

Natural Environments

Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT)

Practice Guide

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Purpose

The purpose of this Practice Guide is to explain requirements and evidence-based practices for providing and documenting services in natural environments.

What are Natural Environments and Why are They Important?

Natural environments refer to *everyday learning opportunities* which take place in *home and community settings* where children live, learn, and play.

Providing services in natural environments is not just the law, but more importantly, it reflects the core mission of early intervention, which is to support families to provide learning opportunities for their child within the activities, routines, and events of everyday life. ([IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association, 2000, p.1](#))

Providing services in natural environments supports the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) Early Supports for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) [Mission](#) and has many advantages for children, families, and communities. Services in the natural environment:

- Use the numerous learning opportunities available in everyday moments
- Enhance the capacity of the family to support their child’s development
- Promote carryover of new skills into the child’s ordinary routines
- Support the family’s belonging in their communities
- Enhance the capacity of communities to support individuals with disabilities
- Foster the use and development of informal and non-specialized support systems
- Encourage community inclusion.
- Promote the civil rights fought for and achieved in legislation, such as the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA), [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) and the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#);
- Are consistent with professional consensus and evidence-based practices in the field of early childhood developmental supports.

Two Aspects of Natural Environments

The two main aspects of natural environments are:

- Natural Settings: the locations in which services take place, and
- Natural Learning Opportunities: the people, interactions, materials, and activities, that make up a visit.

Whereas much of the earliest interpretation of IDEA Part C natural environments requirements focused on the location where services take place, the field has grown to understand that the context and activities that make up a visit are just as, if not more, important than the setting.

Natural Settings

Definition

IDEA Part C federal regulations define natural environment settings as those locations that are “natural or typical for a same-aged infant or toddler without a disability” 34 C.F.R. §303.26.

Requirements

IDEA Part C services must be provided, “to the maximum extent appropriate in natural environments” 34 C.F.R. §303.126(a). [DCYF ESIT Policy and Procedures](#) and the DCYF ESIT contract confirm this requirement for all services conducted by ESIT service providers. See the Resources and Citations [Natural Settings subsection](#) of this document for more information.

Examples of Natural and Non-Natural Settings

A setting is considered natural if it is a location where same-age children without disabilities typically spend time. Some examples include:

- Homes of family and friends
- Grocery store
- Restaurant
- Playground
- Public library
- Children’s museum
- Childcare center.

A setting is considered a non-natural environment if it is a place that was designed only for children with disabilities or a place where only children with disabilities would spend time. Some examples include:

- Therapy clinic
- ESIT provider agency office
- Specialized therapy or teaching room designed or set aside for children with disabilities, even if that room is in a natural community setting, such as a special room in a community center
- A natural setting used after-hours only for children with disabilities, such as using an Early Head Start classroom for ESIT services, after all the other children have gone home.

Natural Learning Opportunities

Definition

Natural learning opportunities are those everyday opportunities that take place within a child and family’s typical routines and interactions. Determining if a service includes natural learning opportunities is more complex than determining if a setting is natural because there are more factors to consider, such as:

- People and social interactions
- Materials used
- Time of day
- Activities and routines.

Requirements

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the federal program that administers Part C nationally, states, “Part C early intervention builds upon and provides supports and resources to assist family members and caregivers to enhance children’s learning and development *through everyday learning opportunities.*” ([Agreed Upon Mission and Key Principles, 2008](#)).

The DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures state that ESIT Part C services are provided “in a manner that will enhance the capacity of the family in facilitating their child’s development *through natural learning opportunities* at home or in community settings where children live, learn, or play” ([DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures](#). Early Intervention Services. 2.A.12(I)).

Likewise, the DCYF ESIT contract states that providers must use practices that strengthen the capacity of parents and other caregivers to *provide everyday learning opportunities* for their child and increase child participation in daily activities and family routines.

