What is Early Intervention?

Based upon patterns of development, early intervention is a systematic program of physical therapy, exercise and activity designed to remedy developmental delays that may be experienced by children with Down syndrome. In many instances, the program is individualized to meet the specific needs of each child, and to help all infants and children reach growth milestones in every area of development. Early intervention helps in each of the four main areas of development: gross motor and fine motor skills, language, social development and self-help skills.

When should early intervention start?

Early Intervention should begin any time shortly after birth, and continue until the child reaches age three. The sooner early intervention begins, the better, however, it's never too late to start. Once it is determined that your baby has Down Syndrome, you may contact your local early intervention specialist and arrange for an evaluation and assessment.

What do the terms "milestones" and "key ages" mean?

Milestones refer to a series of skills in the four areas of development which a child is expected to achieve at a designated time, also referred to as a key age which may be calculated in terms of weeks, months or years. It must be remembered that development is a continuous process that begins at conception and which proceeds stage by stage in an orderly sequence. Each milestone represents a skill which is prerequisite to the next stage in development. In monitoring the development of a child with Down syndrome, it is more useful to look at the sequence of milestones achieved, rather than the age at which the milestone is reached.

How can early intervention benefit a child with Down syndrome?

Early intervention can help in many ways. During the first three to four months of life, for example, an infant is expected to gain head control and the ability to pull to a sitting positions (with help) with no head lags and enough strength in the upper torso to maintain an erect posture. Appropriate physical therapy may assist a baby with Down syndrome, who may have low muscle tone, in achieving this milestone.

One of the fine motor skills that an infant is expected to achieve is the ability to hold and reach for objects. Here again, the baby with Down syndrome may need help before mastering these tasks. Physical therapy and practice in achieving these and subsequent milestones can assist a baby with Down syndrome in the four areas of
development. Early intervention can also prevent a child with Down syndrome from reaching a plateau at some point in development. Thus, the goal of early intervention programs is to enhance and accelerate development by building on a child's strengths and by strengthening those areas that are weaker, in all areas of development.

**Why is gross motor development so important?**

All areas of development are equally important, although the emphasis changes as the child grows. Nevertheless, before birth and in the first months of life, physical development remains the underlying foundation for all future progress. Babies learn through interaction with their environment. In order to do so, an infant must have the ability to move freely and purposefully. The ability to explore one's surroundings, the ability to reach and grasp toys, to turn one's head in order to follow a moving object with one's eyes, the ability to roll over, to crawl in pursuit of a desired objective, all of these behaviors are dependent upon gross as well as fine motor development. These physical, interactive activities foster understanding and mastery of the environment, stimulating cognitive, language and social development.

**Why does health affect development?**

Health plays a major role in everyone's well-being and progress, and this holds true for children with Down syndrome. For this reason, early intervention should begin with a thorough assessment of an infant's health. All health concerns should receive prompt attention to prevent them from interfering with a child's development. Generally, doctors have become much more sensitive to the health needs of children with Down syndrome than they were in the past. Early diagnosis and proper treatment promise better health, and as a result, better developmental progress.

**What can I expect in terms of my child's potential and future development?**

Early intervention, research and case histories have shown that children with Down syndrome have a far greater potential for learning and for functioning as contributing members of society than it was believed to be possible even 10 to 15 years ago. At the same time, we must remember that each child, whether he has Down syndrome or not, is a unique individual with his own strengths and weaknesses, his own abilities, as well as his own rate of development. Even when milestones are reached on schedule, expectations must be balanced. Low expectations will set limits on what a child can achieve. At the same time, unrealistically high expectations place undue burdens on a child, which may lead to failure. Acceptance of your child is the best approach. Optimistic, yet realistic, expectations plus the ability to recognize and reinforce the smallest increments of progress are the attitudes that are most likely to have a positive effect on development. In this way, early interventions succeed in maximizing achievement.

**How can parents benefit from early intervention programs?**
Programs of early intervention have a great deal to offer to parents in terms of support, encouragement and information. The programs teach parents how to interact with their infant and toddler, how to meet their child's specific needs and how to enhance development. Furthermore, early intervention centers give parents the opportunity to share their concerns with other parents.

**How can I find an early intervention program?**

Today, every state in the US. has a center that coordinates early intervention services in the state. Information can be obtained through NDSS and other organizations about the center nearest you. Public schools and community colleges are other resources. If there are no developmental centers in your area, many helpful books are available.

**Who pays for early intervention?**

The evaluation to determine whether your child is eligible for early intervention is free of charge if performed by a state authorized entity. No child deemed eligible can be denied services based on ability to pay, but insurance companies may be billed and/or a sliding scale payment may be required, depending on what state you reside in. Check with your state's early intervention center for information about authorized service providers and financial obligations. Frequently, there is little or no cost to parents for these services.

**Summary:**

- Children develop according to their individual timetables.
- Early intervention may help encourage and accelerate development.
- The four main areas of development are gross and fine motor skills, language, self-help and social development.
- Milestones are essential as prerequisite stepping stones to each new level of maturity.
- Early intervention benefits children with Down syndrome by helping to prevent developmental delays that may occur.
- Gross and fine motor development is important because it facilitates progress in language, cognition and self-help by enabling children to interact with their environment.
- Health factors play a major role in a child's achievement. Early assessment of an infant's health is essential. Health problems must be treated as soon as they are recognized.
- Parental expectations influence a child's development. Unrealistically high, or low, expectations can be damaging to a child's self esteem and progress. An accepting, optimistic, yet realistic attitude creates a nurturing environment for optimum progress.
- Early intervention programs help parents by providing support, encouragement, training and companionship.
- Nearly every area in the U.S. has developmental centers that serve children with
special needs. Information can be obtained from NDSS, similar organizations, schools, colleges and books.

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