

# Navigating Early Intervention



## Undivided's Parent Guide



# Navigating Early Intervention: A Parent's Guide

The 4 Ws of Early Intervention	3
WHAT is early intervention?	3
WHO provides early intervention services?	4
WHEN should you start?	5
WHY is early intervention beneficial?	6
Funding Early Intervention and Disability Services	8
Early Start	8
Regional Center	8
Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA)	9
Medi-Cal	10
IHSS	11
Educational Transitions: What's Coming Next	13
Transition to Preschool	13
Transition to Kindergarten	15
About Undivided	16

# The 4 Ws of Early Intervention

Early intervention can make a huge positive impact on the lives and development of children with developmental delays and disabilities. Of course, figuring out how to determine and prioritize the best care – not to mention navigating funding sources – can be difficult (if not sometimes downright frustrating). If you have questions about whether your child is eligible, what the evaluation process is like, or what age is the right age for a diagnosis, you're not alone. We've gathered plenty of expert advice and useful information to help you through every step of this journey.

## WHAT is early intervention?

The term "[early intervention](#)" refers to services and therapeutic interventions that allow young children to reach their developmental milestones. Research indicates that making small changes early can have a big impact over the years.

With early intervention services, professionals such as pediatricians and therapists will evaluate your child to identify areas of concern, such as delays in socialization, behavior, development, or learning. They'll then put together a plan to address those areas with different types of therapy. Here are examples of some common therapies:

- [Physical therapy](#), which uses exercises and hands-on care to address conditions that affect a child's ability to gain gross motor skills and use the large muscle groups in their body (arms, legs, and torso).
- [Occupational therapy](#), which helps kids participate in everyday activities by working on skills like self-care, fine motor, visual-motor coordination, play, sensory processing, executive functioning, and more.
- [Speech therapy](#), which helps kids build skills in expressive language (what we say) and receptive language (what we hear and understand).

In California, the Early Start program provides early intervention services to children with developmental delays or who are at risk of delays. Regional Centers, California Children's Services, health insurance, and education programs are common sources of information and funding for early intervention services. We'll go into more details in the "Funding Early Intervention" section.

## WHO provides early intervention services?

With so many different medical specialties, it can be difficult to know which kinds of physicians can best help your child. Our [medical glossary](#) provides an overview of the primary medical specialties that serve children with disabilities, but here are some of the key members of your child's care team:

- [Developmental pediatricians](#) treat children with developmental disabilities and other developmental concerns. They can also play a central role in coordinating care.
- A pediatric psychologist can assist children with concerns such as missed developmental milestones or issues with feeding and sleeping. They can also help establish effective communication among a child's providers, as well as help families identify their child's needs and priorities.
- Some of the most important people in your child's early life are the therapists who will help them work toward building the emotional, social, adaptive, and physical skills they'll need to participate in their school and community. To help you learn about what therapies are available and how they might benefit your child, we've created a [therapy glossary](#) that outlines each therapy type, as well as the various subtypes within each therapy, to help you start planning for and prioritizing the care your child needs.

No one knows your child better than you. This puts you in a unique position to advocate for their needs and put together a great care team. Check out our article [How to Build and Coordinate Your Child's Team](#) for tips on how to find providers, questions to ask, and answers to common parent concerns.

# 3 tips for building your child's care team



## Start local



Ask your pediatrician and local parents about resources in your area, such as Regional Center.

## Widen your circle



Find a multidisciplinary clinic or team of specialists that you can trust for expertise on your child's diagnosis.

## Ask lots of questions



Get to know potential providers so that you can assess how well you'll work together.



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## WHEN should you start?

In general, the earlier children are able to start therapies, the better, so they can continue to build skills. Many experts have told Undivided that parents should begin early intervention as soon as possible.

Occupational therapist Kimberly Gardener says, "Ideally, earlier is better when starting interventions. Research has shown that early intervention has the best outcomes for success later in life. Although children can continue to make wonderful progress past the age of three, their nervous systems and brains are much more malleable at younger ages, and can be expected to make the greatest improvements at that time."

