
Early support for a child with disabilities

Summary

- Early intervention means giving children diagnosed with a disability the support they need as early as possible.
 - The Victorian Government's early childhood intervention services (ECIS) provide support to children with disabilities or developmental delay from birth until they start school.
 - The Australian Government funds early intervention services through the Better Start for Children with Disability and Helping Children with Autism initiatives.
 - Although early intervention will give your child the best chance to progress quicker, it is never too late to start to change things.
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For children diagnosed with a disability, getting the support they need as early as possible will give them the best chance of minimising the long-term effects of the disability.

Early intervention

'Early intervention' simply means doing things as early as possible in order to achieve the best result. In a health or developmental sense, it means getting your child the support they need as soon as possible to help them live the fullest life they can.

Research shows that early intervention is the most effective way to help the development of children with disabilities.

In a child's first three years of life, the experiences and relationships they have heavily influence their brain development. Having lots of positive learning and emotional experiences (including lots of love and attention) is especially important during this time.

Early support from healthcare professionals includes specialist therapies and services that focus on making the most of your child's strengths and building up the other aspects of their abilities.

Therapies are the programs that help your child to develop. *Services* are the places and organisations that offer these therapies. A service might provide one or a range of therapies.

The importance of having a diagnosis

Early intervention works best when it is designed specifically to meet your child's needs. For this to happen, you need to understand what your child needs. Having a formal diagnosis, if possible, is the best way to achieve this.

With a diagnosis, your child's healthcare professionals can recommend the interventions that will be the most effective. However, without a disability diagnosis, (sometimes multiple healthcare professionals cannot agree on your child's specific disability), a paediatrician might still be able to narrow down the developmental delay to a particular area such as speech or mobility. This will help in working out which early interventions will best target your child's delays.

Types of early intervention

Many children with a disability can benefit from some type of early therapy. For example:

- **Occupational therapy** can help with motor skills such as playing, dressing and going to the toilet.
- **Physiotherapy** can help with balance, sitting, rolling, crawling and walking.
- **Speech therapy** can help with speech and language, as well as eating and drinking skills.

Early intervention often combines specialist support and therapies. Sometimes these will be provided at a community health centre, hospital or specialist disability service. In some cases a therapist might be able to visit

your child at home.

Depending on where you live, your child's age and your child's type of disability, you might end up using a mix of government-funded early intervention services, community service organisations and private therapists.

There are also early intervention therapies that provide specialised support for specific disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment and vision impairment.

Assessing your child's progress

When thinking about early intervention, consider the following:

- Therapies work best when they truly engage your child – it is not just about the quantity of hours spent doing therapy, but the quality of those hours.
- No single therapy program will be right for every child with a particular disability or their family.
- If you find one therapy is not right or not working, try another. Remember, many therapies take time to make a difference. Gains that might seem small at first, add up.
- Regular assessments can give you a clear indication of your child's progress.
- Local, state and federal government support is available to help pay for early intervention services.

Although early intervention will give your child the best chance to progress, it is never too late to start to change things. Brain development goes on into early adulthood, so even if your child is not diagnosed until they start school, it is not too late to make a real difference in your child's development.

Government early intervention services and programs

Both the Victorian and Australian Governments provide programs and services specifically to help children with a disability.

Early childhood intervention services

The Victorian Government's Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) provide support to children with a disability or developmental delay from birth until they start school. They provide special education, therapy, counselling and service coordination to help children to go to childcare, kindergarten and maternal and child health services.

ECIS aim to give parents and families the knowledge, skills and support to meet their child's needs and to optimise their child's development and ability to participate in family and community life.

The range of ECIS services include:

- information and advice
- supporting families to help their child's development
- linking families to services and providing access and coordination of services such as respite
- education and developmental programs
- additional support to improve access and participation in kindergarten and childcare services
- helping with the move to school
- parent support
- flexible support packages to ease some of the extra pressures on parents of children with disabilities and developmental delays who have high support needs (such as children with autism).

To access ECIS, you need to complete an application form, which is available on the **[Victorian Department of Education and Training website](#)**.

ECIS will fall under the National Disability Insurance Scheme and will transfer to it over the three-year roll out period from 2016 to 2019.

Autism early intervention services

The Australian Government funds early intervention services through both the **[Better Start for Children with Disability](#)** (Better Start) initiative and the **[Helping Children with Autism \(HCWA\) program](#)**.

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Other services include the **Victorian Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre** which provides an individually tailored and evidence based intervention to address early developmental and educational needs of young children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within a naturalistic and inclusive group environment.

Better Start Program

Your child is eligible for funding under the Better Start Program if they are under six years old and diagnosed with one of the following disabilities:

- **Angelman syndrome**
- **cerebral palsy**
- CHARGE syndrome
- Cornelia de Lange syndrome
- **Cri du Chat syndrome**
- **Down syndrome**
- **Fragile X syndrome**
- **Kabuki syndrome**
- microcephaly
- **moderate or greater vision or hearing impairments, including deafblindness**
- **Prader Willi syndrome**
- Rett's disorder
- Smith-Magenis syndrome
- **Williams syndrome.**

Children who are eligible must register for **Better Start** before they turn six years old. A child will have until they turn seven years to access funding.

Children who are eligible can get up to \$12,000 (maximum \$6,000 per year) to pay for early intervention services.

Families living in outer regional or remote areas may be eligible for an extra one-off payment of \$2,000.

For more information about how to register your child with Better Start, call the Better Start Helpline on 1800 778 581.

Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) program

Parents of children with autism can access autism Medicare services if they have not already accessed services under the Better Start for Children with Disability initiative and if they meet the requirements of each service.

Autism Medicare items are available for:

- assessment
- diagnosis
- creation of a treatment and management plan by a consultant paediatrician or a psychiatrist for a child aged under 13 years.

For further information visit health.gov.au.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your paediatrician
- Medicare
- Your local Carers Association, call **1800 242 636**
- **Raising children network - children with ASD**

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