



EARLY START PROGRAM FAQS FOR PARENTS & 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.

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

A1. If you have concerns about your child's development, discuss them with your child's doctor. To learn 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 more 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: California's Early Start Program was enacted in 1986 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Early Start is California's response to this federal legislation. The purpose is to ensure that early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities up to age 3 and their families are provided in a coordinated, family-centered system of services.

Q3: What is Early Intervention?

A3: "Early Intervention" are services and supports to help infants and toddlers, birth to three years old with disabilities or delays in their development. These services are intended to help eligible children learn new skills, overcome challenges, and increase success in life.

Q4: What are early intervention services?

A4: Each child has an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) that is based on a child's assessed developmental needs and the families concerns and priorities. 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 is the document developed with the family to address their priorities, concerns, and the infant’s or toddler’s developmental needs.

Q6: What is Service Coordination and what is their role?

A6: “Service coordination” means assistance provided by a service coordinator whose role it is to coordinate and advocate for services and supports that help the family and child gain access to early intervention services identified on the child’s IFSP.

Q7: Who provides early intervention services?

A7: The Early Start program is available throughout California and can be accessed through local regional centers, county offices of education, local educational agencies (LEAs), health or social service agencies, and a network of local family resource centers (FRCs) throughout the state. The Early Start Program is an effort by the Department of Developmental Services and the California Department of Education that encourages partnerships between families and professionals, family support, and coordination of services.

Q8: What is a regional center?

A8: Regional Centers are a statewide network of 21 community-based, non-profit agencies. These regional centers help develop, pay for, and manage services for young children who have delays in their development. The Department of Developmental Services contracts and oversees each regional centers’ coordination and delivery of services for Californians with developmental delays and disabilities.

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

Q09: Do I have to use my insurance for early start services?

A09: Services that are identified as a need through a child’s Individualized Family Service Plan not covered by insurance shall be purchased or provided by the regional centers or local education agency.

Q10: What happens if my insurance has a waiting list for assessments and/or treatment for my child?

A10: Services that are 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?

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

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

A12: Contacting a regional center will start the process to determine a child's eligibility for Early Start Services. Assessments, evaluation, eligibility determination, and the Individualized Family Service Plan (for eligible children) must be completed within 45 days unless there is an exceptional circumstance that causes delay in meeting this timeline.

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. A 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-calendar days of the referral date, the regional center or local education agency will:

- Assign a service coordinator to help the family with evaluation and assessment procedures
- Obtain parental consent for the evaluation
- Schedule and complete evaluations and assessments of the child's development
- Develop an IFSP for eligible children. The IFSP must address the strengths and needs of the child as well as parental concerns and early intervention services to be provided
- Identify early intervention services that are provided in the family home or other community settings.

Q15: Who is responsible to provide consent for assessments, evaluation, and early intervention services?

A15: Often, a parent is the person responsible to provide consent for their infant or toddler. A parent is often a natural or adoptive parent. In instances where there is no natural or adoptive parent attempting to act as the parent, regional centers and/or LEAs must make reasonable efforts to locate and engage parents in the Early Start intake process. However, in instances where parents are unavailable educational rights may be assigned to another responsible adult, including a guardian; a person acting in place of a parent (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the infant or toddler lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the infant or toddler's welfare); a foster parent, or a surrogate parent. In this instance, they may provide consent for assessments, evaluation, and early intervention.

Q16: What if the child being referred to Early Start is a dependent of the court or the parent cannot be located?

A16: Regional centers, county child welfare agencies and the Courts must work collaboratively to ensure that potentially eligible infants and toddlers who are dependents of the court and their families receive timely Early Start services.

- Regional centers and LEAs (for infants and toddlers with a Solely Low Incidence

disability¹) must contact the infant or toddler's social worker to determine the holder of Educational Rights. If a parent has educational rights but is not available or does not respond when the RC/LEA tries to contact them, then the regional center must work with the county child welfare social worker to assign a surrogate².

