

# Why Young Children Enter Early Intervention Services

**P**ART C OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT (IDEA) PROVIDES FUNDING TO STATES to provide services for children from birth to three years of age with developmental delays and disabilities. States have flexibility—and therefore variation—in determining the criteria for eligibility.

A study published in the *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* examines the reasons why infants and toddlers entering Part C early intervention services are eligible. The findings yield important information about children receiving early intervention and have the potential to shape the services states provide and therefore the outcomes that children experience.

Researchers addressed three main questions. How do service providers describe why infants and toddlers are eligible for services? What demographic characteristics are associated with service providers' descriptions of eligibility for services? How do parents describe why their child is receiving services and how does this compare with service providers' descriptions of reasons for eligibility?



## IDEA Definition of Eligibility

Regulations for the program are flexible, allowing states to design systems that best meet the needs of their citizens. IDEA presents a framework only—early intervention services are provided based on the presence of developmental delay or a diagnosed physical or mental condition associated with developmental delay. Developmental delay is defined as a documented delay in cognitive, communicative, physical, social, emotional, or adaptive development, with the amount of delay required for eligibility defined by the individual states. IDEA also permits the provision of services to children who are at risk of developmental delay if services are not provided, however few states opt to provide service to these children.

## Findings

Given the broad latitude in determining eligibility criteria it is difficult to have a clear picture of the children being served. This study provides a descriptive overview of the reasons infants and toddlers entering Part C programs are eligible for services as characterized by their service providers compared with how parents describe why their child is receiving services.

### ACCORDING TO SERVICE PROVIDERS:

- 62 percent of infants and toddlers were eligible because of developmental delay.
- 22 percent were eligible because of a diagnosed condition.
- 17 percent were eligible because they were at risk for developmental delay.

### PARENTS AGREED:

- 52 percent of children were described as having a developmental delay.
- 27 percent were described as having a diagnosed condition associated with developmental delay.
- 21 percent were described with terms associated with being at risk for developmental delay.

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**WHAT DOES AGE HAVE TO DO WITH IT?**

The age at which a child first received Part C services was significantly related to the eligibility category.

- 91 percent of toddlers who were older than 24 months when they first entered the system were eligible because of developmental delay.
- Infants under 12 months of age when they first received services were more evenly distributed among the three categories with approximately a third in each.

**IS IT A BOY THING?**

- A larger proportion of boys entered early intervention due to developmental delay (66 percent vs. 55 percent).

**THE ROLE OF POVERTY:**

Previous research has shown that poverty is related to disability and developmental delays. The National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study (NEILS) confirms this finding. Thirty-two percent of children entering the early intervention system, in 1997 and 1998 were living at or below the federal poverty level compared with 24 percent of children under three in the general population.

- Children in low-income households were more likely to be in the at-risk category.
- Children from higher-income families were more likely to be eligible because of developmental delay.

**LEVEL OF EDUCATION:**

Eligibility was related to the mother’s level of education. Interestingly, children of mothers with the least education and the most education were similar.

- Both had a higher proportion of children eligible due to developmental delay compared to those with mid-level education.

**REASONS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES:**

Providers and parents provided similar information for 74 percent of the children, with the highest level of agreement being for children with diagnosed conditions.

**Conclusions**

Parents and service providers identified many reasons why children required early intervention services. In order to serve such a diverse group of children, states need to be able to offer a broad range of services and a variety of expertise. Furthermore, the classification of reasons for eligibility demonstrates that the three federal categories are used inconsistently across the country. Lack of a common eligibility language creates challenges in communicating the most basic descriptive information about these young children. ■

**Methodology**

Participants were from the National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study (NEILS), the first nationally representative study of IDEA Part C recipients. NEILS participants were children between birth and 31 months of age entering early intervention for the first time in 1997 and 1998.

Service providers completed a form for every participating child entering early intervention. This form was used to determine how they describe reasons

for eligibility for each child. Parents participated in a 40-minute phone interview or in a small number of cases a written questionnaire. Data was available for 3,200 children (96 percent of the sample).

Researchers classified reasons for eligibility into agreed upon categories, and used the same framework to classify the terms that parents provided regarding why their child was receiving early intervention services.

CATEGORY	SERVICE PROVIDER	PARENT
Delayed Development	12%	11%
Sensory systems impairment (vision and hearing)	3%	9%
Motor impairment or delay	18%	15%
Physiological or neurological system impairment	3%	9%
Intellectual impairment or delay	7%	3%
Social/behavioral delay	4%	4%
Speech communication impairment or delay	39%	34%
Delay in self-help skills	3%	>1%
Congenital disorders (e.g., Down syndrome)	10%	12%
Prenatal/perinatal abnormalities (low birth weight, prenatal exposures, etc.)	20%	25%
Illness or chronic disease	2%	7%
Musculoskeletal disorders	2%	4%
Central nervous system disorders	7%	11%
Receiving medical treatment	1%	4%
Social/environmental risk factors	4%	2%

**To Learn More**

“Eligibility characteristics of infants and toddlers entering early intervention services in the United States” appears in the March 2006 issue of the *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*. Lead author Anita A. Scarborough is an investigator with FPG Child Development Institute. Co-authors were Kathleen M. Hebbeler and Donna Spiker from SRI International, Menlo Park, CA