# Do you know why parent consent matters?

As the primary caregiver, the parent plays an integral role in the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), and the early intervention (EI) services that are determined. A family should be fully informed of the services that their child may receive and consent to each service, including the environment in which the service is provided. Consent, as defined in the Part C regulations in [34 CFR §303.7,](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-III/part-303/subpart-A/subject-group-ECFR8d7eb7e02db8abe/section-303.7) involves the parent fully understanding and agreeing in written form to the implementation of the activity for which their consent is being sought. However, if a state-led agency chooses, parents may provide their consent electronically instead of in a traditional written format. Parental consent sets up the parent-child dyad from the signature of the IFSP and ensures that the child receives services in the most appropriate environment.

Consent empowers parents to make well-informed choices regarding the EI services offered to their child. It ensures they grasp the purpose, benefits, and alternatives involved in what IFSP services they receive and where. Moreover, consent honors parents' autonomy and rights to decide what they believe is best for their child, actively involving them in the decision- making process. Seeking consent also builds trust and cooperation between EI Specialists and families, establishing a supportive partnership where families feel valued, listened to, and respected in their children's care. Consent in EI services is crucial for upholding procedural safeguarding and family rights and fostering collaboration between EI Specialists and families.

Ultimately, consent ensures the [Family Early Childhood](https://ectacenter.org/eco/pages/familyoutcomes.asp) [Outcomes](https://ectacenter.org/eco/pages/familyoutcomes.asp) including families (1) know their rights and (2) can advocate effectively to access desired services, programs, and activities in their community.

The Early Intervention Service Program (EIS) requires parental consent for assessments, evaluations, interventions, insurance usage, and sharing of child information. If a parent declines assessment or EI services, EIS must fully explain its purpose and inform the parent that consent is needed for the child to receive services. Additionally, parents of infants or toddlers with disabilities have the right to determine

whether to accept or decline EI services at any time, in accordance with state law. They may decline service after initially accepting it without risking other services.

# How does this relate to Federal Indicator 2: Natural Environments and Inclusive Environments?

The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/) (IDEA) is a federal statute that ensures all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education. Part C of IDEA outlines how EI services must be offered to maximize the potential of infants and toddlers and requires states to report on 11 indicators in an Annual Performance Report (APR). Indicator 2 states that EI services must be provided in the “natural environment, to the maximum extent appropriate, as determined by the IFSP team and factoring in each

child’s routines, needs, and outcomes” (Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs, 2023). Natural environments refer to home or other community settings (e.g., childcare) where learning opportunities occur naturally for children with or without delays or disabilities.



# How do you explain Natural Environments to families?

Natural environments can be explained as the places where the family and/or child typically spend their time, such as home, playground, grocery store, library, and

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childcare. Beyond location, natural environments

“include the daily routines and activities of families… (and) include the interactions with familiar people and materials wherever the child spends time so that intervention can be designed to support those interactions whether they occur during or between

visits” (Childress, 2021). In other words, natural

environments refer to not just the “where”, but the when and how infants and toddlers learn best, and with whom.

# How are Natural Environments supported in EI?

In accordance with Massachusetts’ EI Key Principle 1, “infants and toddlers develop and learn through everyday experiences and interactions with familiar

people in familiar places” (i.e., natural environments). Thus, as an EI Specialist, it is imperative to learn about and provide EI services in the child’s natural environments.

Based on the statutes and regulations of Part C, the IFSP developed with the family contains “a statement of the natural environments in which EI services will appropriately be provided, including a justification of the extent, if any, to which services will not be provided in a natural environment” For example, when a family consents to their child attending an “EI community group” as listed on their IFSP, that group must consist of a mix of children with and without delays/disabilities.

An EI community group that does not have typically developing community peers is not considered a “natural environment”. When families consent to services listed in the IFSP, it is critical that what they consent to is what ends up happening.

**How are you incorporating Natural Environments in your work with families?**

* How can you learn what the natural environments are for each of the families/children you work with?
* To what extent are you incorporating natural environments in your work with families?
	+ Are you incorporating the family’s everyday activities and routines into your visits?
	+ Is there an opportunity to conduct some of your EI visits in places that the family/child spends time such as the playground or grocery store?
	+ Are there opportunities for the child to interact with same-aged peers without delays/disabilities?
* How do you ensure EI community groups have typically developing peers?
* How do you encourage and support families to support their children’s participation in activities, routines, and settings that their typically developing peers engage in?

**References**

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