Q17: What is a surrogate parent?

A17: A surrogate parent is an adult appointed by an RC or LEA to represent a infant or toddler when no parent can be identified, his/her whereabouts are unknown, or the infant or toddler is a dependent of the court.

Q18: How is a surrogate parent assigned?

A18: RCs and LEAs may assign an individual to act as a surrogate parent if:

- No parent can be identified;
- the infant or toddler is a dependent of the juvenile court and the parental rights of the parent have been limited by the court or relinquished; or
- the parent cannot be located, after reasonable efforts by the RC or LEA.

RCs and LEAs are also required to have procedures for:

- Determining if an infant or toddler needs a surrogate parent;
- assigning a surrogate parent to the infant or toddler ensuring that surrogates have no interest that conflicts with the interests of the infant or toddler he or she represents;
- ensuring that surrogates have knowledge and skills that ensure adequate representation of the infant or toddler;
- ensuring that the surrogate parent is not an employee of any state agency, RC, LEA or service provider involved in the provision of early intervention services to the infant or toddler. (A person who otherwise qualifies as a surrogate parent is not an employee solely because he or she is paid by a state agency, RC or LEA to serve as a surrogate parent.)

Q19: What can a surrogate parent consent to for a child?

A19: A surrogate parent may represent an infant or toddler in all matters related to:

- The evaluation and assessment of the infant or toddler;
- development and implementation of the infant or toddler's IFSP including annual evaluations, assessments and periodic reviews;
- ongoing provision of early intervention services to the infant or toddler;
- requesting mediation or due process hearings; and,
- any other early intervention service established under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that includes parent notice and due process provisions.

Q20: What can't a surrogate parent consent to for a child?

A20: A surrogate parent may not provide consent for medical services for which consent by a parent, legal guardian or the Court is required.

Q21: Do consent forms need to be completed to begin the Early Start process?

A21: Yes, written consent to evaluate/assess a child for the Early Start Program must be provided by a parent, legal guardian, surrogate parent or other adult assigned Educational

¹ [Title 17 CCR §52000](#)

² Title 17, CCR §52175

Rights for the infant or toddler by the court. Also, when a child is found eligible, written consent is required again prior to starting Early Start Services.

Q22: How is consent provided?

A22: Consent can be provided by signing consent documents in person or via mail as long as consent is provided prior to evaluations, assessments, and the provision of Early Intervention services. Consent may also be provided electronically or digitally if the consent cannot be signed in-person as long as the Regional Center/LEA ensures that appropriate safeguards are provided. These safeguards include:

- 1) is signed and dated;
- 2) identifies and authenticates a particular person as the source of the electronic consent;
- 3) indicates such person's approval of the information contained in the electronic consent;
and
- 4) is accompanied by a statement that the person understands and agrees.³

Q23: Who is Eligible for California's Early Start Program?

A23: 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 25% in one or more areas of cognitive, expressive communication, receptive 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

This may include children who:

- Were born prematurely or had low birth weight
- Have extensive medical issues or have been hospitalized for a long period of time
- Have chromosomal conditions such as Down Syndrome, Rett Syndrome and others
- 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

Q24: Is eligibility based on family income?

A24: No, eligibility is not based on family income.

Q25: What is an evaluation and who conducts Early Start evaluations/assessments?

A25: Evaluations are done by psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other professionals to determine if a child has delays in development and need the supports and services available through the Early Start program. This evaluation will involve speaking with the parent to understand the child's needs and observation of 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. If the child is delayed in developing

³ [34 C.F.R. 303.7](#)

language, following simple directions, interacting with others, walking or age appropriate skills he or she may be eligible for Early Start Services

Q26: How is Early Start eligibility determined?

A26: There are several ways to determine an infant's and toddler's eligibility including informed clinical opinion from a qualified 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.

Q27: Will the child or parents' immigration status determine eligibility for the early start program?

