



Signposts

for building better behaviour

Early Childhood Intervention Supplement

Parent Notes

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Introduction

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Introduction

This Early Childhood Intervention Supplement (ECIS) to the Signposts for Building Better Behaviour Parent Program is for parents and carers of children up to six years of age who have developmental delay or disability. Signposts is a program for parents to help them prevent or manage difficult behaviour in their children.

Research from around the world emphasises the importance of the early years of childhood. What children learn before they start school provides the basis for their learning for the rest of their lives. Families are therefore a child's first and most important educators (Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, 2009).

Parents of young children are encouraged to use the Signposts program as this program has been shown to have a positive impact on children's behaviour and on parents' wellbeing (Hudson et al., 2003 & Hudson et al., 2008). This program is effective for families of children who have a range of diagnoses and degrees of disability, for example, developmental delay and disability, autism spectrum disorders, acquired brain injury, and Down syndrome (Hudson et al., 2009). You might like to look at *The Right Signs* on the Signposts website www.signposts.net.au for a summary of the first rollout of the program in Victoria, Australia.

Signposts is a program for parents to help you prevent or manage difficult behaviour in your children. If your child is quite young, or has no behaviours you are particularly worried about, it is still a good idea to work right through the program as this will help prevent difficult behaviour in the future.

Many families with young children have told us that they find it very helpful to work through the *Your family as a team* and *Dealing with stress in the family* modules before they move on to the numbered modules which deal directly with children's behaviour. If you are attending group sessions and these topics are not scheduled, we suggest you work on them yourselves before you start or early in the program.

How to use the ECIS parent notes

This supplement is to help you get the most out of the Signposts program. It does not replace the Signpost program, but gives you extra information to consider given that your child is under six years of age or yet to start school.

It is best to read this Introduction section before you start the program, then read the section relating to each of the Modules just before you start work on that Module.

At the beginning of the Signposts program you are asked to think about how your child's behaviour at present, and to decide on two behaviours you would like to change. One you would like to see less of (e.g. biting his little sister) and one you would like to see more of (e.g. sitting quietly with other members of the family to eat meals). If your child has no difficult behaviour, just choose one or two behaviours to increase.

Some children in the examples in the Signposts parent materials (booklets and DVD) may be older than yours, and some of the behaviours may not seem very relevant to your situation. Try not to be distracted by this. Pay close attention to what the parent in the example is saying or doing, and think about how you might use those strategies or ideas in what you are working on.

The Signposts materials are resources that you can return to whenever you need to do so.

What is developmental delay or disability?

The term “developmental delay” is used where a child under six years of age is significantly slower than or different from other children of the same age in one or more areas of development. “Disability” is used where a child has, or is most likely to have, more permanent or lifelong impairments which generally will require ongoing services and supports (Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, 2009).

You might be wondering if your child has a developmental delay or disability, or they may already have a formal diagnosis. You may be just starting out on a process of visits and assessments, or be very familiar with specialists, waiting lists and service issues. Whatever your circumstance, you have a child who is growing and changing, and participating in the Signposts program is one way of having the best skills to promote your child's development and participation.

As all children grow, learn and develop, their behaviours change. The strategies in the program are designed for families and carers of children with mild to moderately difficult behaviour. Note that this refers to the level of difficulty of the child's behaviour, not their level of development. If your child's behaviour is more extreme, you might still use the Signposts program but would probably be doing so working closely with a behaviour specialist.

Effects on the child

Some children have a delay in one area of their development, for example their skills in understanding what is said to them (receptive language). Others have delays in many areas of their development; for example, standing and walking, picking up objects, holding a crayon (gross and fine motor), understanding and speaking (receptive and expressive language) attention and problem solving (cognitive) taking turns with other children (social).

While children may have developmental delays or disabilities, they also have things they do relatively well; these are their strengths.

The Signposts program helps you recognise and build on your child's strengths.

Some children are diagnosed at birth with a disability such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy. For other children the diagnosis is a process of putting together lots of pieces of information about how they are now and how they have developed over time. For example, a lengthy period is often involved in diagnosing disorders such as specific language or autism spectrum disorders.

