

Health Policy Research Program Summary of Research Results

Title:	Present Policy and Practice and Future Directions in Early Intervention in Canada
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Summary

Major Findings

In Canada, provinces and territories provide services for young children with special needs within a framework of federal and provincial initiatives with administrative and fiscal responsibility spread among various government departments. Service providers are for the most part, independent nonprofit organizations which have developed programs, in response to needs in their communities. This grass roots approach has many strengths, primarily adaptation to local needs and resources; however, provision of universally accessible, quality early intervention services is hampered without a coordinated system backed by provincial and federal policy.

Workshop participants identified a range of difficulties common to early intervention services in most provinces arising from inconsistencies in definitions, lack of data and information for planning and insufficient communication. Terms such as special needs, early intervention, and eligibility are defined differently leading to variations in who receives services and for what reasons. Without consistent definitions as the basis for statistics, it is difficult to plan responsibly. Baseline information about the families and children who use early intervention services is lacking for types of disabilities, need for service, location, and effect of services. Similarly characteristics of service providers and programs are largely unknown.

It was the view of workshop participants that addressing these issues in a cooperative manner will produce beneficial effects for early intervention services in Canada.

Participants recognized that although not every problem affects every program or service, all services could improve from proposed solutions.

The Task Force on Early Intervention has the ability to act as a clearinghouse of information for early intervention services as well as the expertise to undertake focussed research in designated area. Collection, analysis and dissemination of information in a timely fashion are priorities for the group. The Task Force already has literature on best practices, assessment tools, and effectiveness of early intervention. The Task Force can coordinate information which needs to be collected such as long-term outcomes for families and children, effective multicultural practices, and consistent statistical data. Research that would assist in identifying long-term outcomes and essential elements of effective programs would support more efficient planning. Through the inauguration and maintenance of a Task Force website, existing information from literature reviews and reports, annotated and designed for specific audiences, can be made accessible to the early intervention community. Collection of information such as definitions in use across the country, assessment tools and sources of statistics will be undertaken and results posted. Baseline data on children and families in need of services and on the programs and professionals delivering services can be gathered through systematic surveys conducted by the Task Force and its associates. Longitudinal studies, although beyond the scope of the Task Force, are dependent upon accurate, dependable information. The Task Force can be instrumental in creating a source of reliable data for future work.

Workshop participants identified several distinct audiences benefiting from information. Policy makers need information on cost per child, long-term outcomes, and pros and cons of integration of services. Professionals need best practices for specific situations, recommendations for training and qualifications, and information about family situations and dynamics in order to create family centred practices. Families need information about their child's condition, strategies to support optimum development, availability of resources and government policy decisions that affect planning.

Information can be disseminated for various audiences through a variety of media. The Task Force has established regular e-mail communication with all workshop participants with updated status reports of the research agenda established at the meeting. In addition, reports on the workshop for in-house ministry newsletters are in preparation. Long-term plans for continued communication include the development of the Task Force website dedicated to early intervention issues and a follow-up meeting in February 2004 hosted in conjunction with Infant Development Programmes of BC Early Child Development Conference. The Task Force provision of information through external and internal communication will ensure the broadest access to audiences.

Workshop participants made recommendations for research based on their experiences in planning and providing early intervention services. Suggestions included: collection of baseline data on the children and families in need of early intervention services; establishment of databank of assessment tools (including criteria for use, effectiveness ratings, and cost and suppliers) and training programs (including course of study, certification, etc.) made available to a wide audience of people involved in early

intervention services: families, health professionals, service providers and bureaucrats; development of common definitions within the profession and a communication network. The Task Force has begun collecting materials already available (reports, research findings, assessment tools, etc.) and preparing them in appropriate formats for distribution via website, mail, etc. In addition, the Task Force website is being adjusted to reflect its role as an information source. Other steps will be taken in consultation with workshop participants after reviewing workshop proceedings.

Policy in early intervention is determined at provincial levels, influenced by fiscal and political factors as well as programming results. Participants expressed the desire to establish core programming based on evidence, standardized assessments and evaluations, and responsible planning based on research and realistic cost estimates. The Task Force on Early Intervention has the advantage of being able to serve all groups equally as a neutral clearinghouse of information for all provinces. It can ensure access to information at all levels of involvement in early intervention services. This will be an original contribution to the field. As the work of the Task Force continues, policy recommendations will be made in areas indicated a critical by workshop participants. An overwhelming goal of participants was to create provincial policies and common evaluation frameworks influenced by research rather than litigation. The first step towards realizing this goal is the provision of reliable, accurate and adequate information. This is the first priority of the Task Force on Early Intervention.

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- The print version of the full report can be obtained in the language of submission from the Health Canada Library through inter-library loan.
- An electronic version of the report in the language of submission is available upon request from Health Canada by e-mailing rmddinfo@hc-sc.gc.ca.

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