

Early Start Program FAQs for Parents/Guardians & Providers

The California Early Start FAQ has been created to answer common questions about early start services for children under age 3. Topics include eligibility, referrals, services, supports, and what happens after age 3. If you need more information about Early Start services or if you have additional questions, call (800) 515-BABY (2229) or e-mail us at earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

This FAQ guides you through different parts of your Early Start journey. Use the links below to navigate to each section.

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THE REFERRAL AND INTAKE PROCESS

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

A1: If you have concerns about your child's development, talk to your child's doctor. To learn more about early intervention or specialized education services through California's Early Start program, please see our [Reasons for Concern](#) brochure. You can also get more information by calling the Early Start Baby Line at 800-515-BABY (800-515-2229) or emailing earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

Q2: What is Early Intervention?

A2: "Early Intervention" is the term for services and supports to help infants and toddlers who have delays in their development or developmental disabilities. These services are meant to help eligible children learn new skills, overcome challenges, and increase success in life.

Q3: What are examples of early intervention services?

A3: 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

Q4: What is Early Start?

A4: Early Start (ES) is the name for California's early intervention program for infants and toddlers, birth to three years old, who have developmental delays or are at risk for having developmental disabilities. ES supports eligible infants and toddler and their families. ES services are available throughout California and are provided in a coordinated, family-centered system.

Q5: Who can refer a child to the Early Start?

A5: Anyone. Parents, doctors, neighbors, family members, foster parents, and day care providers can all refer a child. They can contact the local regional center or school district to request an evaluation for the baby or toddler.

Q6: What is the fastest way a child can access early intervention services?

A6: Contact your regional center. This will start the process to decide if a child is eligible for Early Start Services. The Early Start program has 45 days to complete their assessment, conduct an evaluation, determine if a child is eligible, and create the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) (when a child is eligible). A delay in meeting this timeline can only occur if there is an exceptional circumstance.

Find the regional center that serves your area by clicking this link: [Regional Center Lookup - CA Department of Developmental Services](#)

Q7: Who provides Early Start services?

A7: The Department of Developmental Services (DDS) is the state lead agency for Early Start. Early Start services are provided through local regional centers, county offices of education, local educational agencies (LEAs), health or social service agencies, and family resource centers (FRCs) throughout the state. This program encourages families and professionals to work together to coordinate services and provide support for the family.

Early Start through regional centers

Regional centers are community-based, non-profit agencies. There are 21 Regional centers throughout California. Regional centers help coordinate and pay for services for young children who have delays in their development or disabilities. The Department of Developmental Services contracts and oversees each regional center.

Early Start through local educational agencies (local school district or county office of education)

Your local educational agency provides services for children who have a solely low incidence condition. This means that the child does not have a developmental delay or a developmental disability, but they have vision, hearing, or severe orthopedic impairment.

Q8: What is an Individualized Family Service Plan?

A8: The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is a written document and plan for early intervention services. This plan is developed with the family to address their priorities, concerns, and the child's developmental needs. It includes the early intervention services recommended for the infant or toddler.

Q9: What is Service Coordination and who is a service coordinator?

A9: "Service coordination" is managing the services needed by a child and their family. A service coordinator helps plan and organize the early intervention services and supports that are listed in the IFSP for a child and their family.

Q10: Are the early intervention services free?

A10: There is no charge for evaluation, assessment, or service coordination. Your service coordinator will give you more information on how Early Start services are paid for.

Q11: Do I have to use my insurance for early start services?

A11: You do not have to use your insurance for the evaluation and assessment during the intake process. However, you may need to use your insurance for ongoing therapy services. Your service coordinator can give you more information. No matter who pays, services will be provided within 45 days of signing the IFSP.

Q12: What happens if there are delays in services for my child?

A12: Services that are necessary to meet the child's needs must be provided as soon as possible, without delay. If there is a delay, the service coordinator will help to resolve the issue promptly and ensure that the child's needs are met in a timely manner.

Q13: What can a family do while waiting to hear from the regional center:

A13: Families can review information on early intervention and what to do at home with their child.

For more information, please refer to these resources:

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

A family can also get 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](#).

Q14: What is a Family Resource Center?

A14: A place where families can go to get support from other parents. Early Start Family Resource Centers work with local regional centers and education agencies to help families learn about early intervention services and how to work with the Early Start system. During the IFSP meeting, regional centers will explain the services available through Family Resource Centers. If the parent consents, they can be referred to their local center.

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



EARLY START ELIGIBILITY

Q15: What happens after a referral is made to the Early Start program?

A15: Within 45-calendar days of the referral date, the Early Start program will:

- Assign a service coordinator to help the family with the evaluation and assessment process.
- Get consent for the evaluation.
- Schedule and complete developmental evaluations and assessments of the child.
- Develop an IFSP for eligible children. The IFSP must discuss the strengths and needs of the child as well as what the parents/caregivers are concerned about. It should also include what early intervention services will be provided.
- Find early intervention services that will be provided in the family home or other community locations.

Q16: Who is Eligible for California's Early Start Program?

