

Appendix 4:

Least Restrictive Environment and Natural Environment

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Least Restrictive Environment is the legislative terminology which is central to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The LRE concept has two parts:

1. Mandates that “schools must educate individuals with disabilities with children who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent possible.”
2. States, “special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aide and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” Implicit in this statement is that children with disabilities be provided with an appropriate education. This is defined as an educational experience that allows the child to benefit from instruction.

The LRE is determined at least annually by the IEP team and is based on the child’s unique service needs. Placement decisions should not be permanent or be based on administrative convenience. According to IDEA, no child can be excluded from any classroom solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum. Likewise, in selecting the least restrictive environment, not every child with an IEP should automatically be placed in a “full inclusion” setting.

Consideration should be given to the quality of services. These guidelines are consistent with the current definitions and legal mandates for best practices in working with children with disabilities.

Natural Environment (NE)

IDEA, Part C requires states to ensure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, early intervention services to infants and toddlers under 3 years of age are provided in natural environments, such as the home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate. These settings include, but are not limited to home, preschool, nursery schools, Head Start programs, kindergartens, neighborhood school classrooms, child care, places of worship, recreational (such as community playgrounds and community events) and other settings that all children and families enjoy.

Services may be provided elsewhere only if early intervention cannot be achieved in a natural environment. In addition, each Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) must contain a statement of the natural environments in which services are to be provided and a justification of the extent, if any, to which the services will not be provided in a natural environment.

Instruction in the natural environment makes use of typically occurring events, activities, and consequences as a context in which to teach specific skills. The instructional context consists of routine events and everyday activities in a variety of settings. Typically, interactions between the child and adult are characterized as following the child's lead or capitalizing on the child's interest and engagement.

Effective practices should have a research base that documents positive results for young children with disabilities and also should reflect program characteristics that are valued by the field, such as

- ◆ A family-centered approach
- ◆ Compatibility with a multicultural and multiethnic perspective
- ◆ Developmentally and individually appropriate practices

Washington State's Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program Guidelines for Implementing Early Intervention Services in Natural Environments provides guidance to all individuals who comprise the state early intervention system in adapting and modifying services as necessary to meet the natural environment requirements of the IDEA, Part C (www.dshs.wa.gov/word/adsa/iteip/Approved%20NE%20Guidelines%2011-01.doc).