Evidence-Based Practices

Federal regulations, ESIT Policies and Procedures, and the DCYF ESIT contract requirements state that ESIT services reflect scientifically based research, including evidence-based and promising practices. Natural learning opportunities have been consistently recognized by the early childhood education field to be an evidence-based best practice for enhancing family capacity and promoting child development. See the Resources and Citations [Natural Learning Opportunities](#) subsection of this document for more information on the professional consensus behind using natural learning opportunities in early childhood services.

Examples of Practices Using Natural and Non-Natural Learning Opportunities

Practices that support natural opportunities include:

- Interacting with familiar people in the child’s life, in ways that are typical for their relationship
- Using materials the child is familiar with or that the family has available
- Prioritizing meeting at times of day that are convenient for the family and fit into their daily routines
- Engaging in activities that the family is able and willing to participate in and that the child and family enjoy.

Practices that don’t support natural learning opportunities include:

- Centering the session around the child’s interaction with the ESIT service provider;
- Providing services to the child during which the caregiver is not present or does not participate;
- Providing services in a group designed only for, or comprised of, a disproportionate number of children with disabilities;
- Bringing new toys, books and games to the home and taking them back at the end of the session;
- Scheduling sessions when convenient for the provider, but not the family (e.g. during a child’s typical naptime or on a day when the family usually engages in some other important activity);
- Encouraging the child and family to repeatedly engage in activities which they find unfamiliar, unimportant, unpleasant, or culturally inappropriate, even if the provider thinks the activities would be beneficial.

Service, Setting, Method, Strategy, and Intensity

The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) team, which includes the parents, is responsible for determining what ESIT services will be provided and documenting those services in the IFSP. The team first develops functional outcomes and then decides which services, providers, settings, methods, strategies, and intensities will support the child and family in achieving those outcomes.

What is a Part C Service?

IDEA Part C requires that most Part C services be provided in natural environments to the maximum extent appropriate but *does not* specify where or how *non-Part C services* be provided. Having a clear understanding of which services are designated as Part C services can answer many natural environments questions that arise. Please see the Resources and Citations [Services, Settings, Methods, Strategies and Intensities](#) subsection of this document for more information.

Pre-IFSP Activities

Part C activities that occur prior to issuing the initial IFSP, such as Child Find, intake, and initial eligibility evaluations, are not mandated to meet the IDEA Part C natural environments requirements. However, it is best practice to conduct the eligibility evaluation in a natural setting in order to see how the child functions in their everyday environment.

Part C Services

Federal IDEA Part C regulations list seventeen types of Part C services (sometimes referred to as “ESIT Services” in WA State) that may be provided to an eligible infant/toddler and their family. See the [ESIT Qualified Personnel Guidelines](#) for a list of these seventeen services and the personnel who are qualified to provide them in Washington State. Additional services may be considered Part C services if they meet federal guidelines.

Other Services

Many families engage in supports that, while potentially beneficial, are not considered Part C services. These supports are recognized as Other Services and should be documented on the IFSP. Please follow current training protocols to ensure accurate documentation of Other Services/Resources.

Other Services are not mandated by IDEA to be provided in natural environments. However, it’s important to remember that even if a service does not fall under legal or contractual requirements to be provided in a natural environment, *research shows that supports and services which incorporate natural learning opportunities in natural settings are much more effective in meeting the needs of young children and their families.*

Setting, Method, Strategy and Intensity

The following terms are used as defined by the DCYF ESIT program. Please see the Resources and Citations [Services, Settings, Methods, Strategies and Intensities](#) subsection of this document for more information.

The service *setting* is the location where the caregiver and child are when they participate in services and may be deemed either a natural or non-natural environment. Examples include child’s home, community park and ESIT Provider Agency office or clinic.

The *method* is the service delivery modality and may take place in a variety of natural and non-natural environment settings. Examples include in-person visits, videoconference calls, phone calls and in-person groups. Services provided virtually are considered to take place in a natural environment if the child and family are participating from a natural environment, even if the ESIT service provider is not.