A specific diagnosis usually gives you an idea of what developmental issues, including behaviour, your child may experience. However, every child is different and every child's experiences of family and their community is different. Your child is unique, and has a unique set of strengths as well as difficulties.

Regardless of diagnosis, all children have the capacity to grow learn and develop, Signposts will help you foster this development in your child.

Bringing up children is about providing a warm and loving environment that is responsive to a child's individual needs. By being aware of and responding to a child's needs, we maximise their growth in all areas of development. When we think about this in terms of a child's behaviour, it means understanding why and how particular behaviours develop, and helping the child use behaviours that will increase their participation in all aspects of their family and community life.

We know that parents are the biggest influence on the experiences of their young children. So the best way to have an impact on a child's behaviour is for parents to know as much as possible about managing behaviour, hence the parent program.

Family reactions

Every parent's experience of finding out that their child has a developmental delay or disability is unique to them. For some it is sudden, for example, being told your baby has Down syndrome just after his or her birth. For others it is a long, drawn out process then final acknowledgment or identification of the reason for concern about your child's development.

Each parent will have their own responses, which may vary in nature, extent and timing.

Siblings and extended family members and friends also participate in this experience. The response of siblings to the news of your child having a delay or disability will vary depending on their age and understanding. Children often respond to changes or stress by becoming more demanding of your attention or clingy.

If you are feeling stressed or pressured by your usual or new responsibilities, this might be the time to call on some help from your family or friends or through services for a few hours of child care, home help or whatever you need.

Most extended family members and friends will be amazingly supportive and helpful.

Family adjustment to parenting

Before your first child is born, there is lots of preparation, little of which gives you any real sense of what it is like to be a new parent. Often just when you think you have got a handle on your new job as a parent, the baby's needs or your circumstances change. Good parenting is about being able to adjust what you do and how you do it to keep "in synch" with the needs of your child (Centre for Child Community Health, 2004).

Like other times of major change in your life, becoming a parent, or finding out your child has a delay or disability, can be challenging.

Family challenges

A family with young children has a range of challenges, but these can be heightened if a child has a developmental delay or disability. Some of these challenges may be related to the following issues:

- » the rate at which your child is developing
- » the level of physical care or attention required by your child
- » uncertainty about what is happening with your child's development, or about what it might mean in the long run
- » changes to your involvement with family, work or other aspects of your community
- » changes to your expectations for your child, and for your parenting
- » the many appointments with and time spent at medical, therapy or early intervention
- » increased expenses for services or equipment for your child
- » difficulties getting or coordinating services and supports.

There is increasing evidence that difficult behaviour is more stressful for parents than the nature or extent of their child's disability (Baker et al., 2003). For some families it is the stress of behaviours that are very difficult to manage, for others it has more to do with feeling worn down by behaviours that are relatively mild but very frequent.

You may have read or heard that in families who have a child with developmental delay or disability it is more likely for parents to separate. A review of research on this issue concludes that there is a small increase in rates of separation of parents of children who have developmental delay or disabilities compared to other families, but nothing like the bleak picture that has been painted in the past (Risdaal & Singer, 2004). Research in fact shows that there is a wide range of responses in families to having a child with delay or disability. Families adjust and adapt to the demands of parenting and family life, and that includes relationships becoming stronger.

By now you might be feeling that this is a bit like reading the possible outcomes, or warning label on a product. While some of these issues may be relevant to you and your family it is far less likely that all of them will be relevant.

If you are feeling stressed, be sure that you are not alone, and that you have a range of resources to help deal with this stress. You have your own strengths, skills and understanding of your child and what he or she needs, as well as your ideas about what you need to be able to do your best as a parent. You might have a partner who shares this with you; you may have extended family and friends.

If you don't already have contact with other parents who have young children with a developmental delay or disability, you can make contact with families whose experiences are similar to yours, or who have slightly older children and have been where you are right now. Early childhood intervention services, parent or advocacy groups, or online are all good places to meet other parents. Having supportive social networks (family, friends, local shopkeepers, parents at playgroup or the like) build your capacity to do a good job as a parent, and to manage any stressful circumstances well (Osofsky et al., 2000).