How do you get started? Talk to your child's primary care physician about your concerns and about scheduling assessments. "If you have any sort of feeling that your child may be falling behind or struggling with something, there's no reason to not seek a consultation from a therapist," says Melissa Epstein of Thrive Occupational Therapy. She adds that there is no harm in trying out services, even if the child ends up not needing them. She continues:

"It's never too early to start therapy. There are NICU occupational therapists working on feeding issues or sensory regulation issues for neonatal preemies. OT starts day one; it doesn't have to wait until your child is behind for three or four months. Kids do develop at different times, but if they're a month or two outside that window and you're still thinking something isn't right, have it checked out. If your child catches up on their own or even faster, that's awesome."

Check out our article [When Does Early Intervention Start?](#) for some key milestones to look for when it comes to physical development, speech, and behavior.

## WHY is early intervention beneficial?

[Research shows](#) that introducing small changes early on in a child's life can have a big impact on their later development. According to a study published in the [Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders](#), "Research shows that early intervention services can increase cognitive and adaptive skills in children with disabilities by up to 25%."

There are many reasons to pursue a [diagnosis](#). A diagnosis can give you language to appropriately express your concerns, hopes, dreams, and vision for your child's future, and most importantly, it can unlock services and opportunities that may otherwise be inaccessible.

However, in some cases it may be too early to identify the diagnosis in question. And sometimes, pursuing a diagnosis can take time and attention away from the most important piece of all: putting into place the services your child needs. A diagnosis doesn't have to be for forever, and it doesn't have to be rushed. Things change and evolve, and it's important that in the process you have a provider who is open to change and is curious to learn more about your child over time.

You may feel overwhelmed during the process and that's okay! Receiving a new diagnosis or news of a developmental delay is a lot to process and understand. When you're ready, make time to explore the many [resources and benefits](#) that are available to you.

**Feeling a little overwhelmed?  
Don't worry — Undivided is here to help!**

Schedule a free Kickstart with a Navigator for support in accomplishing your goals.  
Get started at [www.undivided.io](http://www.undivided.io)



Just scan this QR code!

"Being able to turn to my Undivided Navigator has significantly cut down on the research I need to do."  
- Undivided client



# Funding Early Intervention and Disability Services

Because so many developmental milestones happen in the first three years of life, it's important to start evaluations and therapies as soon as you have concerns. Medical expenses, therapy costs, and other needs such as medical supplies and adaptive equipment may be covered by your private insurance as well as by various public benefits programs.

## Early Start

Early intervention for children under age 3 is mandated by Part C of the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), the federal law governing special education. [Part C of IDEA](#) is a comprehensive nationwide program of early intervention services for infants and toddlers 0-3 years of age with disabilities and their families. In California, this program is called [Early Start](#).

Early Start services are coordinated and funded by Regional Centers and/or Special Education Local Planning Areas (SELPA). Each child enrolled in Early Start will have an [Individualized Family Service Plan \(IFSP\)](#) that is created by a multidisciplinary team that includes the parent or legal guardian as a member.

## Regional Center

If your child has been diagnosed with or is at risk of developmental delays or disabilities, your doctor may have advised you to apply for Regional Center early intervention services. Children 0-3 years of age across California receive early intervention services from Regional Centers if they have been diagnosed with, or are at risk for, developmental delays or developmental disabilities. (Note that some children may be eligible for continued Regional Center services under the Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Act after they turn 3, if they have been diagnosed with a developmental disability as defined by California law.)



Regional Centers are a statewide network of local agencies that serve children and adults with developmental disabilities as defined by California law, such as autism, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy. Each Regional Center operates independently, so services offered (as well as eligibility criteria for specific services) may vary slightly, but many children under age 3 can receive occupational, physical, and speech therapy from the Regional Center during this time, along with other early intervention services. Check out our article [How to Get Started with Regional Center](#) for more information about how to apply; you do not need a doctor's referral.