The *strategy* is the particular activity that will be employed to meet an IFSP outcome. Examples include: parent coaching, turn-taking games, sand play, songs, imitation, using assistive technology, etc. Strategies may also include the use of particular programs and protocols such as, DIRFloortime®, the Hanen Program®, Promoting First Relationships®, and the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP®) curriculum.

The *intensity* refers to the frequency and duration of services and can also indicate whether the service is provided to only one family/child at a time or is delivered in a group format.

Parent-specific Services

Part C services provided specifically in support of an outcome written to support the caregiver, and which do not directly include the child, are recommended, but not required, to take place in a natural environment. Please see the Resources and Citations [Parent-Specific Services and Infant/Toddler Groups](#) subsection of this document for more information.

Infant and Toddler Groups

Part C services provided in a group format must also meet natural environments requirements.

It is recommended that:

- The group is designed to meet the needs of infants and toddlers with a range of diverse learning needs and abilities.
- The group would continue to exist if no children with IFSPs were enrolled.
- The proportion of children with disabilities in the group is generally representative of the proportion of children with disabilities in the surrounding community.

Some examples of group settings which might be a natural environment for a particular child include community recreation centers, libraries, children’s museums, places of worship, along with Early Head Start, Early ECEAP and childcare classrooms.

ESIT Provider Agencies may host or conduct groups at their own facility, but these groups would not be considered to take place in a natural environment. Any Part C service provided in these groups would require an acceptable justification and a plan to return to a natural environment documented on the child’s IFSP.

Example 1: A toddler and her parents participate in weekly home visits with an ESIT speech-language pathologist (SLP). Once a month, the family and the SLP attend a toddler playgroup at the local children’s museum. During the group, the SLP coaches the parents on ways to enhance the toddler’s communication with peers, which aligns with a goal on the family’s IFSP. In this case, a family is participating in a Part C service (speech-language pathology) in a group format and the service meets natural environments requirements.

Example 2: A toddler and her parents participate in weekly home visits with an ESIT SLP. Once a month the family and the SLP attend a playgroup at the local children’s library for toddlers with Down Syndrome. During the group, the SLP coaches the parents on ways to enhance the toddler’s communication with peers, which aligns with a goal on the family’s IFSP. In this case, a family is participating in a Part C service (speech-language pathology) in a group format. However, this group *does not* meet natural environments requirements. If the

IFSP team determines that participation in this group is essential to the toddler meeting her IFSP goals, a justification and a plan to return the service to the natural setting will be included in the IFSP. For example, eventually, the SLP might discontinue working with the family at the library group for children with Down Syndrome and will instead coach the family at a community group that *does* meet natural environments requirements. The family may or may not decide to continue to attend the library group on their own.

Please see the Resources and Citations [Parent-Specific Services and Infant/Toddler Groups](#) subsection of this document for more information.

Justifications and Plans for Services in Non-Natural Environments

In rare situations, the IFSP team may determine that, even with supplementary supports, one or more IFSP outcomes cannot be met in the context of any natural environment. In that case, the team is required to document on the IFSP: 1) a justification for the decision to provide Part C services in a non-natural environment and 2) a plan to return services to natural environments. Please see the Resources and Citations [Justifications and Plans for Services in Non-Natural Environments](#) subsection of this document for more information.

Justifications

Acceptable Justifications

An acceptable justification for providing Part C services in a non-natural environment is:

- Decided by the whole IFSP team, including the parent
- Consistent with IDEA Part C regulations regarding natural environments
- Based on the child's IFSP outcomes.

The following support adequate documentation of an acceptable justification on the IFSP:

- The decision process the IFSP team went through to make the determination
- Evidence that this was a decision made by the entire IFSP team
- Evidence that a variety of natural environment options were explored
- Evidence to support the IFSP team's decision
- A description of how supports and gains made in a non-natural setting will be carried over into the child's daily settings, activities and routines.