You have access to resources such as Signposts, and services which can support you in your parenting and your child in his or her development. Have a look at the Resources section of these notes.

Think about working through *Your family as a team* and *Dealing with stress in the family* before you start the rest of the Signposts program. Some facilitators schedule sessions to work through these modules, but not all, so check with your facilitator.

Early Childhood Intervention services

Research from around the world emphasises the importance of the early years of childhood, and this is often reflected in government policy and the way services are organised.

The way in which early childhood services operate varies from state to state and country to country. However they usually have the same general philosophy which is to promote the inclusion of children in their community services and to recognise the key role parents play in their child's development.

In Australia federal and state governments have developed national Early Years Framework (2009) guidelines to support the development of all children from birth to five and their transition into school (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The national and related state frameworks outline principles for service delivery and outcomes for all children, including those with developmental delay or disabilities. These frameworks recognise that children who have developmental delays and disabilities and their families will require extra support, and a range of Early Childhood Intervention Services are funded as part of this support.

Early Childhood Intervention services are for children from birth to school age who have a disability or developmental delay. Some services refer to the child as their main client, while others refer to parents or families as their main client. Regardless of this, the overall aims of early childhood intervention services are to provide parents/carers with the knowledge, skills and supports to optimise their child's development and their ability to participate in family and community life.

Services funded by governments in Australia focus on building the capacity of families to promote their child's learning and development, and their work is guided by the principle of family-centred practice. This recognises the following principles:

- » families are the child's first and most important teachers
- » families are the primary decision makers for their young child
- » families have the ongoing relationship with the child
- » families know their child best
- » families understand their own family circumstances and needs best.

(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009)

Signposts is an example of family-centred practice in action. It is a resource that helps you develop effective ways of preventing or managing your child's difficult behaviour and promoting adaptive behaviour, and you can come back to the program whenever you need to.

In countries other than Australia the best place to find out about the services you need and how they work is from your local service providers and parent groups. There are some contacts listed in the Resources section, and an internet search of key words will provide you with more options.

This concludes the Introduction to the Signposts program. From here on we suggest you read the Early Childhood Intervention Supplementary Notes for each of the modules just before you work through that module in the program.



Parent Notes

Module 1

Measuring your child's behaviour

Early Childhood Intervention Supplement

Measuring your child's behaviour

Read these supplementary notes before you start Module 1 of the program.

In Module 1 you will be asked to decide on one or two behaviours to work on through the rest of the Signposts program.

You might already have a very clear idea of what you want to work on. If not, here are some suggestions to help you decide:

- » What change in behaviour would make a difference to your family's daily life (e.g. your child cooperating while having a bath or getting dressed, playing quietly while you talk on the phone, showing or telling you what they want to eat or drink rather than standing in the kitchen screaming or repeatedly opening every cupboard and the fridge)?
- » What behaviour might need to change before they go to child care, kindergarten or school (e.g. drinking or eating independently, following instructions, sitting close to other children)?

Think about one behaviour you would like to see more of (e.g. finishing a meal in less than half an hour), and one behaviour you would like to see less of (e.g. biting a sibling, or running away from parents when out shopping). Depending on your circumstances, you might decide that dealing with one behaviour is more feasible at the moment, and that is fine. If you are starting with one behaviour, we suggest you work on a behaviour you want to see more of as this builds on your child's strengths and gives you and others lots of opportunity for positive interactions with your child.

You might be able to turn a negative behaviour into a positive behaviour so that you can still work on what is concerning you at present. To do this, think about what it would look like if your child didn't have the difficult behaviour. For example: if you think about what it would look like if a child wasn't doing the negative behaviour of "running away from parents when shopping or in a playground", it might be that he or she is "holding a parent's hand and walking together at the shops or in the playground".

If you are doing this program with your partner or with another person such as a grandparent, it is best if you work on the same behaviour in the same way. This means you are working together as a team which is easier than working separately, and that your child learns that the behaviour is expected by more than one person.

If your child regularly lives in more than one household you will need to consider what will work best for you.



Parent Notes

Module 2

Systematic use of everyday interactions

Early Childhood Intervention Supplement

Systematic use of everyday interactions

Read these supplementary notes before you start Module 2 of the program.