A16: Infants and toddlers from birth to age three may be eligible if they meet one of the criteria listed below:

- Have a delay of 25% or more in one or more areas of development. Developmental areas include cognitive, expressive communication, receptive communication, social or emotional, adaptive, or physical and motor development including vision and hearing
- Have an established risk condition with a high probability of resulting in delayed development (e.g. Down Syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, as well as other conditions)
- Be considered at high risk of having a substantial developmental disability due to a combination of biomedical risk factors that are determined by qualified personnel

This may include children who:

- Were born prematurely or had low birth weight
- Have extensive health problems or had long hospitalizations
- Had prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol
- Are showing signs of developmental delays
- Experienced significant birth trauma
- Experienced neglect or abuse
- Have limited hearing, vision or use of limbs

Q17: What is an evaluation and assessment during the intake process with an Early Start program?

A17: An evaluation looks at all areas of a child's development and helps to determine if a child is eligible for Early Start services. An assessment is the process where information is gathered about the child that will help determine what services a child needs. Additional assessments may be completed if needed, to help identify services that were not included in the evaluation process.

Q18: Who conducts Early Start evaluations?

A18: Evaluations are done by qualified experts, like psychologists, speech therapists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists. When an evaluation is scheduled, the professional will explain the activities involved. When possible, the evaluation must be completed in the language the child uses at home.

Q19: How is Early Start eligibility determined?

A19: Eligibility for Early Start services can be determined through different ways, including the opinion of a qualified professional, an evaluation, a review of the child's history and development, and information from family members, caregivers, doctors, social workers, and educators.

Q20: Is eligibility based on family income?

A20: No, eligibility is not based on family income.

Q21: Will the child or parents' immigration status determine eligibility for the early start program?

A21: No. A child's or parent's immigration status does not affect or determine eligibility for the early start program.

Q22: Are children and families who are living in motels, living in their vehicle, sharing a home with multiple families, or homeless eligible to receive early start services?

A22: Early Start services are available to all eligible children from birth to age three and their families in California, no matter where they live. Your service coordinator will work with you to set up and organize the services you need through the IFSP process. This includes deciding when and where services will happen and how they will be reviewed if needed.

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



EARLY START SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Q23: Once the infant or toddler is found eligible for the early start program, who will decide the type of early intervention services the infant or toddler will receive?

A23: The IFSP team will decide what early intervention services are needed for the child and family. The IFSP team includes the parents or guardians, service coordinator, and the person who did the assessment. The team can also include other family members, an advocate, a childcare provider, a doctor, or anyone else the family thinks can help with planning for the child.

Q24: How long will it take for the infant or toddler's early intervention services to begin?

A24: Early Start programs are required to arrange and provide early intervention services that were agreed to in the IFSP as soon as possible, no later than 45 days, after written consent from the parent/guardian is obtained.

Q25: Where will early intervention services take place?

A25: Services for an infant or toddler 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. At the request of the parent or guardian, services can also be provided through remote electronic communications. This service must also be specified and agreed upon in the child's IFSP.

Q26: What are the benefits of providing services in the natural environment?

A26: When the parent/guardian and early interventionist work together in the child's natural environment, it helps the parent/guardian to be the primary teacher, while the early interventionist acts as a coach and guide. During each session, the early interventionist encourages meaningful learning experiences during regular activities such as play or mealtime. This helps the parent/guardian use those same strategies when the early interventionist is not present. Services in the natural environment allow for learning opportunities during typical family activities and everyday routines for a child as well as the family.

Q27: How often will an infant or toddler receive services and how will services be implemented?

A27: It depends on the service needs identified and agreed to by the IFSP team. Services should be where the child often spends their time, and where other children without disabilities or delays could or are present.

Q28: How long will a child receive services?

A28: A child will receive services until the IFSP team determines there is no longer a need for services based on the developmental assessment and needs of the child. This can be until the infant and toddler is determined no longer eligible for Early Start services or when a child turns three years old. All Early Start services end when a child turns three years old.

Q29. Does Electronic Visit Verification apply to early intervention services provided to children ages 0-3 in the Early Start program?

A29: No. Services provided to children in the Early Start program are governed and funded by Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These services are not funded through the Medicaid Waiver.

Q30: How often will I meet with my service coordinator?

A30: After the initial IFSP process, the IFSP should be reviewed every three months, this can be completed virtually or in person. Every six months a meeting should be held in person, whether to review the IFSP, or for other reasons.



CONSENT PROCESS

Q31: Who is responsible for giving permission for assessments, evaluation, and early intervention services?

A31: In most cases, a biological, adoptive, or foster parent is responsible for providing permissions (or consent) for their child. However, every family is unique and a guardian, individual acting in place of the parent, or appointed surrogate may fill this role. Service coordinators can help identify who can provide consent based on each family's unique situation.

Q32: How is consent provided?