Unacceptable Justifications

The following should not be used as justifications for providing services in non-natural environments:

- Parent convenience
- Parent need for networking with other parents of children with disabilities
- Provider preference or convenience
- Provider agency staffing capacity or financial considerations

Plans

Along with a justification, providers must document a plan and timeline for moving or returning services to the natural settings and learning opportunities for a particular child and family. The following support effective plans to return to the natural environment:

- Steps that will be taken
- Supports necessary to complete the plan

Example Justification and Plan Scenario

A toddler's initial IFSP team (consisting of a Family Resources Coordinator (FRC), occupational therapist (OT), educator, and the child's mother) created functional outcomes related to feeding, stability while sitting upright, and sustained attention. When it came time to decide on a setting for services, the child's mother disclosed that it is unsafe for her to have visitors at her home as her partner is jealous and becomes violent once the visitors leave.

The FRC discussed safety planning and local resources with the child's mother. The IFSP team discussed virtual sessions and community settings, such as the park, library, mall and a local fast-food restaurant. The mom stated that the best time to meet is 7:30 am. Home-based virtual options were not possible as her partner did not allow her to use the home computer. The library and mall are not places where feeding routinely happens and are not yet open at 7:30 am, so those locations were eliminated as options. Winter weather was not conducive to meeting outside, so the park option was eliminated. A local fast-food restaurant was an option for breakfast at 7:30, but the mother was unsure if she could afford to eat there every week and, with the toddler's attentional challenges in public settings, she felt it would be stressful and difficult to focus on the sitting and feeding skills at a restaurant.

The mom stated she would feel safe in the clinic setting and that the quiet environment would allow her son to focus on feeding skills without the extra stimulation of a public environment. The team decided to begin services in the non-natural clinic setting. The plan for transitioning services to a natural environment included:

- Begin work on maintaining attention in increasingly stimulus-rich activities in the clinic.
- After 2 months, sessions will focus on carrying over new skills into public settings and the FRC will initiate another safety planning discussion with the mom.
- If home safety is still a concern when spring weather returns in April, consider a park location.

Documentation of Settings and Natural Environments

All anticipated settings, along with details on whether those settings are natural or non-natural environments, must be documented on the IFSP.

Selecting Setting on the IFSP

- If the service will be provided in both natural and non-natural environments, enter the service separately on the IFSP for each setting.

- Example Scenario: Billy participates in OT services once a month in the clinic and three times per month in his home. In the Part C Services section of the IFSP, the FRC enters OT twice; one entry indicates OT once a month in the non-natural clinic setting, and one entry indicates OT three times a month in the natural home setting.

If one or two sessions unexpectedly need to take place in a non-natural environment, this can be documented in the child's record and the IFSP does not need to be reviewed. However, any *planned* sessions in a non-natural environment need to be included on the IFSP.

Changing Setting on the IFSP

- A change of settings from *one natural environment to another* (e.g. from home visits to park visits) *does not* require an IFSP Review and can be updated during the next scheduled IFSP Review or Annual Update.
- A change of settings from a *natural environment to a non-natural environment* (e.g. from home visits to clinic visits) or a change in settings from a non-natural environment back to a natural environment (e.g. clinic visits to home visits) *does* require a full IFSP Review.

Resources and Citations

What are natural environments and why are they important?

- IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association (2000). Position Paper on the Provision of Early Intervention Services in Accordance with Federal Requirements on Natural Environments
- ESIT Guiding Concepts: Mission, Principles and Outcomes (2020)
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)
- Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990
- American Academy of Pediatrics Clinical Report (2013). Early Intervention, IDEA Part C Services, and the Medical Home: Collaboration for Best Practice and Best Outcomes.
- Dunst, Bruder & Esperwindt (2014). Family Capacity-Building in Early Childhood Intervention: Do Context and Setting Matter?

