities that are to be used in each lesson, utilize task analysis procedures, and regularly use child assessment and progress data to modify instruction. In addition to structure, the intensity of the services, particularly for severely disordered children, can significantly affect outcomes (Lovaas, 1982). Finally, individualizing instruction and services to specifically meet the children's needs also increases a program's effectiveness.

References


White, K. An Integrative Review of Early Intervention Efficacy and Research. Unpublished manuscript, Utah State University, Early Intervention Research Institute, Logan, Utah, 1984.


Resources

Available from The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091-1589 (703/620-3660).

Early Childhood Education for Handicapped Children: Programs and Curriculum. (100 abstracts). #536. $10.00.


Research on the Effectiveness of Early Childhood Education for Handicapped Children. (60 abstracts). #522. $10.00.


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