**An Overview of Family-Centred Practice**

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The development, learning and wellbeing of the child (0-6) are central to the need for a family-centred approach to early intervention. A family-centred approach to early intervention is now recognised nationally and internationally as best practice in supporting the development, learning and well-being of young children with developmental delay, disability, autism spectrum disorder.

All children (0-6) develop and learn through their meaningful engagement with and participation in the daily routines and activities of family life and pre-school programmes. Engagement is the amount of time a child spends interacting with their environment (e.g. other people, toys etc) in ways that are appropriate to their development and context (e.g. family, pre-school etc). Children cannot develop and learn if they are non-engaged. Being engaged brings a sense of wellbeing. Participation is interacting with people and objects, not being on the side-line watching. Does this apply to children with developmental delay, disability, autism spectrum disorder also? Yes! There is increasing evidence that early intervention needs to target and address children’s engagement and participation in daily routines and activities as the foundation for development and learning. Every child has individual strengths, interests as well as needs, which are best met in daily life environments. There is frequently an assumption that infants and young children with disability need to be treated very differently from typically developing children with insufficient regard to their bond and attachment with parents and the quality of their childhood.

The key to the development and learning of the child is the responsive relationships the child has with parents, siblings, extended family, early education and intervention personnel, peers and wider community over time. In reality there is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone. This relationship is central to the development and learning of the baby, and the wellbeing of both baby and mother/father. Does this present special challenges for children with disabilities and their families? Yes! The birth of a child with a developmental delay or disability brings particular challenges to parents and families.

A mother may experience a loss of confidence in her capacity to meet the daily needs of her child. A father may struggle in how best to support his wife or partner. Both may struggle together regarding how best to support the development, learning and wellbeing of their child. There is frequently fear, fear of the future and the unknown. Parents may ask or wonder will they be good-enough parents? Parents may struggle to make sense of their child’s difficulties. There may be obstacles to the discovery process that parents experience with a typically developing baby, where parents struggle to in finding the clues to the path that is right for their child. There may be a sense of starting on a journey not of one’s own choosing. However, frequently there is also a discovery of personal strength and resilience and renewed hope for the future. Long-term stress is not inevitable. There will be times of sadness and times of joy at small steps taken. These are normal experiences. Much depends on the quality of supports available in families and communities and the sensitive, empathic and informed supports provided by early intervention professionals to family and child. Children with disabilities do need particular and focused supports in order to meaningfully engage and participate in family and pre-school daily.

However, we now know that young children develop and learn through repeated interactions with the important people in their lives and with familiar materials (e.g. toys), distributed over time, days, weeks and months. Children with a disability in particular need multiple opportunities to practice functional skills in the context of everyday family and pre-school life. Children with disabilities need more opportunities than typically developing children to practice functional skills and these opportunities in daily life may need to be prepared for, planned for and goals identified around what is most important for parents as they see their child’s needs. Functional skills are those skills that help young children with a disability to engage with and meaningfully participate in family and pre-school life (e.g. daily routines, activities). Healthy development, learning and wellbeing depends on the quality of the child’s relationships with the important people in his/her life. For development, learning and wellbeing to occur children need frequent contact with at least one person who ‘gets’ the child (e.g. parent, carer).

Meaningful participation in family and pre-school daily life is the key to children’s development, learning and wellbeing. Inclusion is the active participation of children with disabilities in daily family, pre-school, early education and community life. Engagement and participation might not come easily to many children with disabilities and/or autism spectrum disorder. This requires strong, positive and sensitive relationship-building involving families and early intervention and education professionals in implementing a family-centred approach. There is now strong evidence that a family-centred approach helps to improve child behaviour and wellbeing; family quality of life; the value of different supports to families (e.g. extended family, social and professional); family satisfaction with services; and parents feelings of confidence and competence to be good-enough parents to their child.

‘Full participation, belonging, relationships, inclusion, and self-determination for children with disabilities is then the end in mind and this should be the purpose underpinning all service activities from the beginning of service involvement with families and their children. This vision should also provide guidance in day-to-day decision – making and planning about assessments that are authentic and interventions and supports that are designed for children’s daily environments, where they grow, develop and learn’. (Standards and Performance Reporting Working Group. Outcomes for Children and Their Families. 2013).

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