Natural Settings

- IDEA Part C Code of Federal Regulations
 - Natural Environments. 34 C.F.R. §303.26
 - Early intervention Services. 34 C.F.R. §303.126
 - Early Intervention Services. 34 C.F.R. §303.13
- Part C State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (2021). Compliance Indicator 2.
- Children Receiving Inpatient Medical Care ESIT Practice Guide
- ECTA Center: Federal Requirements on EI Services in Natural Environments
- DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures
 - Natural Environments. 2.A.29
 - Natural Environments. 1.D.18
 - Early Intervention Services. 2.A.12(G)
 - Natural Environments Policy. 11.A

Natural Learning Opportunities

- Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments, Office of Special Education Programs TA Community of Practice: Part C Settings. (2008). Agreed upon mission and key principles for providing early intervention services in natural environments.
- Division for Early Childhood. (2014). DEC recommended practices in early intervention/early childhood special education 2014. E1 p. 9
- DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures
 - Early Intervention Services. 2.A.12(G)
- Dunst, C., (2020). Everyday learning opportunities of young children with and without developmental disabilities or delays. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 7(3), 23-41.

Services, Settings, Methods, Strategies, and Intensities

- ESIT Qualified Personnel Guidelines
- IDEA Part C Code of Federal Regulations
 - Early intervention services, 34 C.F.R. §303.13

- Early Intervention Services, 34 C.F.R. 303.344(d)(2)
- DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures
 - Natural Environments Procedures. 11.B.2

Parent-Specific Services and Infant/Todder Groups

- Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, 76 Federal Register 60157 (to be codified at 34 C.F.R.) Natural Environments.
- OSEP Response to Letter to Yarnell, Pennsylvania, October 19, 1999, as cited in Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia (2002) Natural Environments Correlations with Federal Regulations, Policies and Procedures and OSEP Policy Letters. p. 11
- OSEP Response to Letter to Honorable Ike Skelton, June 14, 2001, as cited in Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia (2002) Natural Environments Correlations with Federal Regulations, Policies and Procedures and OSEP Policy Letters. p. 5
- OSEP Response to Letter to Honorable Diane Feinstein, California, March 21 2001 as cited in Infant & Toddler Connection of Virginia (2002) Natural Environments Correlations with Federal Regulations, Policies and Procedures and OSEP Policy Letters. p. 11
- Targeted Universalism: Policy and Practice. (2019) Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society.
- Universal Design for Learning. Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center.
- Universal Design for Learning. Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

