



EARLY START PROGRAM FAQS FOR PARENTS & PROVIDERS

The California Early Start FAQ has been created to answer frequently asked questions related to access and referrals, services and supports, eligibility, and transition after age 3. If you need more information about Early Start services or if you have additional questions call (800) 515-BABY or e-mail us at earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

Q1. I have concerns about my child's growth and development. Who can I contact?

A1. If you have concerns about your child's development, discuss them with your child's doctor. For more information to see if your child may benefit from early intervention or specialized education services through California's Early Start Program please see our [Reasons for Concern](#) brochure. For information regarding Early Start services, please contact the Early Start Baby Line at 800 – 515 – BABY (800-515-2229) or earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

Q2: What is the Early Start Program?

A2: The Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities was enacted in 1986 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 20; U.S.C., Section 1431 et seq.). This program is California's response to federal legislation ensuring that early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities ages birth to three years old and their families are provided in a coordinated, family-centered system of services that are available statewide.

Q3: What is Early Intervention?

A3: "Early Intervention" are services to help infants and toddlers, birth to three with disabilities or delays in their development. Early Intervention Services supports families, through education and family services, to help their children reach their potential.

Q4: What are early intervention services?

A4: Based on a child's assessed developmental needs and the families concerns and priorities as determined by each child's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team, early intervention services can include:

- Assistive technology
- Audiology
- Family training, counseling, and home visits
- Health services
- Medical services for diagnostic/evaluation purposes only

- Nursing services
- Nutrition services
- Occupational therapy
- Physical therapy
- Psychological services
- Service coordination (case management)
- Sign language and cued language services
- Social work services
- Special instruction
- Speech and language services
- Transportation and related costs
- Vision services

Q5: What is an Individualized Family Service Plan?

A5: An Individualized Family Service Plan, also known as an IFSP, is a written plan for providing early intervention services to an infant or toddler and their families who have been determined eligible for early intervention services. The IFSP addresses the infant’s or toddler’s developmental needs and the needs of the family related to meeting the developmental needs of the infant or toddler.

Q6: What is Service Coordination?

A6: “Service coordination” means assistance and services provided by a service coordinator that will act as a bridge between agencies in the community and a family in order secure needed services for a child.

Q7: What is the role of the Service Coordinator?

A7: The service coordinator’s role is to coordinate services and assist the family and child gain access to early intervention needed services identified on the child’s IFSP.

Q8: Who provides early intervention services?

A8: The Early Start Program is a multi-agency effort by the Department of Developmental Services and the California Department of Education that encourages partnerships between families and profession also, family support, and coordination of services. The statewide program is available throughout California and can be accessed through local regional centers, county offices of education or local school districts, health or social service agencies, and a network of local family resource centers (FRCs) throughout the state.

Q9: What is a regional center?

A9: Regional Centers are a statewide network of 21 community-based, non-profit agencies. These regional centers develop, purchase and manage services for individuals and their families. The Department of Developmental Services contracts and oversees each regional centers’ coordination and delivery of services for Californians with developmental delays and disabilities. There are 21 regional centers across California. Find the center that serves your area here: [Regional Center Lookup - CA Department of Developmental Services](#)

Q10: Do I have to use my insurance? If so, what happens if my insurance has a waiting list for assessments and/or treatment for my child?

A10: Services that are identified as a need on a child's Individualized Family Service Plan not covered by insurance shall be purchased or provided by the regional centers or local education agency. The services required to meet the needs of the child must be put in place as soon as possible and without delay.

Q11: Are the early intervention services free of cost?

A11: There is no cost for evaluation, assessment, service coordination and your service coordinator will provide you more information on how early start services are funded.

Q12: What is the fastest way a child can access early intervention services?

A12: Contacting a regional center directly will start the process immediately to determine a child's eligibility for Early Start Services. All of the assessments, evaluations, and if found eligible; Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) must be completed within 45 days of the initial referral, unless there is a documented exceptional family circumstance that prevents this timeline to be met.

Q13: Who can refer a child to the Early Start Program?

A13: Anyone can make a referral, including parents, medical care providers, neighbors, family members, foster parents, and day care providers. The referral can be made by contacting the local regional center or school district to request an evaluation for the infant/toddler.

Questions and Answers on Eligibility and Services

Q14: What can a parent expect after a referral is made to the Early Start Program?

A14: Within 45-days the regional center or local education area shall:

- Assign a service coordinator to assist the family through evaluation and assessment procedures.
- Parental consent for evaluation is obtained.
- Schedule and complete evaluations and assessments of the child's development.
- If an infant or toddler is eligible for early intervention services, an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) will be developed that addresses the strengths, and needs of the infant or toddler, parental concerns, and early intervention services.
- Identify early intervention services that are provided in the family home or other community settings.

Q15: Who is Eligible for California's Early Start Program?

A15: Infants and toddlers from birth to age 36 months may be eligible if they meet one of the criteria listed below:

- Have a developmental delay of at least 33% in one or more areas of cognitive, communication, social or emotional, adaptive, or physical and motor development including vision and hearing; or
- Have an established risk condition of known etiology, with a high probability of resulting in delayed development; or be considered at high risk of having a substantial developmental disability due to a combination of biomedical risk factors of which are diagnosed by qualified personnel

Q16: Is eligibility based on family income?

