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## CHLOE LEAREY: THE POSITIVE OUTCOMES FROM EARLY INTERVENTION

If you want to spend less money on special education in public education, invest in early intervention. If you want to spend less on health issues, invest in early intervention. If you want children to be ready for school, invest in early intervention. If you want families to be able to support their children, invest in early intervention.

In fact we have a formal program called “Early Intervention” that is Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. According to The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC), the program started in 1986 to support the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities from birth to age 3 to minimize developmental delay and “reduce educational costs to our society by minimizing the need for special education services as children with disabilities reach school age.”

<http://www.nectac.org/~pdfs/pubs/importanceofearlyintervention.pdf>) The program takes an interdisciplinary approach, working with children and families in natural environments, and helping families better understand and meet their child’s needs. Developmental delays and disabilities are “equal opportunity” and can impact any child and family regardless of race, religion, class, education level or other dimension of diversity. The Winston Prouty Center has housed this program since it began in our region. It was originally known as The Family Infant Toddler Program (FIT), and is now Children’s Integrated Services (CIS) Early Intervention (EI).

Speech delays are one of the most common issues that cause referrals to our Early Intervention program. Imagine you have a child who is not talking at 18 months, not saying “hi” or “bye”, “ma-ma” or “da-da”, “milk” or “cat” despite all the reading and talking you are doing with him or her. We know this is a critical time for brain development, and that the circuits in our brains are most flexible during the first 3 years of life, well before anyone is even anticipating beginning kindergarten. Identifying a delay and exploring the possible causes is the most important step you can take in making a difference. One child we worked with started receiving services when she was 16 months old and not yet talking. By the time she exited the program, she was age appropriate in her language and no longer in need of any services. Last year, 61% of children on average exited early intervention with age-appropriate functioning across outcome areas we measure, and 83% of those who were not age-appropriate had substantially increased their growth – a tremendous indication of the progress that is made.

Life can certainly be more complicated, too! Some children who receive early intervention may never reach age-appropriate function given their disability and will still require special education; although services can be less intensive due to the positive impact of EI. A few years ago, we worked with

a child who had complications at birth, which caused significant brain impairment. Although he could not speak clearly, he was able to learn words through picture cards and eventually learned to use a communication device to be able to interact with family, friends and teachers. With appropriate supports he was able to participate full-time in an early learning program with same age peers and transitioned to kindergarten with everything in place, ready and available to maximize his learning. He began services with Early Intervention at birth, and then worked with special education through the supervisory union from age 3 to 5. If we had waited until he was 5 years old to get started on teaching communication and other skills it would have been more difficult and more expensive to help him learn.

More importantly, Early Intervention gives families the skills they need to support their child. On our most recent survey, 87% of families said that Early Intervention helped them help their child develop and learn. Ultimately one of the most powerful things we can do in our programs is build capacity in others – children, families, and colleagues – so that natural systems of support can be as strong as possible. Our goal is to help people have the skills and confidence they need to be successful, and Early Intervention gives children and families the opportunity to build a strong foundation for more positive outcomes in the future, including having friends and being able to participate as fully as possible in community.

There are multiple studies about early childhood intervention programs that “have found a number of long-term cost savings in terms of decreased grade repetition, reduced special education spending, enhanced productivity, lower welfare costs, increased tax revenues, and lower juvenile justice costs - outcomes that imply large costs for government and for society” according to researchers Martha Diefendorf and Susan Goode of NECTAC

<http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/pubs/econbene.pdf>). A report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) specifically identifies the economic benefit for Early Intervention Part C at “\$8 return on every dollar invested, and estimate(s) that 80% of the benefits were directly applicable to society in general (because of more efficient use of school services and less use of criminal justice and other public systems)”

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/132/4/e1073.full.pdf>). It appears that the programs not only pay for themselves, but can offer savings to government and the larger society many times the cost.

High quality Early Intervention for identified infants, toddlers and young children and their families is clearly a sound economic investment. As noted in the AAP report, this broadens the scope of early intervention from “social service/educational policy to one of critical economic-development and conservative fiscal responsibility.”

*Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. She served on the "Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High-Quality, Affordable Child Care." You can learn more by visiting [winstonprouty.org](http://winstonprouty.org).*

<https://vtdigger.org/2017/08/02/chloe-learey-positive-outcomes-early-intervention/>