



Family-Centered Early Intervention

Sources: Dunst, C.J. (2000). Revisiting "Rethinking early intervention". *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20(2), 95-104.

Bruder, M.B. (2000). Family-centered early intervention: Clarifying our values for the new millennium. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20(2), 105-115, 122.

Early intervention services can be very valuable for young children who are showing signs of mental health problems. These two articles, part of a special early intervention issue of *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, discuss the importance and effectiveness of delivering family-centered early intervention services designed for the specific needs of each individual child and his or her family. Dunst presents a theoretical framework from which family-centered early intervention can be studied and developed, while Bruder puts forth a call to action for the implementation of family-centered early intervention.

Dunst:

This article revisits a 15-year old concept of social support and the social systems approach to early intervention services that has guided practice and research and led to the development of models of early intervention and family support services. Revisiting these concepts has led to a third generation model incorporating new knowledge into the framework that is currently being used to study family-centered early intervention practices.

One concept is *Proactive Empowerment through Partnerships* (PEP), a set of principles used to guide beliefs for working with families. While the PEP framework has undergone some changes since it was first created, it has helped to alter the way people think about the delivery of early intervention services. For example, the idea of family-centeredness, which places the family in a primary decision making role, has shifted from theory to practice. In addition, PEP principles have influenced intervention practices to become strengths-and asset-based, which research has shown to be more effective than a deficit-based approach.

Dunst revises his originally proposed definition of early intervention to "the provision of support and resources to families of young children from members of informal and formal social support networks that both directly and indirectly influence child, parent, and family functioning" (p. 99). An important piece of this definition is families' social support networks. Research over the last 15 years has demonstrated that in addition to the well-established importance of formal supports, a strong relationship exists between informal supports and child, parent, and family outcomes.

The third generation of this model takes into account advancements made over the past 15 years and will help guide further research and define additional elements of effective approaches to early intervention. As was supported in this article, family-centeredness and informal social support networks are two elements that have proven effective in the past and should be continued elements in early intervention services.

Bruder:

This article discusses the disparity between family-centered early intervention research and practice and provides recommendations for improved implementation in the future. The author reviews past and current research in family-centered early intervention and emphasizes a value-based vision for the field of family-centered early intervention.

The importance of family inclusion in early intervention has been acknowledged for many years. Families spend the most time with children and have the greatest opportunity to influence a child's development. Research has shown that parent characteristics and parental attitudes and belief systems affect child competence. Despite this support, questions remain about the implementation of policies and practices that support family-centered early intervention.



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Bruder asserts that the field needs to clarify its values about why and how early intervention is implemented and practitioners need to renew their commitment to helping families. "We must always remember that the children we serve belong to their families, and we are privileged to be in their lives for a short time" (p. 110). In addition, Bruder presents four expectations for providers to ensure the implementation of family-centered early intervention services. These are:

1. Engage in participatory research.
2. Move beyond ineffective training models and instead develop learning communities.
3. Demand that administrators display the leadership necessary to create and lead rational, value driven, and innovative organizations.
4. Develop decisions and practices in tandem with families' stories, dreams, and fears.

Conclusion and Further Research:

Both of these articles stress the importance of family-centered early intervention services and review research that demonstrate its effectiveness in improving outcomes for families. Through his presentation of a somewhat complicated conceptual framework, Dunst reiterates the importance of informal social networks and family-centered practice and pledges to use this model to frame future developments in early intervention. Bruder asserts that despite research developments, family-centered early intervention is not of much use unless family-centered values, empathy in particular, are put into practice.

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