

Early Intervention in an International Perspective

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Abstract The importance and potential value of a worldwide commitment to provide comprehensive early intervention services for children at risk for or with identified intellectual disabilities are considered in the context of this special issue on early intervention. Further refinement of policies and advances in effective practices will result through the application of relevant research findings, through the development and implementation of comprehensive professional training programs, and through model program development with corresponding efforts to bring programs to scale. Articles in this special issue are discussed as representing major early intervention themes in the international community.

Keywords: early intervention, education, inclusion

Estimates of the number of children with or at risk for intellectual disabilities worldwide are staggering. Well-known biomedical and environmental factors, often acting together, suggest that as many as 780 million children birth through 5 years of age may be affected (Olness, 2003). Fortunately, a recognition of the magnitude and scope of this problem has been accompanied by a growing worldwide commitment to provide comprehensive early intervention services and supports to young vulnerable children and their families (Blackman, 2002). One expectation is that early intervention programs can prevent, sometimes entirely, risk factors from exerting their negative influence on children's development. Another expectation is that, even for children with identified intellectual disabilities, early intervention can not only minimize intellectual delays but other secondary complications as well. Available evidence suggests that these are realistic expectations for many children and families (Guralnick, 2005a).

For this to occur most optimally, comprehensive systems of early intervention must be in place in every community. In order to make these comprehensive and well-integrated programs accessible and most effective for all children and families, an early intervention infrastructure based on thoughtful and realistic policies and practices needs to be in place. Among other factors, these policies and practices must be compatible with existing resources, be sensitive to an individual family's and a community's culture, priorities, and expectations, have meaningful professional and paraprofessional training programs in place, demonstrate a firm grasp of a child development framework that centers on families, and make every effort to apply current and accepted knowledge to practice.

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Through this commitment to early intervention, it is now evident that the fundamental principles and practices required to establish high levels of comprehensiveness and quality are gradually achieving consensus and are being tested and implemented in diverse communities around the world (Guralnick, 2005b). Both policies and practices are being further refined by applying new information disseminated through the usual publication outlets but accelerated through Internet access to both the information itself and to the opportunities to communicate with colleagues provided through organizations such as the International Society on Early Intervention (<http://www.isei.washington.edu>). Despite an existing extensive knowledge base and even consensus with respect to principles and practices, knowledge in all its forms relevant to early intervention policies and practices, particularly for children with intellectual disabilities, is growing at a rapid pace. This Special Issue of the *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* is intended to capture some of the major themes and directions in the field of early intervention from an international perspective.

One of the most pressing issues in the field is the extensive variability evident in children's developmental patterns and in the diversity of family characteristics; factors that can influence early intervention outcomes. It is quite common to find substantially different degrees of responsiveness to similar early intervention efforts. Ideally, we would like to be able to match a unique profile of child and family characteristics to intervention strategies. This should be done on an individual-by-individual basis, but finding subtypes or patterns of child and family characteristics is an important beginning. This critical topic is the focus of three articles in this Special Issue. One article addresses the ability of neonatal assessment to predict child development and neurological status. The changing pattern of risk over time has important policy implications for developmental surveillance approaches

and the allocation of precious early intervention resources. Two other articles used clustering techniques to examine this issue. One identified family subtypes likely to moderate the impact of early intervention programs for young children, mainly identified as having Down syndrome. Another found distinct patterns related to child engagement, an important element of effective early intervention programs.

Early intervention conceptualized as supporting the emerging relationship between parents and children is discussed in another article. As noted earlier, being family-centered is among the generally accepted principles for early intervention, and this approach is thoughtfully incorporated into a model program focusing on families of children with Down syndrome. The availability of these models for specific subgroups of children, often with unique developmental and behavioral characteristics, in this case specificity defined by etiology, is an essential part of the process of enhancing early intervention services. Another important article addresses how early intervention professionals can best promote a child's development and foster parent well-being by supporting families' use of everyday learning activities. This constitutes an important and further refinement of the meaning of family centeredness and carries vital implications for policy development and intervention practices. Moreover, recent research has revealed that young children with intellectual disabilities are at an extraordinarily high risk for social isolation from their peers. This circumstance poses a considerable threat to their overall mental health and is discussed in another article in this Special Issue. Our understanding of the causes of this pervasive problem is becoming clearer, and the problems identified are not likely to respect international boundaries. The policy implications of this issue for both mental health and children's inclusion in everyday activities are significant.

This Special Issue also contains new information regarding the scope and magnitude of the problem that early intervention systems need to address and how professional training programs can respond. In one article, a comprehensive analysis of child and family characteristics for children eligible for services in one country's early intervention system is presented. The more we

know about this population, the better prepared we will be. Numerous policy implications emerge from this study that is relevant to the international community. Correspondingly, professional training issues are of concern in every community, especially in view of the many challenges facing the diverse group of professionals representing many different disciplines. Without a knowledgeable and well-trained cadre of professionals, there is no hope that comprehensive and optimal early intervention supports and services will be provided. Agreeing on "common ground" for professional training is one important step to ensure the availability of well-trained professionals. This is discussed in another article in terms of the European community's effort to do so.

Taken together, this Special Issue provides a glimpse of the exciting efforts being carried out to further enhance early intervention from an international perspective. The policies and practices that are being refined through thoughtful research, through innovative professional training programs, and through model program development efforts underscore the international community's commitment to early intervention and enhance the prospects for improving the well-being of young children at risk for or with established intellectual disabilities.

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