



Learning

IN EVERYDAY PLACES

Using natural environments to help your child





When families are required to dramatically change their normal routine in order to access services, the additional stress that this promotes in their lives becomes yet another barrier to their ability to cope.

For children, it means that they must begin life outside the mainstream, perhaps never getting "IN."





When your Harbor Regional Center Counselor helps you find early intervention services for your child, he or she tries to ensure that those services are provided in “natural environments.” We talk more about these settings later in this booklet but, for now, we define natural environments as settings that are “natural or normal for the child’s age peers who have no disabilities.” This would include the home, the neighborhood, and the community where children without disabilities typically spend time. Natural environments are not segregated socialization programs, preschools for children with disabilities, or special education classrooms.

Why do we emphasize natural environments? One reason is because research has demonstrated over and over that young children are more likely to achieve desired outcomes as a result of time spent in such settings than if they spend that time in a segregated environment. In fact, natural environment is considered such an important factor in a child’s development that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal law governing early intervention services, requires the Individual and Family Service Plan (IFSP) to include specific justification if a service is **not** provided in the natural environment.

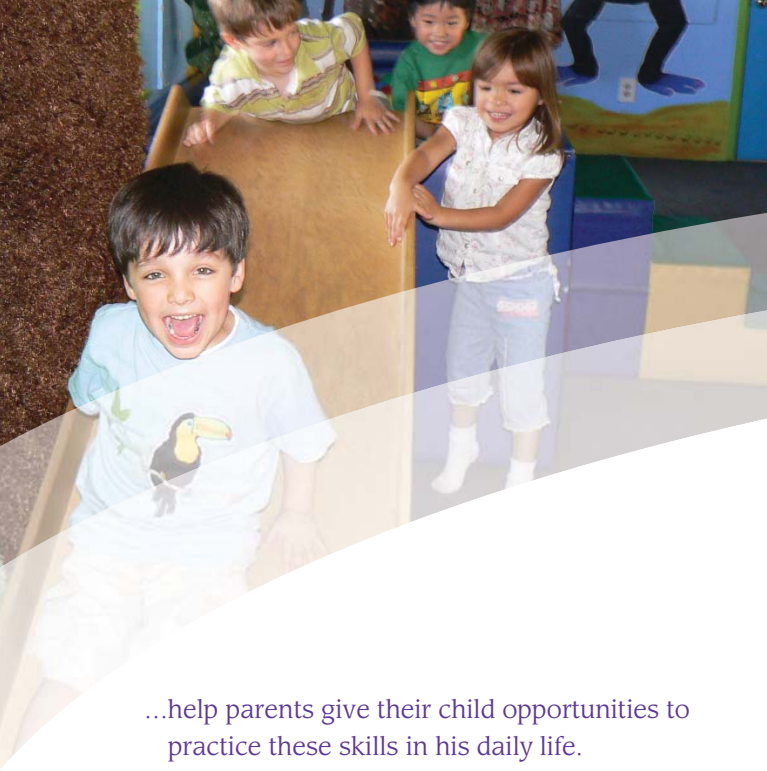
In this booklet we explain what natural environment means, and why it is considered important for your child to receive services and have experiences in these types of settings. We begin by more fully defining the term and then discuss some of the reasons such environments are so important. Finally, we give some examples of natural environments and discuss how you can help your child make the best use of these settings to have fun, make friends, and in the process, learn skills that will help him become more independent.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY NATURAL ENVIRONMENT?

Though the simple definition we gave at left suggests that natural environment is a physical place, the true definition of this term refers to much more than a place. It refers to when and how services are provided to your child and your family. Let’s take a closer look.

Services provided in natural environments...

- ...are provided in settings where the child and the family normally spend their time or would spend time if the child did not have a disability.
- ...are provided in settings where children without disabilities normally spend time.
- ...use community resources as opportunities for the child’s learning and activities.
- ...are provided in settings that are right for the child.
- ...are based upon the family’s resources, concerns, and priorities.
- ...are woven into the child’s and family’s normal daily routine.
- ...focus on practical activities that normally occur within the family’s daily routine to help the child become increasingly independent.
- ...use familiar materials naturally available in the home and the community.



- ...help parents give their child opportunities to practice these skills in his daily life.
- ...increase opportunities for the child to learn from other children his own age.
- ...give parents opportunities to collaborate with one another, with service providers, and with others in the community to enhance their child's development.

In short, natural environments are part of the natural fabric of a family's life. They are anywhere families typically spend time. The use of natural environments provides children with the opportunity to develop and practice skills in settings where they live, learn, and play throughout the day. We know that young children learn best when they are taught



skills like eating, playing, moving, and communicating during the times and in the places most natural for them to eat, play, walk, or talk.

