Early Intervention: Services for Young Children and Families in Poverty

At a Glance
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that very young children with disabilities receive early intervention services to lessen developmental delays. The purpose of this research was to find out whether poverty has an impact on the effective delivery of early intervention for children with disabilities.

Key Findings
Results showed that stress experienced by families in poverty make it more difficult for them to participate in services for which their children qualify. Service providers could improve the effectiveness of early interventions by addressing poverty stressors when creating a service delivery plan. Best practices include using a family-centered orientation, natural learning environments, collaborative team processes, and integrated services.

Putting it Into Practice

Use a Family-Centered Approach
In a family-centered approach, providers encourage active family involvement and provide necessary resources to support the child and the family. Providers can promote this approach by:

- Teaching problem-solving and coping strategies to overcome poverty stressors
- Recognizing and building on family strengths
- Being respectful of family efforts under adverse circumstances
- Encouraging parent engagement and forming balanced partnerships with families
Provide Services in Natural Learning Environments
IDEA mandates that early intervention services be provided in natural learning environments where young children have opportunities to learn in everyday home and community events. Providers must be aware of the challenges that may affect the natural learning environment of families living in poverty, including frequent relocation, neighborhood conditions, and homelessness.

Nurture a Collaborative Team Approach
Families often need early intervention services from multiple professionals and disciplines. Research shows that the lower a family’s income, the fewer services they use that they could qualify for. Providers and programs from diverse backgrounds can explore ways to organize, manage, and link services to families based on child and family need, rather than on a family’s available resources.

Integrate Service Provision
Fragmented service provision and the stressors of poverty often prevent families from progressing from referral to enrollment to participation. Clear and uncomplicated procedures that are understood by staff across all program systems could reduce this fragmentation. Provider’s ability to provide cross-referrals for additional supports to families (such as for food, financial, and housing assistance) could increase families’ ability to interact with programs and services providers.

More about this Research
This research examined 31 journal articles to learn how research addressed the intersection of poverty, disability, and early childhood. To organize findings, the authors used Bruder’s four components of early intervention: family-centered orientation, natural learning environment, collaborative team processes, and service integration.

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