

Golden Gate Regional Center

Background for Natural Environments

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the federal regulations for Part C of the Early Intervention Act have, since their inception in 1989, held that early intervention take place in settings where children without disabilities participate. Then, in 1991, in amendments to IDEA, Part C, Congress added “natural environments” as part of the definition of early intervention services and required natural environments as part the Individual Family Services Plan (IFSP). **In 2011, Part C defined *Natural environments* (§303.26) as "settings that are natural or typical for a same-aged infant or toddler without a disability, may include the home or community settings, and must be consistent with the provisions of §303.126" (Early intervention services in natural environments).** Natural Environments reflects the core mission of early intervention. It offers learning opportunities for infants, toddlers, and their families within the activities, routines, relationships, places, and events of everyday life. Natural Environments has *features* of inclusion indicative of high quality early childhood programs and services: access, participation, and supports that enable children to fully participate (NAEYC Inclusion Statement). The natural environments philosophy and mandate is the mission practice of The Golden Gate Regional Center (GGRC). Additionally, it is the strategic plan focus to offer services to support individuals with developmental disabilities to belong, contribute, and thrive in their home communities with appropriate supports. Finally, Natural Environments is supported by National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) several other professional organization.

References: *Growing Up Naturally*. 2002. North Carolina Chapel Hill. *Implementation Guide to Natural Environments*. November 2003. State Interagency Coordinating Council. *Early On Michigan. Part C of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. July 2011. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). *Position Paper on the Provision of Early Intervention Services in Accordance with Federal Requirements on Natural Environments*. April 2000. IDEA Infant and Toddlers Coordinators Association. *Mission and Key Principles for Providing Early Intervention Services in the Natural Environments*. March 2008. Office of Special Education (OSEP TA Community Practice. *Early Childhood Inclusion: A Summary*. April 2009. National Association Education of Young Children and Division for Early Childhood (DEC). California Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention. *Early Start Personnel Manual* November 2010.

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Natural Environments and Learning Opportunities Policy

GGRC embraces the natural environments philosophy and IDEA Part C mandates regarding natural environments. Early Intervention is relationship-based and relationship dependent. GGRC will work together as an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) Team to facilitate relationships between the infant/toddler and their caregiver as a means of promoting and supporting development. GGRC is committed to:

- Providing evaluation and assessment, IFSP development, and service delivery recommendations that support natural learning opportunities within the child's routine, relationships, activities, and settings.
- Engaging parents and family members as their child's first teacher and advocate.
- Supporting families in a culturally sensitive manner/approach in their daily routines and relationships as they nurture their child's development.
- Raising awareness regarding efforts to support infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities to be fully included in natural learning opportunities (home, community, and other settings) with same aged peers without developmental delays.
- Implementing the natural environments mandate and promoting programs embedded in home and community settings.

Natural Environments and Learning Opportunities Policy Components

- The GGRC staff and providers will evaluate and assess infants and toddlers within their natural routines, relationships, activities, and settings whenever possible.
- Through the IFSP process with parents, the IFSP Team will consider natural learning opportunities and the environments in which they occur.
- GGRC will prioritize vendorization of programs and individuals that are designed to serve infants and toddlers within the context of everyday routines, relationships, activities, and settings.
- Service providers who do not offer natural learning opportunities in natural environments will receive referrals when the child's needs cannot be best met in a natural environment.
- Family functional goals and activities will be developed in partnership with caregivers to ensure they are active participants in early intervention services.

Assessments that support natural learning opportunities (natural places and play)

- A family-centered comprehensive strength-based evaluation and assessment will include opportunities to observe/evaluate the child in his/her everyday routines, relationships, activities, and/or places.
- Family-centered assessments will be linked with family and child outcomes which lead to activities that a caregiver could carry over in everyday places, activities, and routines.

IFSP Development, Family Outcomes, and Service Provision

- The IFSP Team will develop functional outcomes which support infants and toddlers being served in the everyday places, activities, relationships, and routines of their typical same-aged peers, to the extent possible.
- Services will support functional outcomes and will assist the primary caregiver with carrying over activities in daily routines and activities.

Community Awareness and Resource Development

GGRC will make a concerted effort to develop resources that support natural learning opportunities in everyday routines, relationships, activities, and places.