A32: Consent is always in writing. It can be provided by signing consent documents in person or via mail. Consent must be provided prior to evaluations, assessments, and starting Early Intervention services. If the consent cannot be signed in-person, it may also be provided electronically or digitally if the Early Start program ensures that appropriate safeguards are provided. These safeguards include:

- Consent is signed and dated
- It identifies and authenticates a particular person as the source of the electronic consent
- It indicates such person's approval of the information contained in the electronic consent
- Is accompanied by a statement that the person understands and agrees.¹

Q33: Do consent forms need to be completed to begin the Early Start process?

A33: Yes, written consent to evaluate/assess a child for the Early Start Program must be provided. Consent forms can be completed by a parent, legal guardian, surrogate parent, or other adult who has Educational Rights for the infant or toddler by the court. Also, when a child is found eligible, written consent is required again before starting Early Start Services.

¹ [34 C.F.R. 303.7](#)



TRANSITION FROM EARLY START BY AGE 3

Q34: What happens when my child turns 3 years old?

A34: Early Start services end when a child turns 3 years old. 90 days before a child turns 3, the parent/guardian and the service coordinator will create a transition plan to prepare for the family for when the child “ages out” of the Early Start program. This plan discusses the steps and services needed for the child as they approach their third birthday. It may include finding special education services through a local school district, determining eligibility for other services through the Regional Center, or connecting to community programs like Head Start or medical insurance. The plan is discussed in a transition meeting with the parent, service coordinator, a school district representative, and anyone else the parent/guardian want to include. Family Resource Centers can also help families understand the difference between Early Start and school services and can provide information about special education options.

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

For information relating to eligibility for services through the Regional Center 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](#)

Q35: What is a notification to the state or local education agency (SEA or LEA)?

A35: At least 90 days before a child turns three, the Early Start program must inform the SEA or LEA that the child may be eligible for special education services. The LEA could be the local school district or county office of education.

The notification must include the child's name, birthdate, where they live, and parent/guardian contact information.

This notification is required by law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which says that the lead agency must notify the SEA and LEA when a child will soon be eligible for services.

Q36: What is a referral to the local educational agency (LEA)?

A36: With the parent/guardian's permission, a referral can be made to the LEA before a child turns three years old. This referral is in addition to the notification and can help the LEA determine if the child qualifies for special education services. A referral to the LEA can include the service coordinator's details, the child's recent IFSPs, evaluations, and other important information in addition to the information in the notification.

Q37: What if I do not want my child to have an assessment through the LEA?

A37: When the LEA contacts you to start the assessment process, you can decline the assessment.

For more information on transition please refer to [Effective Early Childhood Transitions A Guide for Transition at Age Three — Early Start to Preschool](#)

Q38: If a child is not eligible to receive services through the school district, can the regional center continue to support my family?

A38: Federal guidelines require Early Start services to end at three years old. Through a different program authorized under California's Lanterman Act, the regional center will provide services if the child had been determined provisionally eligible (for children 3 and 4 years old only), or eligible for Lanterman Services.

For information on provisional eligibility for Lanterman Services please refer to: [DDS directive August 5, 2021 - Provisional Eligibility for Regional Center Services](#) and [Welfare and Institution Code section 4512\(a\)\(2\)](#)

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 \(CA Dept of Education\)](#).

Q39: My child is three years old or will be soon, who can I call instead of a Regional Center or LEA?

A39: If you have questions, please contact the Early Start Baby Line at 1-800-515-2229 or email: earlystart@dds.ca.gov.



COMPLAINTS

Q40: What do I do if I do not agree with the Early Start program's determination of eligibility or recommended services?

A40: Request a voluntary Mediation Conference.

At a Mediation Conference, someone who is impartial, called a 'mediator', helps you and the early start program reach an agreement. The mediation conference must occur within 30 days of a mediation request. You can request a voluntary mediation conference by talking to your service coordinator or by filling out the [Mediation Hearing Request form](#).

For more information about a Mediation Conference please refer to [Early Start Mediation Conference Requests : CA Department of Developmental Services](#).

Q41: What if my disagreement with the Early Start program cannot be resolved during a Mediation conference?

A41: You can talk to your service coordinator and request a Due Process Hearing by filling out the [Due Process Hearing Request \(DS 1802\)](#).

A due process hearing is where you and the early start program meet with a judge who decides if the early start program should change their decision. The due process hearing must be completed within 30 calendar days of when the Office of Administrative Hearings receives the request.

Q42: What do I do if I think that the law has not been followed regarding early intervention services?

A42: You can file a complaint by completing the [Early Start Complaint Investigation Request](#). Any individual, agency or organization may file an Early Start State Complaint. Complaints can be filed against the Department of Developmental Services, a regional center, local education agency (LEA) or any private service provider receiving Early Start funds.

More information can be found at [Early Start Complaint Process : CA Department of Developmental Services](#) or [Early Start Parent Rights Revised 2023](#).

For more information on Early Start, please refer to the [Early Start Information Packet](#).



QUESTIONS

Contact the Department of Developmental Services /
Early Childhood and Youth Services Division

Email: earlystart@dds.ca.gov

Phone: 800-515-BABY (800-515-2229)

Mailing Address: 1215 O Street, MS 7-40
Sacramento, CA 95814

Website: <https://www.dds.ca.gov/services/early-start/>

