

# EVIDENCE BRIEF

## EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

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### KEY MESSAGES

- Early intervention is widely recognised as an important approach to supporting vulnerable children, families, and communities
- The term 'early intervention' is understood in different ways by different sectors, and varies dependent on the client population and the outcome the sector is trying to prevent or achieve
- In the context of the child protection, early intervention most typically refers to intervening earlier to address or reduce known risks to prevent child protection involvement or re-involvement, and/or abuse and neglect from occurring or re-occurring.
- Even in the context of child protection, 'early intervention' can mean different things, e.g., preventing child protection contact, preventing entry into care, preventing youth justice involvement among children in care
- Using the term 'early intervention' without being clear on the target population and outcome can act as a barrier to effective inter-agency, multi-disciplinary or collaborative practice.

#### Purpose

This evidence brief provides an overview of the definitions of early intervention and prevention, and challenges in applying these definitions to practice.

#### DEFINING EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

Early intervention is widely recognised as an important approach to supporting vulnerable children, families, and communities, with many child protection systems showing a trend towards

While the term is commonly used, it is often understood in different ways by different people, depending on the context or the sector.

Understanding what is meant by early intervention and prevention helps ensure that programs, policies, and services are targeted appropriately. It also supports better communication and decision making across sectors, including child protection, health, education, disability, and community services.

*Early intervention* refers to any action taken at an earlier point in time, either in a person's life or at the first signs of a problem, with the aim of *preventing* more serious issues later.

In general, early intervention can include:

- **Health promotion** activities that encourage positive behaviours and development; and
- **Disease prevention** strategies aimed at reducing risks or harmful behaviours before they become established, entrenched, or lead to adverse outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2025).

Although widely used across the child and family welfare system and other sectors, the term carries multiple meanings depending on the target population, the purpose of the intervention, and the intended outcomes.

In the context of children, early intervention typically refers to two key approaches: **early in life** and **early in the life of the problem**.

## 1. Early in Life

This approach focuses on supporting children during the earliest stages of their development, especially from conception to five years of age (Featherstone et al., 2014). These years are recognised as a critical window for brain development and lifelong health and learning outcomes. Interventions during this period often focus on promoting healthy development and reducing risks before challenges emerge or escalate. The definition of 'early in life' can vary depending on the program goals, with some approaches focusing on the first 1,000 days from conception, and others targeting children from birth to five years.

**Examples:** Nurse-Family Partnerships where nurses provide home visits during pregnancy and infancy to offer guidance and support (Tomiczek et al., 2024).

The 10-year Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 outlines how the Australian Government will help children aged 0-5 and their families to learn, grow and thrive.

## 2. Early in the Life of the Problem

This approach focuses on identifying and addressing emerging risks or vulnerabilities before they escalate into more serious issues (Dunst,

1985). The goal is to intervene as soon as warning signs appear. Evidence shows that acting early in the life of a problem is more effective and less costly than responding after issues have become more complex and difficult to address (Le et al., 2024).

It is important to recognise that what may appear to be an early intervention from a system perspective may, in fact, be a late response to a long-standing issue. For example, chronic neglect may only become visible when a child enters school and is brought to the attention of authorities for the first time.

### Examples:

The Triple P parenting program has tiers of intervention ranging from general parenting principles to promote positive parenting through to behaviour management for children at risk of conduct disorders and parenting education for parents subject to child protection concerns (Sanders, 2023).

## Applications across sectors

Within the child and family welfare sector, examples of what early intervention might mean include:

- Supporting families involved in child protection to avoid out-of-home care placements.
- Supporting adult survivors of childhood violence to manage their emotions and behaviours in healthy ways, rather than escalating to using violence.
- Health promotion initiatives to promote and develop a child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional, and spiritual health.
- Supporting struggling parents early to strengthen parenting skills and prevent challenges from escalating into abuse or neglect.
- Offering targeted services to families where known risk factors (such as domestic violence or substance use) are present.

Other service systems also use the term early interventions. For example:

- In health, it may refer to early childhood health checks and screening.
- In disability services, it may refer to early therapies that build on children's strengths to support their growth and development.

- In education, it may refer to early learning programs that nurture a child's physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development.
- In drug and alcohol or youth justice contexts, it may refer to outreach programs that target early offending risk factors and strengthen protective factors.
- In adult populations, it might refer to early screening and treatment for anger management.

These multiple uses highlight the importance of being clear about what early intervention means in a specific policy or program. Clarity helps ensure the right supports reach the right people at the right time, and that systems are coordinated rather than overlapping or inconsistent. This means better planning, resource allocation, and outcomes for children, young people, and their families.

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of vulnerable children.**