

Beyond Bubbles and Blocks

Information for EI Home Visitors



Do you know about Exceptional Family Circumstances in Early Intervention?

Timely services are an essential component of Early Intervention (EI). Federal and state requirements establish timelines for activities such as evaluation, initial IFSP development, initiation of service delivery, and transition planning to ensure children and families receive support as quickly as possible. There are times, however, when circumstances outside the control of the early intervention service (EIS) program delay these activities. These circumstances are considered exceptional family circumstances.

Exceptional family circumstances under IDEA Part C are documented situations that prevent the timely conduct of required meetings, evaluations, and assessments (including timely service delivery and transition requirements) that are due to family circumstances outside the provider's control. In the Early Intervention Client System in Massachusetts, there are four reasons for delay that are exceptional family circumstances:

- Difficulty Contacting/scheduling with family
- Extreme weather conditions/natural disaster
- Family Cancellation/no show
- Family/child illness or hospitalization

How are Exceptional Family Circumstances measured in MA?

Idea part C federal regulations require that the lead agency or EIS provider must document in the child's early intervention record the exceptional family circumstances or repeated attempts by the lead agency or EIS provider to obtain parental consent and meet required timelines.

Exceptional family circumstances as a reason for delay for not meeting a required timeline are

documented by the early intervention service provider or program in the early intervention client system. When Massachusetts submits its State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report, it reports these delays and exceptional family circumstances to the Office of Special Education Programs.



Why do you as an EIS provider need to know about Exceptional Family Circumstances?

As an EIS provider it is important to understand the impact a timely experience has on a family and their child. Meeting the required timelines helps ensure that families are accessing necessary evaluations, IFSPs and services during a crucial time in their child's development. Understanding exceptional family circumstances helps you recognize those unique situations in which a family circumstance would prohibit you and the family from meeting these important timelines. Accurate documentation of these unique circumstances can help both the state and EIS program identify trends and barriers to reduce these circumstances in the future and demonstrate continued commitment to engaging and serving families.

How do you explain EFCs to families?

Families may not be familiar with the term “Exceptional Family Circumstances,” but they understand that life can be unpredictable. Explain to the family that part of their rights in early intervention is for providers to meet these timelines. Reassure families that the purpose of documenting these situations is not to assign blame, but to accurately reflect what occurred and ensure services continue as soon as possible. Maintaining open communication with families during periods of disruption can strengthen relationships and help everyone work together to support the child’s development.

How do you incorporate EFCs into your work with families?

Exceptional family circumstances provide an opportunity to demonstrate family-centered practices. As a provider you should proactively discuss scheduling preferences, identify potential barriers to participation, and establish multiple methods of communication. When unexpected circumstances arise, you can maintain engagement by reaching out consistently, documenting attempts to contact the family, and collaborating to identify alternative meeting times whenever appropriate. Incorporating awareness of exceptional family circumstances into daily practice also means recognizing that families may be balancing medical appointments, work schedules, transportation challenges, or other responsibilities that affect participation. Approaching these situations with flexibility and empathy helps maintain positive relationships while supporting the family to access these necessary services as soon as possible.

How are EFCs supported in EI?

Support for managing exceptional family circumstances comes through federal regulations, state guidance, staff training, supervision, and consistent documentation practices. Section 303.310 of IDEA Part C requires programs to

document exceptional family circumstances in the child's record and to complete required activities as soon as possible once the circumstances no longer exist. The regulation also emphasizes the importance of continued efforts to engage families and, when appropriate, the development of an interim IFSP. Massachusetts programs support compliance through staff training, supervision, data monitoring, and ongoing review of timeline requirements. Understanding exceptional family circumstances is important not only for supporting families during challenging situations, but also for ensuring accurate documentation for what occurred in that child’s early intervention experience and informing changes that may need to be made going forward.

Reflecting on your practice

As you consider your work with families, take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- As you think about your current practice, consider how confident you are in distinguishing between compliant and non-compliant reasons for delay. How consistently do you document exceptional family circumstances that affect timelines?
- When families experience barriers to participation, how do you balance flexibility and empathy with ensuring services take place as soon as possible?
- What strategies have been most effective in maintaining communication with families who are difficult to reach?
- How might your documentation practices help tell a complete and more accurate story about the services families receive?

References and resources

- [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\), Part C. 34 C.F.R. 303.10 b](#)

- Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Early Intervention Division. Early Intervention Operational Standards. ([Open DOCX file, 531.76 KB, Early Intervention Operational Standards](#))
- Part C State Performance Plan (SPP) And Annual Performance Report (APR) Indicator Measurement Table ([FFY2020-FFY2025 Part B SPP/APR Measurement Table](#))