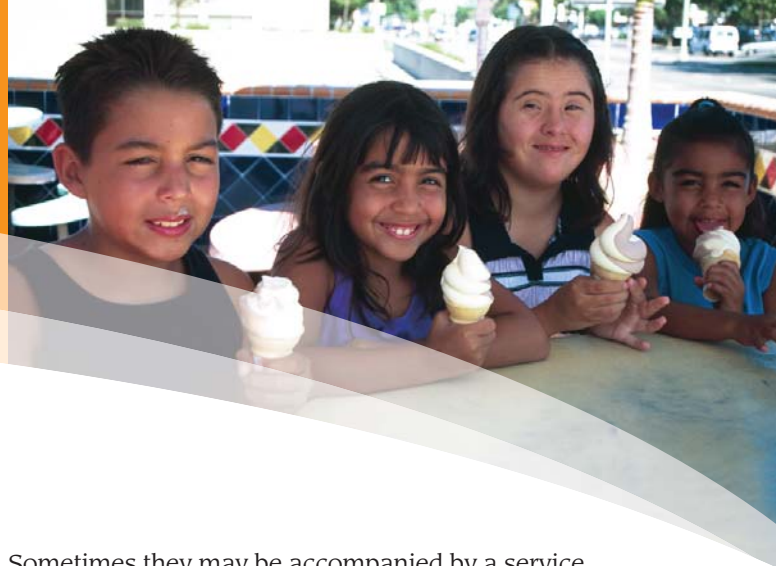
You may have guessed from the description that natural environments rarely include settings that are traditionally designed for and serve only children with disabilities. In natural environments, you observe children with and without disabilities participating in the same activities, using the same toys and materials, and interacting with the same adults.

WHY ARE NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS IMPORTANT?

Research on child development has provided us with a lot of reasons to try to ensure that young children maximize time spent in natural environments with non-disabled children. Studies have shown repeatedly that:

- Children with disabilities learn from their typical peers; at the same time, typical children learn from children with disabilities.
- The presence of children with disabilities in a school or other learning environment does not impede the progress of other children in that setting. Further, children who have experiences in classrooms that include children with disabilities develop a better understanding of disabilities.
- Children with disabilities make more progress in language and social skills when in inclusive – as opposed to segregated – settings.
- Parents of typically developing children report that their children benefit from being in early childhood programs that include children with disabilities.





- Children learn best when they practice skills in settings and activities in which they would normally use those same skills, rather than in contrived learning situations. In other words, providing services within the child's typical daily activities increases the number of learning opportunities and enhances the meaningfulness of what is learned.
- Children are more likely to develop functional skills in natural settings and they are more likely to be able to generalize those skills to other settings. Children often have difficulty transferring skills learned in a clinical setting or a special classroom to places like the park, their living room, or childcare settings.
- Children learn best from adults and other children involved in their daily life.
- Early intervention services that are relevant to their lives decrease a family's stress.

When we talk about natural environments, then, we are talking about two general types of settings. The first includes structured early childhood settings serving children with disabilities as well as typically developing children. Examples would be a typical pre-school or a class at My Gym, where children with and without disabilities are engaged in structured play or other activities that help them develop skills that increase their independence.

The second type of setting is any environment in which non-disabled children live, learn, and play throughout the day. Examples would be the neighbor's house and the local playground. In these environments children with disabilities may engage in many unstructured activities that offer learning opportunities. They may do this with their parents or with other children and adults they meet in these places.

Sometimes they may be accompanied by a service provider who provides therapy in that setting, or who helps the family identify or create opportunities for the child to learn and practice new skills.

Services provided in natural environments also encourage families to develop and strengthen supports in their communities. They connect families to natural sources of support, such as friends, neighbors, and congregations. Finally, and most importantly, they improve a family's abilities and capacities to support and promote their child's healthy development. It is said that ***the quality and effectiveness of early intervention can be measured in large part by how effectively it assists parents in supporting and enhancing the development of their infants and toddlers.*** Below are some examples of natural environments and the kinds of learning opportunities that can be found there.

Examples of learning opportunities in natural environments:

A Friend's House

- Saying hello and goodbye to friend's parents
- Taking off and putting on a coat
- Playing a game
- Petting the dog
- Practicing table manners

The Park

- Drinking at the water fountain
- Climbing on the equipment
- Taking turns
- Improving strength and balance
- Talking to other children



The Grocery Store

- Selecting items to purchase
- Learning about money
- Helping carry purchases
- Waiting in line

Home

- Getting dressed
- Putting clothes away
- Talking on the phone
- Taking a bath, brushing teeth
- Helping to cook
- Feeding the pet

When you meet with your HRC Counselor and other early intervention service providers, they will help you identify goals that will result in increased independence for your child. They will also give you suggestions about what you can do with your child as part of your everyday routines and activities to help him achieve these goals. With their help, you will find many knowledge- and skill-building opportunities for your child in natural environments all around you.

RESOURCES

Books on natural environments available in the HRC Resource and Assistive Technology Center:

Natural Environments and Inclusion. Susan Sandal and Michael Ostrosky, Eds, Council for Exceptional Children, 2000.

Activity-Based Intervention. Diane Bricker, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1995.

Young Children with Disabilities in Natural Environments. Mary Jo Noonan, PhD and Linda McCormick, PhD, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. 2006.

An Activity-Based Approach to Early Intervention, Third Edition. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, PhD, & Diane Bricker, PhD, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. 2004.

Web sites where you can find additional resources:

www.circleofinclusion.org. *The Circle of Inclusion Web Site* is for early childhood service providers and families of young children.

www.dec-sped.org. The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children

www.nectas.unc.edu. National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center at the University of North Carolina

www.wested.org. An excellent resource for publications on early intervention





HARBOR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES FOUNDATION, INC.

21231 Hawthorne Boulevard, Torrance, CA 90503
(310) 540-1711 • www.harborrc.org