



Early Intervention Makes a **LIFE- CHANGING** Difference

Parents should not wait to access services because of the Covid-19 shutdown



RAPPAHANNOCK AREA
COMMUNITY SERVICES BOARD

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During the first three years of life, a child's brain is growing rapidly, with nerve cells forming connections that lay the foundation for a lifetime of learning. That's why the years of zero to 3 are so crucial to a child's development, and why interventions targeting developmental delays during these years can have such impact.

"We want children to have as many rich experiences as they can in those early years so that they have the greatest depth of synapses and brain connections, so that later on they can pull from that reserve to help them move further forward," said Alison Standing, Part C Coordinator of the Infant & Toddler Connection of the Rappahannock Area.

May is Early Intervention Awareness Month in Virginia, and as this month finds Virginians living under a stay-at-home order to slow the spread of Covid-19, early childhood experts stress that parents and caregivers of young children can and should still reach out to the resources in our community that provide early intervention to children with developmental delays.

The Parent Education - Infant Development Program, part of the Rappahannock Area Community Services Board, has provided multi-disciplinary support to parents and young children in the Fredericksburg area for more than four decades.

PE-ID, known to many as "Early Intervention," provides services for children in Stafford, Spotsylvania, Caroline and King George Counties and the city of Fredericksburg. Parents can contact the program directly, and pediatricians and hospitals also refer families to the program, which provides in-home support—from occupational and physical therapists,

speech pathologists, educators, and Service Coordinators—to parents and children.

As the Covid-19 crisis has closed schools and curtailed in-person interactions, Early Intervention has taken its services virtual to ensure that critical time isn't lost with these children.

These services have been "life-changing" for Fredericksburg-area mother Nicole Jones, whose twins, Oliver and Olivia, entered the program on referral from her pediatrician around the time of their second birthday.

After five months in the program, Jones said, her children have gone from being non-verbal and biting and fighting in response to their frustration with not being able to communicate to repeating what they hear Jones say to them, showing verbal affection and reminding her of their progress every time she hears them say, "Mommy."

"They are leaps and bounds from where they were to where they are now," she said.

Jones, who works full-time, said Early Intervention staff worked hard to fit their visits into her life, scheduling morning visits at her home that could even be conducted while the twins were finishing their breakfast.

"The twins love seeing their teacher," Jones said. "They get so excited."

PE-ID Educator Stacy McDonald said the focus of the visits is on equipping parents with strategies that can empower them to work with their children to continue their progress every day.

"We give them strategies and they run with it. They are the ones doing it day in and day out," she said. "We come in every two weeks and support them to be the champion of their child's progress."

PE-ID continues to take referrals and screen new families during the Covid-19 crisis. Initial assessments and services that were previously provided in-person are now being conducted via Zoom, a licensed and secure video-conferencing platform that is compliant with HIPAA privacy regulations.

Initial assessments are conducted by a three-person team that includes an occupational therapist, physical therapist, developmental specialist or speech language pathologist, and a Service Coordinator said Service Coordinator Beth Shultz.



"Parents tell us what they want to work toward, and we write their goal around what their concerns and priorities are," Shultz said. "We are there to help and provide tools, we are not there to judge. We

just want to guide their children, give them the tools they need to help their kids get to where they want them to be, based on their priorities for their family"

While the program serves children from birth to age 3, Shultz emphasized that when children turn 3, PE-ID staff will work with them to connect them with the next level of support they need as they grow. She said parents should not think that just because their children are approaching their third birthday, that they can't benefit from contacting PE-ID.

"Any time a parent has a concern and their child is under 3, we want them to call us," she said. "If we are not going to be the ones to provide services, we will help them figure out where to go."



PE-ID continues to take referrals and screen new families during the Covid-19 crisis.

As services moved online due to the governor's stay-at-home order, PE-ID Coordinator Angie Ringersma said she was amazed at how much of a connection specialists were still able to make with families through the videoconferencing software.

"I feel like parents are actually more engaged with their providers and their assessment teams," she said.

From the parent perspective, Jones said the process is as easy as clicking a link on her smartphone, and the added allure of technology holds her children's attention in a whole new way.

"It's crucial that they have kept these services going," Jones said. "We are still in a very pivotal stage where we are working on communication, and through this we are able to keep building upon it. We are not losing anything."

Standing said parents with concerns about children ages birth to 3 should not hesitate to call 540-372-3561 to talk about a screening. Parents who have questions can find developmental milestones posted on the RACSB website at <https://rappahannockareacs.org/portfolio/early-intervention/>.

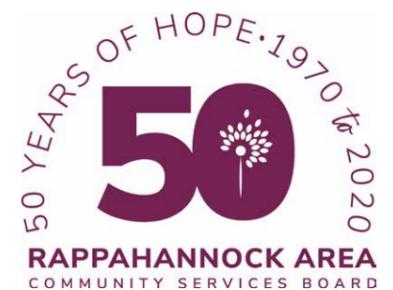
The Covid-19 crisis should not be a reason to delay making contact.

"If parents have any concerns, they should make the call," Standing said. "It can be a 45-day process for families to get in to services. The longer they delay making that first phone call, the longer accessing services is delayed. Every month counts for a child under the age of 3."

PARENT EDUCATION - INFANT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

A service of the Rappahannock Area
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540-372-3561
877-268-4169 (toll-free)
Rappahannockareacs.org



RACSB is celebrating 50 years of
serving the community



Stay tuned to the Fredericksburg Parent Facebook page and YouTube channel for a video this month with more information about the **Parent Education - Infant Development** program at RACSB.

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