While many early intervention services are free to families, some are not – for example, Regional Centers fund services as a payer of last resort, meaning you have to first go through other funding sources like private health insurance. You can ask your Regional Center about what services are free to you and what can be covered through your insurance carrier. Regional Centers may also have family cost-sharing requirements for certain services and/or an annual family program fee for families above a certain income, although this requirement is waived for children receiving Medi-Cal. For families with household income below 400% of the federal poverty level, Regional Centers can also assist with [copayments](#) for services documented in the IFSP.

## Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA)

In most cases, Regional Centers will be responsible for providing early intervention services. However, for children with certain low-incidence disabilities, the SELPA will provide services instead of or in addition to the Regional Center. A SELPA is a consortium of local school districts, county education offices, and charter schools tasked with certain special education responsibilities for children with disabilities within its geographic region.

California Education Code Section 56026.5 defines low-incidence disabilities as severely disabling conditions with an incidence rate of less than 1% of statewide K-12 enrollment – specifically, “hearing impairments, vision impairments, severe orthopedic impairments, or any combination thereof.”

For children ages 0–5 with low-incidence disabilities, the SELPA is responsible for 1) direct services via Early Start for children ages 0–3 under IDEA Part C, and 2) preschool and special education services for children ages 3–5 under IDEA Part B in coordination with local education agencies.

A child may have an IFSP with both the SELPA and the Regional Center. However, since the Regional Center is the payor of last resort, services provided by the SELPA will be considered generic resources, and the Regional Center will not duplicate services. If your child is enrolled with both the SELPA and the Regional Center, and you feel that a particular service offered by the Regional Center is more appropriate than what is offered by the SELPA, you will need to demonstrate why the SELPA service as a generic resource does not meet your child’s needs.

## Medi-Cal

[Medi-Cal](#) is California’s Medicaid program. While it is traditionally income-based, many people with disabilities are eligible for programs that expand access to Medi-Cal to prevent institutionalization by broadening the financial criteria or applying different thresholds. Medi-Cal can help cover medical and therapeutic services, equipment, and supplies for your child, even if you already have primary insurance. However, Medi-Cal, like the Regional Center, is the payor of last resort, meaning that Medi-Cal will only step in after your health insurance has paid its share of costs.

Children with disabilities who are Regional Center clients under the Lanterman Act (children over age 3 and some children under age 3) may qualify for Medi-Cal’s [institutional deeming waiver](#) program, which provides access to Medi-Cal regardless of parental income.

Medi-Cal and [California Children’s Services \(CCS\)](#) can work together to help coordinate your child’s care team. CCS can provide physical and occupational therapy as well as durable medical equipment if your child has an eligible diagnosis.

## IHSS

[In-Home Supportive Services \(IHSS\)](#) is a Medi-Cal program that provides home-based personal care and related services so that people with disabilities can remain safely in their communities instead of institutions. Although IHSS doesn't provide early intervention therapies, the program can fund caregiver services in your home so that you have additional resources to support your child. You can even be paid by IHSS to provide certain types of care for your child at home. There is no minimum age requirement to receive IHSS. However, IHSS hours are awarded to children based solely on care needs that exceed those of a typically-developing child, so it is unusual for children to qualify for IHSS before the age of 3 unless they have extensive medical care needs or extreme supervision needs.

For more information about funding, see our article [How Do We Pay For It All? Undivided's Guide to Funding Resources](#).



## Funding your child's medical & therapeutic needs: California resources at a glance

Resource	Eligibility	What it provides
Regional Center	Based on assessment of developmental disability	Early intervention; respite; parent training; access to Medi-Cal; and more via funding when there is no other resource
Medi-Cal	Based on income or Regional Center client status	Medical coverage for services and some equipment + supplies; access to IHSS
CalABLE	Based on disability	Savings/investment account that doesn't affect government benefits
California Children's Services (CCS)	Based on diagnosis and income or Medi-Cal status	Funding for diagnostic and treatment services
Head Start	Based on income and age	Early learning programs
Self-Determination Program (SDP)	Based on Regional Center client status	Flexible budget for services authorized by Regional Center
SELPA's and LEAs	Based on school assessment of needs	Special education; early intervention for children with low-incidence disabilities

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Looking for a step-by-step guide to applying for Regional Center, Medi-Cal, IHSS, or another program? Get started at [www.undivided.io](http://www.undivided.io).