Module 2 concentrates on what you can do as you go about your daily activities, at home, childcare or kindergarten drop offs, appointments, family occasions and outings etc, to build on your child's skills in behaving well. This module includes a lot of information, so it might be a good idea to read over it more than once. Some people cover the content over two sessions rather than one.

Remember that some of the examples in the program may not seem so relevant to you or your child. Focus on what the parent is doing and saying, and think about how you might use the same strategy in your situation with different words (and other forms of communication) and actions.



Parent Notes

Module 3

Replacing difficult behaviour with useful behaviour

Early Childhood Intervention Supplement

Replacing difficult behaviour with useful behaviour

Read these supplementary notes before you start Module 3 of the program.

This is where you work out the reason for your child's difficult behaviour. Sometimes this seems hard to work out, however this module gives you a way of working it out through watching what happens rather than relying on your child's level of language.

Throughout this program, you are offered ways of managing your child's behaviour that are known to work well, and you practise how to use them; it is then up to you to decide which strategies to try out in your family.



Parent Notes

Module 4

Planning for better behaviour

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Planning for better behaviour

Read these supplementary notes before you start Module 4 of the program.

Routines help children learn. Even in very early stages of development children respond to routines. This module helps you look at using routines, including new planned routines, to help your child behave in the way you would like them to and to limit their difficult behaviour. It includes examples of routines, but your own routine is what it is important to concentrate on.



Parent Notes

Module 5

Developing more skills in your child

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Developing more skills in your child

Read these supplementary notes before you start Module 5 of the program.

All the strategies in this program are about developing more skills, more skills in behaving well. This module is about more formal teaching and about working together with other people who work with or teach your child, such as early intervention or child care staff.

The section on “Your child at school” can equally be applied to child care, kindergarten, early interventions services or school.

This section, together with ideas from *Your family as a team*, can help provide you with ideas about how you can work with the service system. Of course, neither of these replace having contact with other parents either informally or through parent support or advocacy groups or agencies.

See the Resources section for more information.



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Dealing with stress in the family

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Dealing with stress in the family

Read these supplementary notes before you start *Dealing with stress in the family* in the program.

It is recommended that everyone works through this module. It helps you think about what is stressful in many aspects of your life, not just the stress that may be as a result of dealing with your child's behaviour or their disability or developmental delay.

It provides ideas for building up your resilience to stress and ways of managing stressful times when they occur.

This module, together with the next module, *Your family as a team*, will help you talk to and support each other in your positive or negative experiences related to your child and in other aspects of your life.

Working through *Dealing with stress* before you look at other parts of the program may help you decide if this is the right time for you to do the program.



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Your family as a team

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Your family as a team

Read these supplementary notes before you start *Your family as a team* in the program.

If you have not been a family with children for long you may not have had a lot of practise working together as a team in this way.

We use the words “family” and “team” fairly loosely. Family may be those who live in your household, or include others involved in your child’s life. Your team may just be your family or include others who are involved in your child’s life such as a regular early intervention workers or hospital staff.

What you learn about in *Your family as a team* and in Module 5 in the section on “Your child at school” can be applied to others who are involved in our child’s life such as early intervention workers, hospital or medical staff, child care or kindergarten staff. In early childhood intervention services great importance is placed on staff and parents working together in partnership.



Parent Notes

Resources

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Resources

Websites

Raising Children Network	http://www.raisingchildren.net.au
Zero to Three	http://zerotothree.org
Child and Youth Health	http://cyh.com
Signposts for Building Better Behaviour	http://signposts.net.au

Parent groups

Association for Children with a Disability (Australia)	http://www.acd.org.au/home/index.htm
MyTime (Australia)	http://mytime.net.au

Government

Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)	http://www.fahcsia.gov.au
Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development	http://www.education.vic.gov.au
Victorian Government Department of Human Services – Disability Services	http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/disability

Non-English Speakers

Advocacy Disability Ethnicity Community (ADEC)	http://www.adec.org.au
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Keywords for internet searches

- » early childhood intervention (rather than “early intervention”)
- » early childhood intervention services
- » parenting
- » disability
- » education
- » parent groups
- » parent advocacy

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