A16: No, eligibility is not based on family income.

Q17: What is an evaluation and who conducts Early Start evaluations/assessments?

A17: Evaluations are used by psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other professionals to determine if a child needs the supports and services available through Early Start. This evaluation will involve speaking with the parent to understand the child's needs and observe how the child completes age appropriate skills.

When a child is scheduled for an assessment, the professional responsible for conducting the assessment will describe the type of activities involved so the parent is involved in every step of the process. If the child is delayed in developing language, thinking, walking or age appropriate daily living skills he or she may be eligible for Early Start Services.

Q18: How is Early Start Eligibility Determined?

A18: There are several ways to determine an infant's and toddler's eligibility including informed clinical opinion from a medical professional, conducting an evaluation, a review of your child's history and development, gathering information from other sources including family members, other caregivers, medical providers, social workers and educators and a review of pertinent records. Also, the evaluation must be conducted in the native language of the child.

Q19: Will the child and/or parents' immigration status determine eligibility for the early start program?

A19: A child's and/or parent's immigration status does not determine eligibility for the early start program. Early Start eligibility is determined through documented evaluation and assessment.

Q20: Once the infant/toddler is found eligible for the early start program, who will decide the type of early intervention services the infant/toddler will receive?

A20: The specific early intervention services that are needed to meet the unique needs of the infant/toddler and family will be decided by the IFSP team, which includes the parent(s), the service coordinator and the person (s) who conducted the assessment. The IFSP team can also include, other family members, an advocate, a person outside of the family, a child care provider, doctor or nurse or anyone else the family feels that can provide information that would be helpful in planning for the child.

Q21: When the infant/toddler's early intervention services have been identified, how long will it take for services to begin?

A21: Regional centers and Local Education Agencies are required to arrange and provide early intervention services required by the IFSP no later than 45 days after written consent from the parent is obtained.

Q22: Where will early intervention services take place?

A22: Most services for a child are required to be provided in the family home, childcare center, local playgroup, or wherever a child is during the day. These places are referred to as natural environments.

Q23: How often will a child receive services and how will services be implemented?

A23: Services will be provided according to the services identified and agreed to by the IFSP Team.

Q24: How long will a child receive services for?

A24: Services are provided as long as the IFSP team determines there is a need for continued services based on the assessment of developmental needs of the child, until the infant and toddler is determined no longer eligible for Early Start services, or when a child turns three years old.

Q25: What can a family do while waiting to hear from the regional center:

A25: While waiting, a family can access support and resources related to early intervention through:

- [California's Department of Developmental Services Early Start Program](#)
- [California's Early Start Neighborhood](#)
 - [Early Start Central Directory](#)
 - [Early Start Resources on Family Support](#)
 - [Early Start Family Community](#)
- [Infant Development Association of California](#)
- [Zero to Three](#)

A family can also seek support by connecting with a parent who is familiar with the Early Start Program through the Family Resource Network of California or [Family Empowerment Center](#)

Q26: What is a Family Resource Center?

A26: Families of infants and toddlers can receive parent-to-parent support from Early Start Family Resource Centers. Family Resource Centers actively work in partnership with local regional centers and education agencies and help many parents, families and children get information about early intervention services and how to navigate the Early Start system. For more information about your local Family Resource Center please refer to [DDS-Family Resource Centers](#)

Questions and Answers on transition from Early Start at age 3**Q27: What happens when my child turns 3 years old?**

A27: A transition plan will be developed by a parent and the service coordinator and put in place 90 days prior to the child's third birthday. A transition plan is a plan to prepare for when a child is about to "age out" of the Early Start Program at age three.

This plan should include the steps and services needed to support a child for when they turn three years old. This plan may include steps needed to pursue special education services through a local school district, coordination of services through Lanterman Eligibility, or access services/supports through generic resources that include local community programs (i.e. Head Start, First 5, Help Me Grow, etc.), medical insurances, or privately funded services.

For information related to school district special education services, please contact your local school district or the [California's Department of Education](#).

For information relating to eligibility for Lanterman Services please refer to [Regional Center Eligibility & Services - CA Department of Developmental Services](#).

For more information about your local Family Resource Center please visit to [DDS – Family Resource Centers](#).

For more information on resources local to your community please visit [California's Early Start Central Directory](#)

Q28: If a child is not eligible to receive services through the school district, can the regional center continue to support my family?

A28: A regional center may continue providing services if the child had been determined eligible for Lanterman services.

For information related to eligibility for Lanterman Services please refer to [Regional Center Eligibility & Services - CA Department of Developmental Services](#)

For further information on Parent's Right's related to special education services through a local school district, please visit [Parents' Rights - Quality Assurance Process \(CA Dept of Education\)](#).

Q29: My child is 3 years old or will be soon, who can I call instead of a Regional Center?

A29: If you have questions please contact the Early Start Baby Line at 1-800-515-2229 or email: earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