A27: No. A child's or parent's immigration status does not determine eligibility for the early start program.

Q28: 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?

A28: Early start services are available to all eligible children from birth up to age three and their families in California regardless of living situation. Your service coordinator will arrange and coordinate the delivery of all needed services with you through the IFSP process. This process will include identifying when/where services will take place and how services are reviewed when needed.

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

Q29: 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?

A29: 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 that includes the parent(s) or guardian(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.

Q30: How long will it take for the infant or toddler's early intervention services to begin?

A30: Regional centers and local education agencies are required to arrange and provide early intervention services agreed upon in the IFSP no later than 45 days after written consent from the parent is obtained.

Q31: Where will early intervention services take place?

A31: 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. At the request of the parent or caregiver, services can also be provided through remote electronic communications. This service must also be specified and agreed upon in the child's IFSP.

Q32: What are the benefits of providing services in the natural environment?

A32: The collaboration of the parent/caregiver and early interventionist in the child's natural

environment enables the parent/caregiver to serve as the primary teacher, while the early interventionist serves as a coach and guide. During each session, the early interventionist fosters meaningful learning experiences during regular activities such as play or mealtime, which empowers the parent to utilize those same strategies to enhance learning while the early interventionist is not present. One of the primary benefits are learning opportunities during typical family activities and everyday routines for a child as well as the family.

Q33: How often will a child receive services and how will services be implemented?

A33: Services will be provided according to the service needs identified and agreed to by the IFSP team. Also, the IFSP and services provided should be reviewed at least every six months, or more frequently when needed or when requested by the family.

Q34: How long will a child receive services?

A34: Services are provided as long as the IFSP team determines there is a need for 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.

Q35. Does Electronic Visit Verification apply to early intervention services provided to children ages 0-3 in the Early Start program?

A35. 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.

Q36: What can a family do while waiting to hear from the regional center:

A36: Families are encouraged to review information on early intervention and how to engage with their child available in 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](#)

Q37: What is a Family Resource Center?

A37: 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 parents, families and children get information about early intervention services and how to navigate the Early Start system. Regional Centers will discuss services that may be available through a Family Resource Center at the IFSP meeting and, with parental consent, make a referral.

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

Q38: What happens when my child turns 3 years old?

A38: A transition plan will be developed by the parent and the service coordinator and is 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 outlines 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, determination of eligibility for Lanterman Act services, 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. These steps are discussed in a transition conference, which is a meeting that includes the parent, the service coordinator, a representative from the school district (including staff who have knowledge of dual language learners’ needs), and anyone else the parents would like to invite.

Additionally, Family Resource Centers are also responsible to review the timeline, differences between Early Start Services and Education Services, and information on Special Education classes through the local school district with Early Start families.

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](#)

Q39: Who notifies the local school district that my child is leaving Early Start services at age 3?

A39: Not fewer than 90 days before the child’s third birthday, the regional center or local education Part C agency must notify the state education agency (SEA) or local education agency (LEA) that your child may potentially be eligible for special education services. The LEA could also be your local school district or county office of education.

The notification must include: the child’s name, date of birth, the LEA in which the child resides, and the contact information of the parent(s). It may also include the service coordinator’s name and contact information. With parental consent, additional identifying information, recent IFSPs, evaluations/assessments, and other pertinent information can be included.

This notification is required in accordance with IDEA, which states “...the lead agency notifies the SEA and the LEA for the area in which the toddler resides that the toddler on his or her third birthday will reach the age of eligibility for services under Part B of the Act, as determined in accordance with state law.”

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

Q40: If a child is not eligible to receive services through the school district, can the regional center continue to support my family?

A40: 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 \(CA Dept of Education\)](#).

Q41: My child is 3 years old or will be soon, who can I call instead of a Regional Center?

A41: If you have questions please contact the Early Start Baby Line at 1-800-515-2229 or email: earlystart@dds.ca.gov.

