

DEC POSITION STATEMENT

The Role of Special Instruction in Early Intervention

Purpose: The purpose of this position statement is to clarify the role of the service, Special Instruction, and its providers (referred to as “special instructors” in this paper) within the broader field of Part C early intervention. Aligned with federal requirements, this statement focuses on this service as it is provided to families of eligible infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. Information about how special instruction is defined and described in federal law and in practice, recommendations for professional preparation and qualifications of special instructors, a description of the role of the special instructor in each part of the early intervention process, and a statement about the uniqueness of the service is discussed. An appendix is also included to specify what special instruction is and is not when implemented using best practices.

Special instruction is an early intervention service that focuses on promoting caregiver-child interactions and supporting caregivers in learning new strategies they can use to enhance the child’s development and participation in the natural activities and routines of everyday life.

Special Instruction and Early Intervention

Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) describes an array of early intervention services, including special instruction, that are available to support families of eligible infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. The purpose of these services is to support parents and other caregivers as they interact with their children in ways that enhance the child’s development, learning, and participation in daily activities and routines (Childress, 2004; Trivette & Dunst, 2000).

Generally, early intervention services, including special instruction, focus on active caregiver-professional partnerships that are grounded in family-centered practices and guided by family priorities and outcomes written into each child’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP; Part C, IDEA, 2004, Sec. 303.18). Collaborative early intervention visits with the family focus on identifying how to integrate intervention strategies into family routines and how the caregiver can independently implement these strategies throughout the week when the early interventionist is not present (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005; Ridgley, Snyder, McWilliam, & Davis, 2011). Intervention is provided in the child’s natural environment, including places where the child and family naturally spend time (e.g., home, childcare center, local park, playgroup) as well as in settings that are natural for the child’s peers who do not have disabilities. Activities,

routines, and materials that are familiar to the child and family are used during visits and provide the context for individualized, meaningful intervention that appropriately addresses the child's strengths and needs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Within the framework of early intervention, special instruction is provided in accordance with these recommended practices as well as with both the *Agreed Upon Mission and Key Principles for Providing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments* (http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/families/Finalmissionandprinciples3_11_08.pdf) and the *DEC Recommended Practices for Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education* (2014; <http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>).

What is Special Instruction?

As described in federal legislation (IDEA, 2004), special instruction includes:

- The design of learning environments and activities that promote the child's acquisition of skills in a variety of developmental areas, including cognitive processes and social interaction;
- Curriculum planning including the planned interaction of personnel, materials, and time and space, that leads to achieving the outcomes in the child's individualized family service plan;
- Providing families with information, skills, and support related to enhancing the skill development of the child; and
- Working with the child to enhance the child's development (CFR 303.12 (13) (i-iv)).

Each of these aspects of special instruction is individualized for the children and families who receive this service. How each aspect is implemented will look different depending on the unique priorities of the family and the abilities of the child.

The early intervention service "special instruction" is identified by different names in different states (e.g., developmental services, specialized skills training, developmental therapy), but the purpose and goals of the service are generally the same. Special instruction is complementary, not duplicative, to the other early intervention services (Childress, 2004). While it requires a similar set of knowledge and skills, including child development and adaptations for different learners, special instruction is also not the same as special education provided in a school setting. The service provided by a special instructor goes beyond child-centered teaching and general parent education and requires a distinct set of knowledge, skills and experience. See the Appendix for more information about what special instruction is and is not.

Special instructors are qualified professionals who bring a unique set of knowledge, skills, and expertise to the early intervention team.

Professional Preparation and Qualifications of Special Instructors

Due to the specialized nature of this service, special instruction is provided by qualified professionals who hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Special Education, Inclusive Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Early Childhood, Child Development, or Infant Mental Health with a concentration or state certification in early intervention. These professionals must have knowledge and skills in the following areas of expertise:

- Federal IDEA (Part C) requirements;
- Typical and atypical patterns of infant and toddler development and learning in all areas (e.g., cognition, communication, social-emotional, adaptive and motor development);
- Functional assessment of development across domains;
- Developmental disabilities in the birth-to-three population; and
- Specialized instructional strategies to help young children learn.

Special instructors also must have foundational competencies in:

- Promoting caregiver-child interaction;
- Facilitating the capacities of families to adapt routines and activities to support child learning and interaction;
- Integrating all areas of development for a holistic view of the child;
- Utilizing adult learning approaches to support the caregiver's competence and confidence in meeting the child's needs;
- Understanding how cultural diversity affects family interactions and intervention practices; and
- Using effective teaming practices to collaborate with families and other professionals within and across agencies.