# Educational Transitions: What's Coming Next

Once your child turns three years old, your school district becomes responsible for providing special education services through an [Individualized Education Plan](#) (IEP). The transition process begins several months before the child turns three years old so that an IEP is in place with the school district by the child's third birthday, which is the day the Regional Center early intervention services end. (Some children will be eligible for continued Regional Center services under the [Lanterman Act](#) after they turn three years old if they have been diagnosed with a developmental disability as defined by California law.)

## Transition to Preschool

You should receive a request from the school or district inviting you to an IEP meeting about 90 days before your child's third birthday. ([If you don't, read about how to request an IEP meeting here.](#)) With your IEP team, you'll discuss placement options for your child's preschool, accommodations and services your child would benefit from, and any other specialized support your child needs.

Check out [Choosing a Preschool and Preparing for Your Child's First IEP](#) for a full guide to this process, IEP basics, plus a checklist of questions to ask when you tour potential preschools.

To dive more into the IEP process for preschoolers, be sure to review our [Preschool IEP Decoder](#), which has links to articles about preschool accommodations, IEP goals, and inclusion.



## How to find an inclusive preschool near you

01

Try to find a neighborhood school so your child can make local friends.

02

Network with other parents of children with disabilities, who may have already talked to preschool directors and visited sites.

03

Ask the schools you tour about the ways they welcome students with disabilities.

04

Learn about your child's rights; schools in the district may offer a segregated classroom, but it is your right to discuss options at your IEP meeting.

05

Join your district's special education advisory council (SEAC) or SELPA Community Advisory Committee. Contact your district's director of special education to find out when and where the meetings happen.