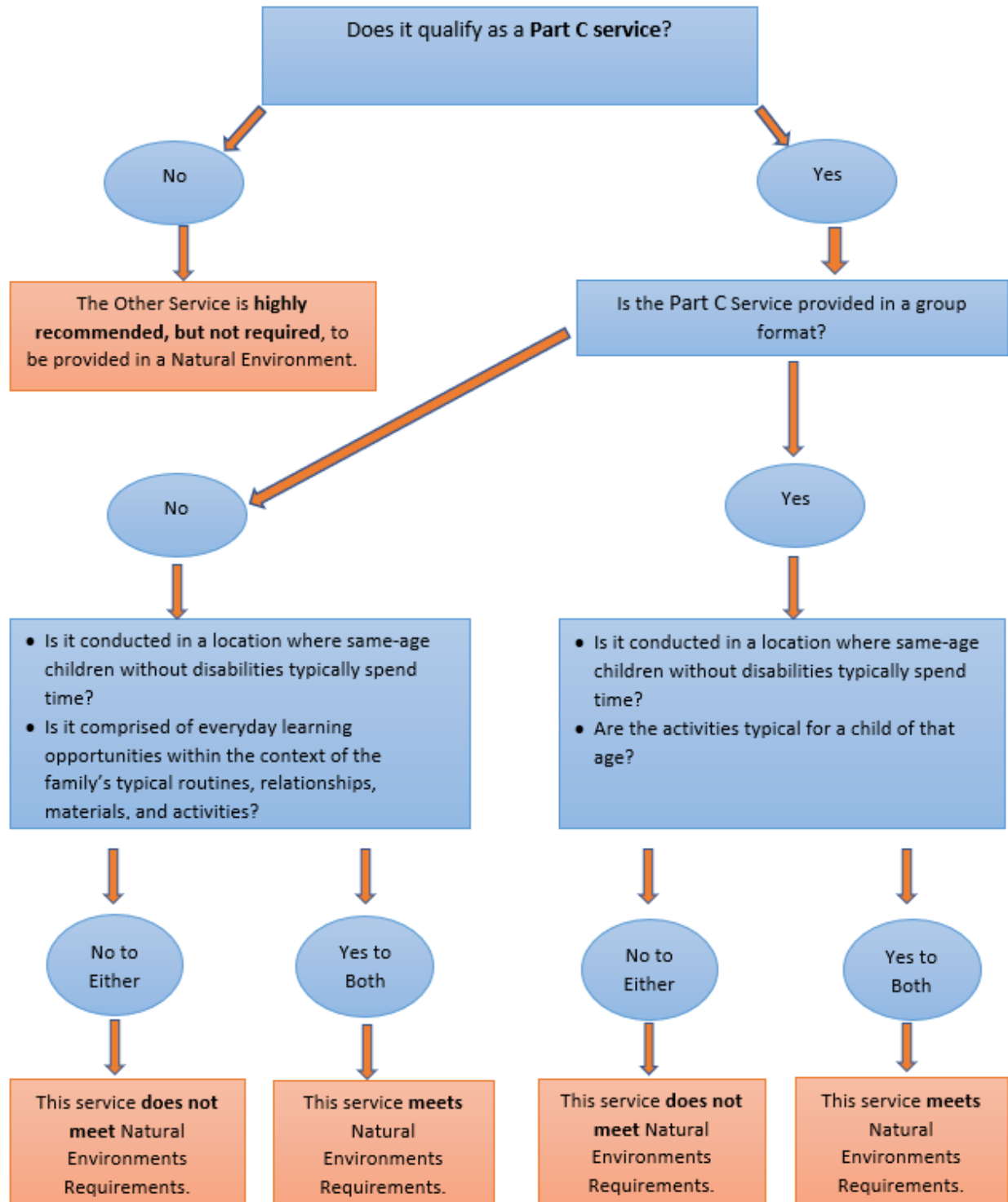
Justifications and Plans for Services in Non-Natural Environments

- IDEA Part C Code of Federal Regulations
 - Early Intervention Services. 303.344 (d)(ii)
 - Early Intervention services in natural environments. 34 CFR 303.126
- DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures
 - Content of the IFSP. 10.B.2(B)(2-3)
 - Natural Environments Procedures. 11.B
 - Natural Environments Policy. 11.A

Documentation of Settings and Natural Environments

- IDEA Part C Code of Federal Regulations
 - Early Intervention Services. 303.344 (d)(ii)
 - Early Intervention services in natural environments. 34 CFR 303.126
- DCYF ESIT Policies and Procedures
 - Content of the IFSP. 10.B.2(B)(2-3)
 - Natural Environments Procedures. 11.B.
 - Natural Environments Policy. 11.A.

Appendix 1. Does the Service Meet Natural Environments Requirements? Decision Tree



Appendix 2. Does the Service Meet Natural Environments Requirements? Decision Tree (Screen Reader Version)

Does it qualify as a Part C service?

- If no, the other service is highly recommended, but not required, to be provided in a natural environment.
- If yes, Is the Part C service provided in a group format?
 - If no,
 - Is it conducted in a location where same-age children without disabilities typically spend time?
 - Is it comprised of everyday learning opportunities within the context of the family’s typical routines, relationships, materials, and activities?
 - If no to either, this service does not meet Natural Environments requirements.
 - If yes to both, this service meets Natural Environments requirements.
 - If yes,
 - Is it conducted in a location where same-age children without disabilities typically spend time?
 - Are the activities typical for a child of that age?
 - If no to either, this service does not meet Natural Environments requirements.
 - If yes to both, this service meets Natural Environments requirements.