



Supporting Our Youngest Learners: What We Know About Equity in Early Intervention

EARLY INTERVENTION IS THE KEY TO SETTING KIDS WITH DELAYS AND DISABILITIES ON A PATH TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS. YET CHILDREN OF COLOR FACE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THESE SERVICES.

WHAT ARE EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES?

Every child from birth to age 3 in the U.S. is entitled under IDEA ([IDEA Part C](#)) to support in reaching developmental milestones if they have a **developmental delay** — that is, if they are meeting milestones more slowly than expected, or if they have a diagnosed condition that has a high probability of resulting in a delay. Strong support as soon as a developmental delay is identified can have a positive ripple effect that lasts a lifetime. These services are provided not only for a child with a developmental delay, but also for the child’s **family**, ensuring that caregivers have the tools they need to create a healthy, supportive environment for the whole family.

EARLY INTERVENTION FOCUSES ON SKILLS IN THESE AREAS:

- Physical skills (reaching, crawling, walking, drawing, building)
- Cognitive skills (thinking, learning, solving problems)
- Communication skills (talking, listening, understanding others)
- Daily living or adaptive skills (eating, dressing)
- Social or emotional skills (playing, interacting with others)

EARLY INTERVENTION PROVIDES ONE OR MORE SERVICES TO A CHILD AND THEIR FAMILY, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO THE FOLLOWING:

- Special instruction
- Speech and language therapy
- Physical or occupational therapy
- Psychological services
- Nursing or nutrition services
- Hearing (audiology) or vision services
- Social work services
- Transportation
- Assistive technology

From [Understood.org](#)

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT EQUITY IN EARLY INTERVENTION?

Early intervention services set young kids with delays and disabilities and their families on the course for long-term success. Systemic racism in health and education systems and insufficient federal funding for IDEA Part C threaten access to these services. Better data can help us measure equity and, ultimately, ensure that families of color gain access to the high-quality early intervention services they deserve.

Children of color who could benefit from early intervention services often do not have enough access to them.

This inequitable access reflects the fact that early intervention services are at the nexus of health care, education, and other systems pervaded by systemic racism.

The probability of a child being identified as having a developmental delay and using early intervention services is drastically different depending on their race and ethnicity. Compared to their White peers with developmental delays,

- Black and Latino children with developmental delays are 78% less likely to have their need for early intervention services identified;
- Black children with developmental delays are 78% less likely to receive early intervention services.¹

A large, nationally representative study found that Black and White children who are eligible for early intervention services received them at the same (albeit **low**) rate of 9% at 9 months of age, but at 24 months of age, **Black children were five times less likely to receive early intervention services than White children.**² This racial disparity was particularly pronounced among children qualifying for services based on developmental delays that were difficult to detect and required observational assessment, indicating that there are racial inequities in timely access to **screening**, attention to potential developmental concerns, and resources within health and education systems.

A large, nationally representative study that followed young children from the time they entered early intervention services as infants and toddlers until kindergarten completion found that **families of color had more challenges and negative experiences when entering into early intervention services**, including difficulty in finding out about existing services and initiating service delivery, and feeling that their concerns were being ignored by professionals and/or that professionals didn't respect their cultural background and values.³

Federal funding for IDEA is far too low: Congress has always vastly underfunded these critical services. Early intervention services are part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). When Congress passed IDEA, it pledged to provide 40% of the extra money needed to provide special education services such as early intervention services; state and local funding was supposed to cover the rest. However, Congress has yet to fund its promised share of the cost. Federal funding covers only about 15% of this cost, even though the number of children receiving services under IDEA has increased by 25% in the past two decades.



EARLY INTERVENTION: Key Components & Opportunities for Equity

SCREENING

What is it?

The first step in assessing developmental delays, typically conducted at regular pediatric visits and sometimes in early childhood education settings. Under the Child Find law, states are required to locate and identify any child who may be eligible for early intervention services.

How is it inequitable?

Children of color often have less access to programs in which specialists are trained to use screening tools, such as high-quality health care and early childhood education programs, resulting in fewer screening opportunities.

EVALUATION

What is it?

A process to establish whether a child is eligible for early intervention services under the IDEA Part C law.



How is it inequitable?

Children of color living in low-income neighborhoods are less likely to receive evaluations, due to limited access to developmental screenings; and when they are screened and referred for evaluation, they are less likely to be tested. This could be due, in part, to the limited supply of evaluators in their areas, though more research is required to determine all contributing factors.

EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES

What are they?

Services for families to support children in developing physical, cognitive, communication, social/emotional, and daily living skills.

How are they inequitable?