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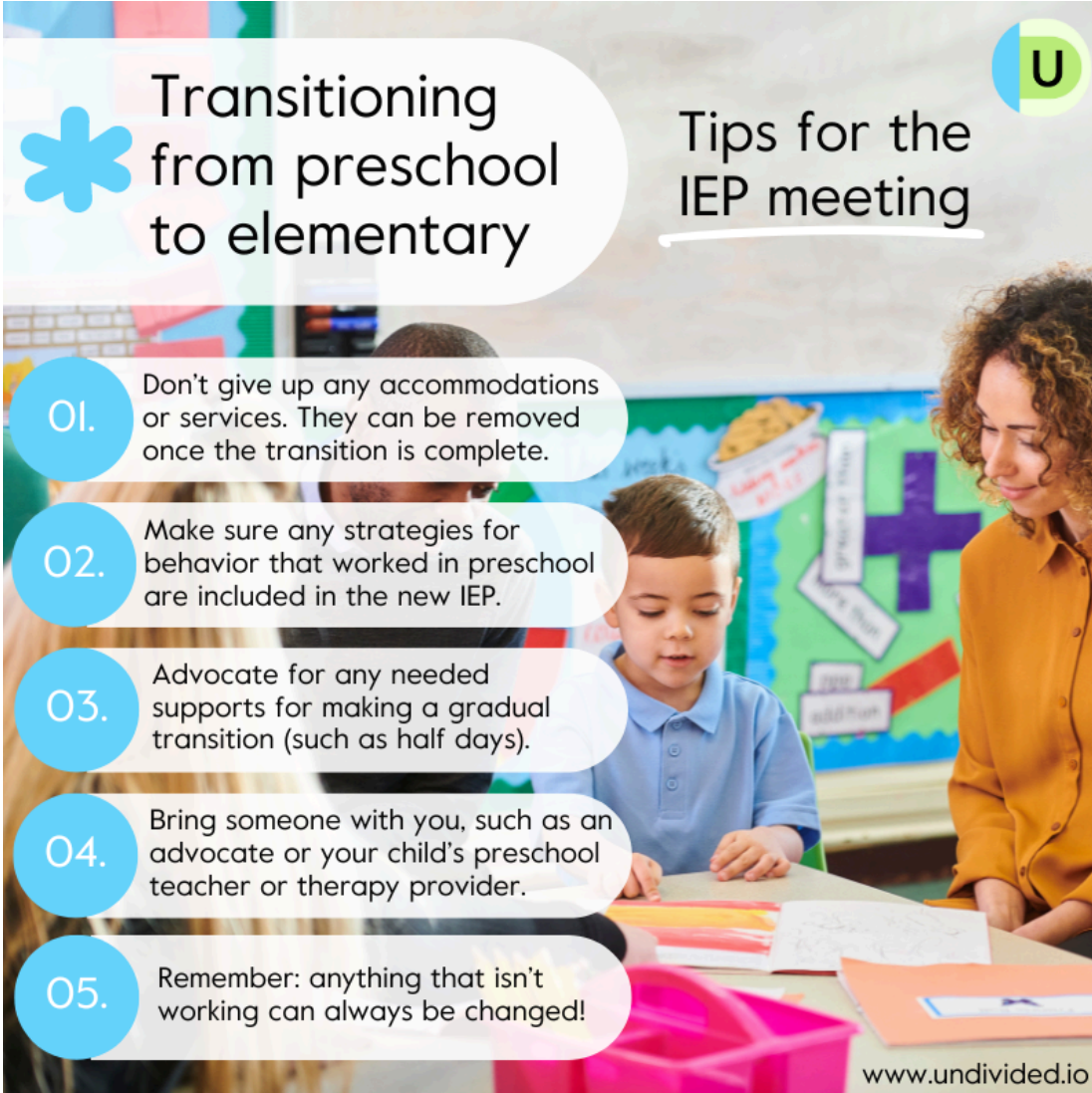
When we talk about [inclusion](#), we mean making sure our kids with disabilities have plenty of opportunities – in both classrooms and in extracurricular activities – to socialize with their non-disabled peers and having access to their grade-level content. Research shows that inclusive education is linked to better academic results, employment in competitive integrated work, and other indicators of success.

The earlier inclusion starts, the better, so we have a whole series of articles about prioritizing [inclusion in preschool](#).

## Transition to Kindergarten

For many kids, kindergarten is the first exposure to a more structured curriculum, and the academic environment (and expectations) can be stressful. If your child is transitioning to a public elementary school, the sheer size of the building and number of other students can also be overwhelming.

To make the process easier for families, our article [Making the Transition to Kindergarten with an IEP](#) offers plenty of tips for navigating kindergarten assessments, touring placement options, preparing for the transition IEP meeting, and more. You can also [download our in-depth IEP prep packet here](#).



The infographic features a background image of a young boy in a blue shirt sitting at a table with a teacher in a yellow shirt. They are looking at papers on the table. The infographic includes a blue star icon, a green circle with a white 'U', and a list of five numbered tips. The website address 'www.undivided.io' is visible in the bottom right corner of the infographic.

### Transitioning from preschool to elementary

### Tips for the IEP meeting

01. Don't give up any accommodations or services. They can be removed once the transition is complete.
02. Make sure any strategies for behavior that worked in preschool are included in the new IEP.
03. Advocate for any needed supports for making a gradual transition (such as half days).
04. Bring someone with you, such as an advocate or your child's preschool teacher or therapy provider.
05. Remember: anything that isn't working can always be changed!

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## About Undivided

Undivided is a parent-driven support system for families raising kids with disabilities. We provide an inclusive community, experienced parent coaches, and expert-backed resources, all organized on our innovative app, to help families get more for their children. Whether you need help accessing Regional Center services, developing an IEP, or finding funding resources for therapies, an Undivided Navigator can walk you through each step with expert-backed answers.



Get started at [www.undivided.io](http://www.undivided.io).