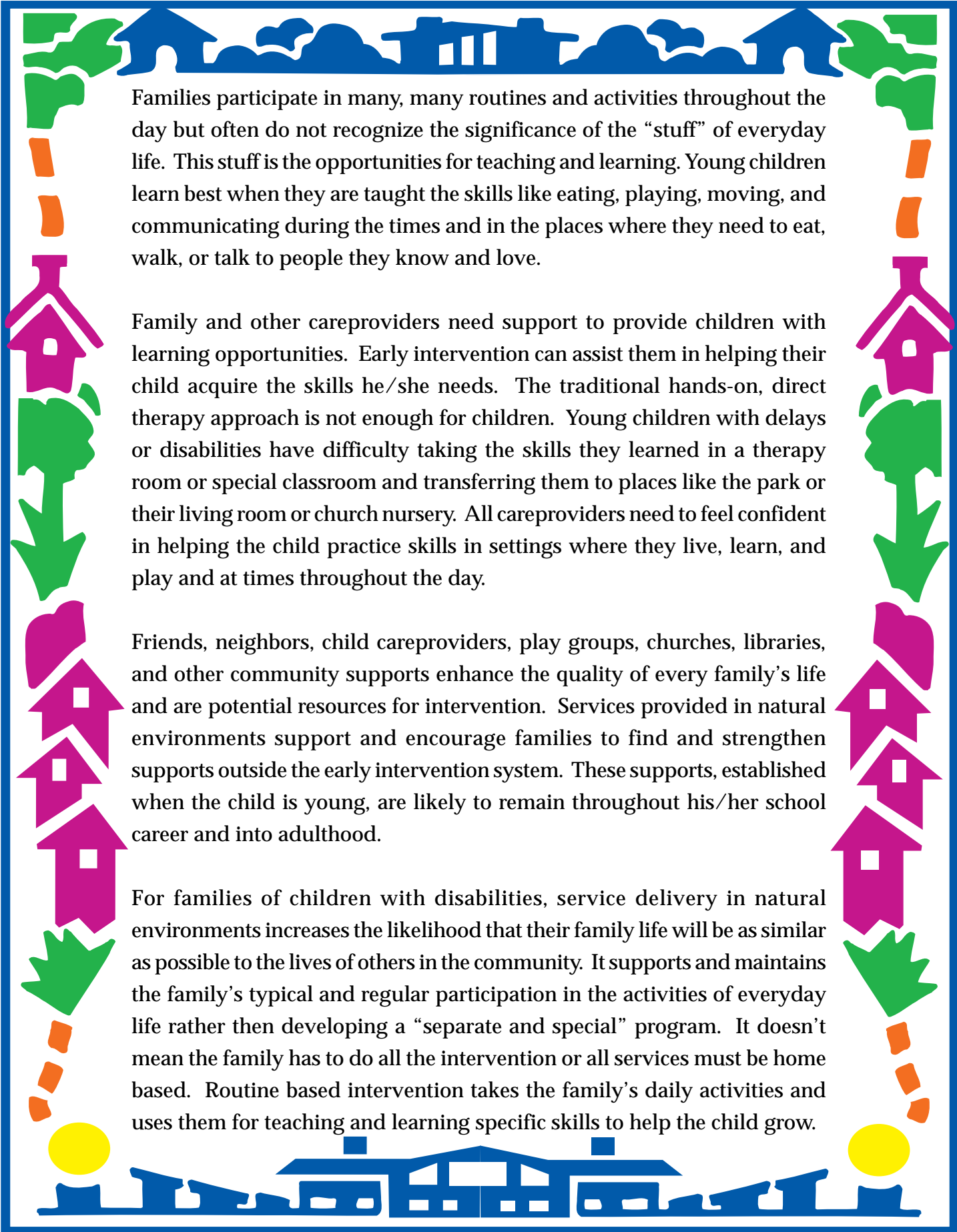




Providing Services in Natural Environments

Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 says that to the maximum extent appropriate, early intervention services *must* be provided in natural environments, including home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate. Services can only be provided in a setting other than a natural environment when early intervention cannot be achieved satisfactorily in a natural environment. Providing services in natural environments is not just the law. It reflects the core mission of early intervention, which is to provide support to families to help their children develop to their fullest potential. The basic premise of natural environments intervention is the involvement of careproviders in the teaching and learning process for the child. It is about the process of working in a relationship where family members and careproviders are doing actual “hands on” throughout the day, as opportunities arise, with the service provider as a consultant.

Natural environments are the day-to-day settings, routines and activities that promote learning for children. Children learn about “water” while playing in the bathtub, washing hands in the sink, getting a drink, splashing in a puddle or swimming in a pool. In addition to understanding what water is, children are learning self-help skills like drinking from a cup, hand and face washing, or motor skills like walking or jumping. Children and families have many routines that occur in different places including the bathroom, kitchen sink, backyard, mailbox, car, pool and the grocery store. The family identifies these as they talk about the activities of their life. They may go to grandpa’s, walk to the store, make the bed, feed the dog, and do the laundry. Routine based intervention is portable and adaptable to the family’s interests, needs, and responsibilities. Embedded intervention implemented by careproviders can occur at home, at childcare, in the car, at the soccer game, in the laundromat, in the yard, in the doctor’s office, at play group, at the park, at grandma’s, while visiting the neighbors, or anywhere kids and families go.

The page is framed by a blue border. At the top and bottom, there are blue silhouettes of houses and trees. On the left and right sides, there are vertical decorative elements: a green tree, an orange dashed line, a pink house, a green tree, a green arrow pointing down, a pink house, a pink house, a pink house, a green tree, a green arrow pointing down, an orange dashed line, and a yellow sun.

Families participate in many, many routines and activities throughout the day but often do not recognize the significance of the “stuff” of everyday life. This stuff is the opportunities for teaching and learning. Young children learn best when they are taught the skills like eating, playing, moving, and communicating during the times and in the places where they need to eat, walk, or talk to people they know and love.

Family and other careproviders need support to provide children with learning opportunities. Early intervention can assist them in helping their child acquire the skills he/she needs. The traditional hands-on, direct therapy approach is not enough for children. Young children with delays or disabilities have difficulty taking the skills they learned in a therapy room or special classroom and transferring them to places like the park or their living room or church nursery. All careproviders need to feel confident in helping the child practice skills in settings where they live, learn, and play and at times throughout the day.

Friends, neighbors, child careproviders, play groups, churches, libraries, and other community supports enhance the quality of every family’s life and are potential resources for intervention. Services provided in natural environments support and encourage families to find and strengthen supports outside the early intervention system. These supports, established when the child is young, are likely to remain throughout his/her school career and into adulthood.

For families of children with disabilities, service delivery in natural environments increases the likelihood that their family life will be as similar as possible to the lives of others in the community. It supports and maintains the family’s typical and regular participation in the activities of everyday life rather than developing a “separate and special” program. It doesn’t mean the family has to do all the intervention or all services must be home based. Routine based intervention takes the family’s daily activities and uses them for teaching and learning specific skills to help the child grow.