

## Our EI Services in the Time of COVID-19

I have enjoyed and cherished our time with Early Intervention (EI). We knew at my 18-week prenatal scan that EI would be part of our lives. I cannot imagine my life without the special village I have gathered throughout this journey. My little lady will be turning 3 shortly and our first EI evaluation was before she was 3 months old.

For over 2 ½ years my calendar has been bombarded with therapy visits, and when those visits turned to zoom calls that change was felt on many levels. Pre-pandemic, we had up to 4-5 visits in any given week with our Development Specialist, Physical Therapist, Occupational Therapist, Speech and Language Pathologist, and Aqua Therapy. Those 5 EI providers worked alongside my daughter's nurse, her dad, her grandmother, her Respite Center, and me. In-person therapy allowed this good-sized "village" to work together on the overall growth of our daughter. When we started with EI, she could barely keep her head up and now she is taking assisted steps with a walker.

Enter Mid-March 2020 and the messages from our service providers were "we can't come to the home because of COVID, and we don't know when we can again." A million things were flying through my mind but the biggest question eating away at every parent for the almost a year "is my child going to regress and if so by how much?"

The first question I had to answer was "do you want to participate in virtual therapy sessions?" Although many families opted out of virtual EI sessions my family chose to continue in EI. So, we hunkered down and dealt with it as best as possible. It has not been easy, and our patience has been tested, including my daughter's. I could see her getting frustrated not being able to give a celebratory fist bump or a hug goodbye. After a while, these Zoom sessions became routine to us. Our service team of five dwindled down to three due to a furlough and the closing of community centers.

It has been tough, really tough. There are days when I think "why are we doing this?" Previously, my daughter would have roamed free in our house but now she is strapped to her highchair trying to pay attention to the therapist on the other end of the screen.

The mom guilt has been heavy for sure. "Am I doing her justice- because I am not a therapist, I am not trained on these things!?!?" "Where could she be if we weren't stuck behind screens right now?" Then I think of those three reasons that I answered yes to remote therapy with EI. Because as a parent, I will do anything and everything to try and help my child succeed. Whether today's success is the use of proper pronouns, peeling off stickers, or walking across the room with her fancy purple walker.

This pandemic has turned everything topsy-turvy. Many families took their children to outpatient services because Zoom did not work for them. We all have different support systems in our lives. If you are reading this as a therapist, please take this as an apology for all the times parents logged into Zoom while wearing pajamas and made you dizzy while trying to navigate the camera while our child was on the move. To my fellow parents, who have kept their baby/toddler virtual thru their pandemic- understand you are not alone. To the children and everyone else stuck behind a screen please know you are doing fabulous!

Ever since that scary 18-week pregnancy diagnosis, I have learned to take life one day at a time, one hour at a time even. It is so bittersweet to be ending EI and starting preschool shortly. I would give anything to get back the past 6.5 months, but we are healthy, and my daughter is happy.

Continue to advocate for your child and your family. Just because the platform has changed the goal has not, helping families help their children. Although it has been a struggle, the tips, tricks, resources, and listening ears are so much better than trying to navigate on my own. Do not give up-these amazing therapists are trying their best.