

COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI): Role of psychologists



This resource provides an overview of the valuable role psychologists play in delivering high quality early childhood supports and improving outcomes for children with developmental concerns, developmental delay, or disability.

The early childhood years (0 – 8 years old) are a critical period for development. Children’s early experiences, environments and relationships shape their lives by impacting the development of the young brain and laying the foundations for lifelong learning, behaviour, health, and wellbeing. For children with developmental concerns, delays, or disability, these early years are especially important. They offer an important window of opportunity to support skill development, build positive social relationships, and promote physical and psychological wellbeing.

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What is Early Childhood Intervention (ECI)?

Professionals & Researchers in Early Childhood Intervention (PRECIE) define ECI as:

“Specialist services and supports provided to young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families...

The ultimate aim is the same as for all children and families: to ensure that young children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families thrive”.

Best practice in ECI involves working collaboratively with a child, the child’s family and other caregivers to enhance their skills and capacity to support their child’s growth, development, and participation in daily life. Ideally, ECI is provided by a team of professionals who bring diverse areas of expertise.

Working together across professional disciplines is an important part of ensuring children and families have the right expertise at the right time. A team approach commonly includes psychologists, speech and language pathologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, early childhood, and/or specialist education teachers. Team members may also consult with paediatricians, dietitians, and other services to best meet a child’s needs.

More information about best practice in ECI can be found in the [National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention](#).



What is a psychologist?

Psychologists are highly qualified health practitioners registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and must meet the Psychology Board of Australia's professional competencies and skills.

All psychologists have a minimum of six years of education and training and are required to work in line with the professional standards set out by the Psychology Board of Australia. This includes continuous learning to ensure they are up to date with the latest developments in the field of psychology.

Psychologists can practice in ECI in many different ways including as a sole clinician, part of a multidisciplinary team, as a service consultant, or as a key worker as part of a transdisciplinary team. In all of these roles, psychologists participate in decision making processes with families and other professionals to develop collaborative child and family goals.

Providing support and coaching to significant people in the child's life to support inclusion, learning, and wellbeing is one of the central roles of psychologists in ECI.

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How an ECI psychologist can help

The expertise that psychologists working in ECI bring to the area of early childhood development encompasses a broad range of services and skills including:

Assessment and goal setting: Psychologists have expertise in the assessment of child development, cognitive functioning, behaviour, social communication, and learning needs. Working in partnership with children, parents, carers, early childhood educators and communities, a psychologist can provide comprehensive assessment to assist in understanding a child's functional skills, strengths and interests, and to identify what evidence-based supports and/or interventions are most appropriate to promote development, learning, wellbeing, and participation in everyday activities.

Therapeutic interventions: Psychologists provide tailored early intervention supports, working in partnership with children, parents, and caregivers. Psychological interventions and supports can be provided across a range of settings, including those where children learn, live and play. These often focus on learning and skills development, supporting behaviour

and understanding emotions, building positive social relationships, and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the child and their family. Psychologists play a key role in strengthening family capacity and skills, as well as identifying resources that assist families to support their children. Psychologists can also provide support to ensure successful transitions such as when a child starts school.

Diagnosis: Psychologists provide diagnostic assessments in early childhood where appropriate. They may work independently as sole clinicians or within multidisciplinary assessment teams. Psychologists work with families to complete a comprehensive diagnostic assessment and provide support that helps families understand what a diagnosis may mean for their child.

Provider psychoeducation, training and reflective practice: Psychologists provide evidence-based training, education, and support for educators, allied health professionals and organisations. The services psychologists provide promote a deeper understanding of disabilities, developmental concerns, and learning and emotional needs. This work recognises the importance of inclusive



practices for children with developmental delays, differences, and/or disability, and the significance of working to adapt the environment and support early relationships to promote full participation and engagement in every setting for all children including early childhood education and care.

Program design, research, and evaluation:

With training in evidence based practices and research methods, psychologists often contribute to research and evaluation efforts that strengthen understanding of what works best for young children and their families. Their work may involve designing programs, coordinating their implementation, and assessing outcomes to ensure services are effective and continuously improving.

Funding models

Psychologists work in ECI under a variety of government, private sector, and philanthropic systems. Here are some examples of where and how you might see a psychologist:

NDIS: The NDIS provides funding for Scheme participants to access psychology (and other therapies) through the Early Childhood Approach. Psychologists have a role in supporting participants with goals around development, learning, positive relationships, emotions, and behaviour.

Medicare rebates: Medicare provides rebates for children to access psychology for mental health concerns (such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders). Medicare also provides limited rebates across the lifetime for developmental or disability related supports for clients who have a treatment and management plan in place. Caregivers who experience mental health concerns may also access psychology intervention with a referral from their GP.

Service consultation: State-based systems including education and healthcare also engage psychologists to provide assessment, direct support, capacity building, reflective practice, and service consultation roles to improve outcomes for children and families.

Conclusion

Psychologists working in ECI are regulated health practitioners with expertise in early childhood development. With their extensive skills and knowledge, psychologists are well placed to provide support related to assessment, interventions and therapeutic supports, program coordination, and team collaboration. Psychologists can work in partnership with caregivers, families, children, and other professionals to build a personalised, supportive, and inclusive team around the child.

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