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**Equitable IEP/IFSP Planning**

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University of Connecticut Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

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**Indicator 3: Equitable IEP/IFSP Planning**

**Introduction**

**Definition of Equity**

Current literature provides a myriad of definitions for the term “equity.” While the term itself is not new, its incorporation into the world of early childhood intervention (ECI) service delivery is nascent. As the concept of equity becomes more deeply ingrained across ECI in both practice and research, it will also become more important that families and providers have a shared definition.

Existing research and organizations dedicated to the field of early childhood field assert that, overall, equity in ECI acknowledges, adapts to, uplifts, and amplifies families’ individual strengths, needs, and voices (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2019; National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE), 2023; Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA), 2023). The literature affirms that equity within ECI requires taking intentional steps toward ensuring all children and families have access to the resources necessary to meet their individual goals regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or other social or cultural identities (Maryland State Department (MSD), n.d.; NAEYC, 2019). To achieve this common goal for equity within ECI, providers and educators must actively work to ensure all children and families receive the individualized support necessary to fully meet their unique potential (i.e., cognitive, social, emotional, and physical; NCPFCE, 2023).

A crucial first step toward equity in ECI environments is to build on each child’s unique set of strengths - individual, family, cultural, and communal. Effective screening and service delivery must also address the diverse backgrounds of children by incorporating community outreach that is both culturally and linguistically sensitive (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2012). Ultimately, equity within the field of ECI will result in eliminating barriers limiting positive outcomes that are a result of past and present inequities in society (MSD, n.d.; NCPFCE, 2023).

**Definition of IEP/IFSP Planning**

Early childhood interventions (ECI) can provide significant benefits for overall child development - including educational success - for all children and families, but especially for those from communities who have been historically underserved. These developmental benefits make access to a Free Appropriate Public Education through an IFSP or IEP developed through an equity lens a truly powerful resource to reduce child development inequities (Archambault et al., 2019).

Developing an IFSP or IEP with an equity lens requires that opportunities (i.e., educational resources and services) are provided specific to the unique needs of each eligible child (i.e., a child whose developmental delays have been evaluated and confirmed through appropriate diagnostic assessments and tools) and family, which may include additional resources and services to appropriately foster an environment that supports true educational equity (IDEA, 2006; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), 2019). To create such equitable educational environments for children, it is critical that a cross-disciplinary team - including families as experts - establish shared knowledge and objectives. Once established, children who have or are at risk for developmental delays or disabilities are more likely to achieve positive outcomes, and families are more likely to help children achieve their highest potential (DEC, 2014).

Developing IFSPs and IEPs rooted in equity requires cross-disciplinary teams actively work to understand and respond to the broader cultural and societal contexts, biases, and historical and current inequities that influence their practice and impact the children and families they support (NAEYC, 2019). All children have the right to IFSPs and IEPs that provide them with learning opportunities rooted in equity, opportunities that enable them to achieve their individual potential, opportunities that support their being engaged learners. Families also benefit from equitable opportunities to engage in the process of developing the IFSPs and IEPs that provide increased access to these opportunities. By centering families’ voices through an equity lens, educators and providers can understand and respond to their perspectives, lived experiences, and expertise throughout the process of developing an IFSP or IEP (NCPFCE, 2023).

Settings in which ECI is delivered (i.e., centers, homes, and schools) are often children’s first consistent communities. These settings can provide critical contexts for children’s development and learning. IFSPs and IEPs - developed equitably - can act as bridges between children and their families’ goals and the learning opportunities that support their meeting these goals. These bridges help all children and families experience success by building upon their unique strengths (i.e., cultural background, language, skills, and experiences), but they should also work toward eliminating limitations stemming from societal inequities (NAEYC, 2019).

It is critical that throughout the IFSP and IEP planning process, cross-disciplinary teams intentionally establish and foster safe and respectful environments where team members (i.e., parents and caregivers, providers and educators) can learn from each other and engage in honest dialogue about their expectations and objectives (NCPFCE, 2023). To engage in the IFSP/IEP process equitable, parents and caregivers must be recognized as equal partners and experts on their child. IFSP and IEP cross-disciplinary teams should consistently seek information from families about their observations of, concerns, goals, etc. for their child to inform program development (Drymond, 2023; NCPFCE, 2023).

 According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2006), IFSPs and IEPs must provide a comprehensive plan (i.e., a plan based on a child’s current levels of development as assessed by appropriate evaluations and tools) tailored to each child's - and family's - needs (i.e., developed with family input and to address their concerns), with clear and measurable goals, recommended service dates and durations, and transition support (IDEA, Part C Sec.303.344; Part B Sec. 300.320). The general purpose of developing these programs for children with disabilities is to 1) implement services and accommodations/modifications to provide individualized support as each child works toward their unique potential, 2) facilitate respect, collaboration, and partnership among cross-disciplinary teams throughout program development to ensure consistency for each child and family, and 3) improve and expand learning opportunities through an equity lens for all children (IDEA, 2006).

**Purpose**

The immediate purpose of this brief is to provide information (i.e., definitions, examples, recommendations, references, resources) in support of the first of six identified equity indicators: equitable developmental screenings. This brief is intended for early childhood educators and providers delivering services to children and their families.

This brief was written as part of the “Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities – Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Equity Center (ECIPC - Equity)" project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The work done was intended specifically to address Objective 1.2:

Develop materials, resources, and tools to facilitate the use of the early childhood

intervention equity-based framework as aligned with national professional organization

personnel standards, state standards, and evidence- based practice (“EBP”) in early

childhood intervention programs of study in institutions of higher education (“IHEs”).

**Definition of Equitable Developmental Screenings**

Equitable developmental screenings utilize assessments, tools, and resources when observing an infant or toddler’s progress toward developmental milestones with an understanding of and respect for how each child and family’s unique strengths, cultural background, language(s), abilities, and experiences impact the outcomes of a screening.

Ensuring an equitable developmental screening involves designing and implementing assessments, tools, and resources that are universal for all children by acknowledging and appropriately incorporating cultural and linguistic considerations and supports.

Equitable developmental screenings that are accessible for all families recognize and respect each family’s cultural background, language(s), and experiences and are designed to reduce outcomes that are a result of past and present inequities in society. Building an awareness and understanding of each family’s culture, personal beliefs, values, and biases is a foundational step toward highlighting parents and caregivers' voices and to encourage them to participate as informants during an equitable developmental screening.

**Recommendations**

* Involve children, families, and communities in program design and implementation, and build on the funds of knowledge families bring as members of cultures and communities (NAEYC, 2019)
* Collaborate with educators and other professionals (i.e., related service providers) as needed with the goal being to foster success and maximize each child’s potential (NAEYC, 2019)
* Embrace the primary role of families in children’s development and learning (NAEYC, 2019)
* Provide financial supports, structures, and resources that allow families to effectively participate in meetings (i.e., flexible meeting times, childcare, and transportation costs; ECTA, 2023)
* Ensure equal access to materials and resources provided before and at meetings by using translation and interpretation services, multiple communication formats (for example, written or visual), and easy to understand language (ECTA, 2023)
* Use "cultural or linguistic brokers" (i.e., individuals from the same culture or language as families) to recruit and support families through the process developing, implementing, and evaluating their child’s program - include these individuals on cross-disciplinary teams, as appropriate (ECTA, 2023)
* Suggest the use of evidence-based practices (EBPs) to meet the learning and developmental needs of children with disabilities (i.e., LAS, OT, PT, APE; ECTA, 2023)
* Uphold every family’s right to make decisions for and with their children (NAEYC, 2019)

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