The Role of the Special Instructor in the Early Intervention Process

Special instructors have important roles throughout the early intervention process. Which roles they play will depend on individual qualifications, state and local program policies, team composition, and family priorities and preferences.

Child Find and Screening

Special instructors may participate in child find activities by conducting developmental screenings with children, collaborating with community partners, and providing information about early intervention services. Special instructors also share the results of screenings and recommendations regarding the need for further assessment with the family, physicians, and other team members.

Referral and Intake

In some programs, a special instructor may collaborate with families, physicians and other referral sources to gather and review screening information and prepare for the child's entry into the early intervention program. If the special instructor also serves in the role of service coordinator, he or she might also conduct intakes with new families and initiate the planning process for the assessment and IFSP.

Evaluation and Assessment

Special instructors play important roles in evaluation and assessment. As a member of the team, they conduct developmental evaluations using appropriate tools to determine a child's eligibility for services. During an evaluation, the special instructor uses his or her knowledge and skills to follow the child's lead, observe developmental patterns, and creatively engage the child in specific activities designed to identify strengths and needs. The special instructor also engages the caregiver in discussion about the child's development to gather important assessment information about the child's functional abilities in daily activities. When the evaluation and assessment are completed, the special instructor shares the findings with the family in a sensitive, honest manner and assists the family in interpreting the relationship between the skills evaluated using the assessment protocol and the child's abilities and participation in daily life.

Special instructors may also assist with the family assessment to explore family priorities, routines, and resources related to the child's development. This information is used in the development of an eligible child's IFSP.

Development of the IFSP

Special instructors are trained to view the child from a holistic perspective that recognizes the interrelated nature of all areas of development. This perspective is vital to assisting IFSP teams with integrating the information gathered from evaluation and assessment into functional outcomes and goals. Special instructors also support the family-centered nature of the IFSP. Their knowledge of child development helps the team weave family priorities, routines, and formal and informal resources together with the child's interests and abilities to create a plan that is meaningful for the child and family.

After IFSP outcomes are developed, the special instructor participates in the determination of early intervention services. Recommendations from the special instructor for services are based on the IFSP outcomes and the type and level of support the family needs to promote the child's development.

IFSP Implementation and the Delivery of Special Instruction

When special instruction is recommended as an early intervention service on the IFSP, it may be implemented either as a primary or secondary service. When working as a primary service provider, the special instructor receives support from other team members, such as speech-language pathologists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists through regular team meetings and joint visits to assist the family and other care providers in implementing intervention strategies that address IFSP outcomes within the context of everyday routines and activities. A variety of evidence-based methods are used to support child and adult learning during and between visits, including natural learning environment practices, coaching interactions, collaborative consultation, routines-based intervention and participation-based intervention strategies (Dunst et al., 2001; McWilliam, 2010; Rush & Shelden, 2011; Stremel & Campbell, 2007; Woods, Wilcox, Friedman, & Murch, 2011).

When the special instructor provides secondary support services, he or she meets with the caregivers and the primary service provider as needed to provide strategies and support that address and integrate the child's learning needs across all areas of development. The special instructor uses his or her knowledge and expertise to suggest appropriate instructional strategies and adaptations to intervention to meet the child's and family's changing needs. These strategies are then implemented and monitored by the primary service provider and the family.

Special instructors also monitor emerging skills and needs for support by conducting ongoing assessments of the child's development. Special instructors and other team members use this information to monitor the child's eligibility status and determine when changes are needed to intervention strategies and/or the child's IFSP outcomes or services.

Throughout the implementation of the IFSP, the special instructor has additional responsibilities to maintain regular communication with all team members, including the service coordinator; to accurately document all contacts with or on behalf of families; to use and stay current on evidence-based practices; to support culturally sensitive and inclusive interactions with the community; and to promote family competence, independence, and empowerment.

Transition

As a child and family prepare for transition out of the early intervention system, the special instructor can assist by completing evaluations for and sharing documentation with the receiving program, with parental permission. He or she may also assist with the development of a transition plan and suggest strategies that could be helpful in preparing the child for the new setting.

Special instructors play an important role in each step
of the early intervention process.