Children of color who are eligible for services are less likely to receive them and more likely to face challenges while receiving them. This is due to a variety of factors, including insufficient outreach and a lack of culturally competent services.

Source: See endnote for list of sources for this graphic.⁴

Incorporating **cultural and linguistic competency** into evaluation processes, including assessment tools and clinical observation and judgment, is critical to minimizing racial and cultural bias and promoting equity in early intervention and other special education services. Developing a racially, culturally, and linguistically **diverse early intervention workforce** that reflects the diversity of the early childhood population and antiracist and culturally competent, ongoing **professional development** that includes family engagement approaches are also key. These strategies are needed to ensure that children who would benefit from services receive them, and to avoid inappropriate identification, placement, and instructional and disciplinary practices.⁵



ENDNOTES

1. Dawn M. Magnusson, Cynthia S. Minkovitz, Karen A. Kuhlthau, Tania M. Caballero, and Kamila B. Mistry, "Beliefs Regarding Development and Early Intervention Among Low-Income African American and Hispanic Mothers," *Pediatrics* 140 (5): e20172059 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-2059>; Dawn M. Magnusson, Mari Palta, Beth McManus, Ruth E. Benedict, and Maureen S. Durkin, "Capturing Unmet Therapy Need Among Young Children With Developmental Delay Using National Survey Data," *Academy of Pediatrics* 16 (2): 145-53 (2015), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26183004/>; Emily Feinberg, Michael Silverstein, Sara Donahue, and Robin Bliss, "The Impact of Race on Participation in Part C Early Intervention Services," *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics: JDBP* 32, no. 4 (May 2011): 284-291, <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0b013e3182142fbd>.
2. Emily Feinberg et al., "The Impact of Race on Participation in Part C Early Intervention Services," 284-291, <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0b013e3182142fbd>.
3. Deneen L. Evans, Marvin D. Feit, and Theresa Trent (2016). "African American parents and attitudes about child disability and early intervention services," *Journal of Social Service Research*, 42(1), 96-112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2015.1081118>; Donald B. Bailey, Jr., and Anita Scarborough. (2003). National early intervention longitudinal study: Families' first experiences with early intervention. (Executive Summary). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina.
4. Advocates for Children of New York and Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, "Early Inequities: How Underfunding Early Intervention Leaves Low-Income Children of Color Behind," December 2019, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cccnewyork.org/2020/12/EI-Report-FINAL-12-4-19.pdf>; Erin E. Barton., Bryn Harris, and Nancy Leech, "Autism Identification Policies and Practices in Early Childhood: A Preliminary Investigation from One State," *Infants and Young Children*, 29, no. 4 (2016): 267-89, <https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.000000000000076>; Deneen L. Evans, Marvin D. Feit, and Theresa Trent, "African American parents and attitudes about child disability and early intervention services," *Journal of Social Service Research*, 42, no. 1 (2016): 96-112, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-01561-008>; Emily Feinberg et al., "The impact of race on participation in part C early intervention services," *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 32, no. 4 (2011): 284-291, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3138901/>; James P. Guevara et al., "Effectiveness of Developmental Screening in an Urban Setting," *Pediatrics*, 131, no. 1 (January 2013):30-37; <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0765>; James P. Guevara et al., "Patient navigation to facilitate early intervention referral completion among poor urban children," *Families, Systems, and Health*, 34, no. 3 (2016): 281-286, <https://content.apa.org/record/2016-37831-001>; Ashley H. Hirai et al., "Prevalence and Variation of Developmental Screening and Surveillance in Early Childhood," *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172 no. 9 (2018): 857-66, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.1524>; Manuel E. Jimenez et al., "Barriers to evaluation for early intervention services: Parent and early intervention employee perspectives," *Academic Pediatrics*, 12 no. 6 (2012): 551-557, [https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/article/S1876-2859\(12\)00205-7/fulltext](https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/article/S1876-2859(12)00205-7/fulltext); Dawn Magnusson et al., "Capturing unmet therapy need among young children with developmental delay using national survey data," *Academic Pediatrics*, 16, no. 2 (2016): 145-153, [https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/article/S1876-2859\(15\)00171-0/abstract](https://www.academicpedsjnl.net/article/S1876-2859(15)00171-0/abstract); David S. Mandell et al., "Racial/ethnic disparities in the identification of children with autism spectrum disorders," *American Journal of Public Health*, 99, no. 3 (2009): 492-498, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19106426/>; Beth M. McManus et al., "Child characteristics and early intervention referral and receipt of services: A retrospective cohort study," *BMC Pediatrics*, 20 (2020), <https://bmcpediatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12887-020-1965-x>.
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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON EQUITY IN EARLY INTERVENTION, READ THE [FULL REPORT](#).

