



Specialized Skills Training



One of the services provided by an Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) program is Specialized Skills Training (SST). This service is intended to address the “design of learning environments and activities that promote an infant and toddler’s acquisition of skills in a variety of developmental areas, including cognitive processes and social interaction” (IDEA Part C, 34 CFR §303.13 (b)(14)(i)). There is no richer learning environment than an infant and toddler’s home and no better teachers than parents, extended family, and siblings.

Research demonstrates that the brain is the most malleable or “plastic” during the infant and toddler years. Because of this, every interaction and every environment the child experiences is an opportunity for growth and development. SST supports development across domains with an emphasis on strengthening cognitive skills, positive behaviors and social interactions.

There are four components within the cognitive domain that describe how young children develop and demonstrate abilities: exploring the world around them, solving problems, remembering and retaining information, and pretending and using their imagination. Cognitive development is reflected by growth in thinking, reasoning, and understanding.

The four components of the cognitive domain are part of the cognitive process called **Executive Function**. Executive function “refers to a group of skills that helps us to focus on multiple streams of information at the same time, monitor errors, make decisions in light of available information, revise plans as necessary, and resist the urge to let frustration lead to hasty actions.” (The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, Working Paper 11).

This sounds like an advanced skill, so what does this have to do with infants and toddlers? Cognitive development begins in infancy. For example, an infant kicks a mobile because he naturally kicks out his legs. The mobile moves and perhaps makes sounds. He sees something happen that has captured his interest. He may first observe, but after several repetitions, he understands that this action “causes” something to occur. This early learning of cause and effect is a building block for more complex tasks. In addition, family members share in his excitement about what happens when he kicks the mobile. They praise him and are “delighted” with his new found skill. He enjoys this interaction and attention. As a result, this has been a “positive” experience. Positive early experiences that support cognitive development contribute to traits that support life-long learning, such as curiosity and persistence.

Texas Parent to Parent

1805 Rutherford Ln. ★ Suite 201 ★ Austin, TX 78754 ★ 866-896-6001 ★ 512-458-8600

website: www.txp2p.org ★ Email: info@txp2p.org

SST is an appropriate service to help parents learn how to support their child's development of executive function skills. Three building blocks for executive function are:

- i. **Working memory** - which includes following multiple-step instructions and taking turns in group activities;
- ii. **Inhibitory control** - which makes the following possible: selective, focused, and sustained attention. It also includes joint attention, and the ability to take turns; and
- iii. **Mental flexibility** - which includes the ability to switch gears and adjust to changed demands.

The SST service is provided by an Early Intervention Specialist (EIS). The EIS is credentialed by the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). An EIS is a credentialed specialist in:

- Infant and toddler development, both typical and atypical patterns
- Early childhood cognition, motivation and how infants and toddlers learn
- Typical infant and toddler behavior and challenging behaviors (biting, tantrums, picky eating, sleep issues)
- Infant and toddler social interactions
- How developmental areas are interconnected

Children with delays and disabilities often need assistance to enhance their development. The EIS through SST supports the child's cognitive development by introducing strategies into everyday activities that promote cause and effect, attention and adjusting to changed demands.

What does this look like? For example, when a child is having problems with transitions, the EIS may suggest a timer or song to "cue" the child to anticipate there will be a change from one activity to another. The EIS provides support to the family as they implement this strategy for transition but also asks for feedback about how it is working. Sometimes this means that the EIS and family must try several strategies to find the right fit for the child and family.

There is a strong link between the development of cognitive functions and social and emotional development in young children. One of the key points about brain development is that a positive relationship with primary caregivers is essential. The focus of all early intervention services is to create positive working relationships with families that will support the parent and child relationship and promote development across domains.

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