Special Instruction is a Unique Early Intervention Service

Special instruction is a service that focuses on promoting caregiver-child interactions within the context of everyday activities and routines as the foundation of effective early intervention for infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities. Special instructors' abilities to integrate knowledge about child development across domains, knowledge of family-centered practices and techniques for supporting the learning of the caregivers, and skill in using instructional strategies to promote child learning through adapting natural activities make them uniquely qualified to provide support to many children and families in early intervention.

Glossary of Key Terms

Assessment - The ongoing process used to determine the individual child's present level of development, level of participation in the family's daily routines, and early intervention needs.

Caregiver - Any adult, such as a parent, grandparent, or childcare provider, who acts in a caregiving capacity toward the child.

Coaching interactions - The interaction style based on adult learning principles used by an early intervention practitioner to build the capacity of care providers to promote child learning and development in family, community, and early childhood settings.

Evaluation - The process used to determine eligibility for Part C early intervention; the process used to determine the existence of a delay or disability and the child's strengths and needs in all areas.

Evidence-based practices - Practices that are informed by research, in which the characteristics and consequences of environmental variables are empirically established and the relationship directly informs what a practitioner can do to produce a desired outcome (Dunst, Trivette, & Cutspec, 2007).

Family-centered practices - Values, attitudes, and approaches to services that treat families with dignity and respect and are individualized, flexible, and responsive. Family-centered practices focus on the infant or toddler within the context of the family. Providers using family-centered practices recognize that each family is unique; that the family is the constant in the child's life; and that they are the experts on the child's abilities and needs. Family-centered practices allow the family to work in partnership with service providers to make informed decisions about the services and supports the child and family receive.

Individualized Family Service Plan or IFSP - The service plan required under IDEA, Part C; a "road map that guides the development, implementation, and evaluation of early intervention supports and services for eligible children and their families" (Ridgley et al., 2011, p. 309).

Natural environment - Places where the child and family naturally spend time (e.g., home, childcare center, local park) as well as settings that are natural for the child's peers who do not have disabilities.

Natural learning environment practices - An approach to intervention that uses everyday family and community activities as the sources of child learning opportunities where child participation and competence enhancement is mediated by social and nonsocial experiences afforded a child in everyday activity (Dunst et al., 2001).

Primary Service Provider - The identified professional on the IFSP team who works directly with the child and family on a regular basis to provide intervention services.

Screening - Activities to identify children who may need further evaluation in order to determine the existence of a delay in development or a particular disability.

Secondary Service - Services other team members provide to support the primary service provider in addressing and integrating the child's learning across all areas of development.

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Appendix

What is Special Instruction?

	Special Instruction IS...	Special Instruction IS NOT...
Professional Qualifications of a Special Instructor	Provided by professionals who have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Special Education, Inclusive Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Early Childhood, Child Development, or Infant Mental Health with a concentration or state certification in early intervention and specialized knowledge and skills related to early intervention	Provided by service providers with little or no education and training in child development, intervention strategies, family-centered practices, or teaming practices
Service Delivery & Teaming with Families	A primary or secondary IFSP service recommended, as appropriate, to help families address IFSP outcomes	A temporary service put in place while waiting for other services (e.g., occupational, physical, or speech therapy) to begin
	A family-centered service that focuses on supporting caregivers as the agents of change in the child's development	A professional-driven, child-centered service that focuses on the special instructor as the agent of change in the child's development
	A service that is delivered through the use of evidence-based family centered practices (e.g., coaching, collaborative consultation, routines-based intervention)	A service that is delivered exclusively through direct teaching, with minimal family participation and engagement
	Instruction and support provided in the context of child and family routines (with adaptations and modifications as needed)	A service provided in the context of contrived educational activities removed from daily family routines (e.g., bringing toys/materials such as books, bubbles, puzzles, etc., to conduct special activities that focus on skill development that would not otherwise be a part of the family's day)

	Instruction that broadly advances the family’s capacity to meet the child’s needs by focusing on the child’s overall development, functional abilities, independence and meaningful participation within the activities and routines that are important to them	Instruction that exclusively targets discrete skills (e.g., tasks or items from a developmental checklist) as IFSP outcomes <i>For example, Special Instructors do not work on the task “stacking five blocks” when it has not been identified as relevant, meaningful, or functional for the child or family.</i>
Teaming with other Service Providers	Provided by working as a collaborative partner who regularly communicates with, shares knowledge and expertise, and learns from other team members in order to deliver coordinated services	Provided by working in isolation providing a fragmented, discipline-specific service

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