



EARLY SUPPORT FOR BRIGHT FUTURES

EARLY INTERVENTION & THE FAMILY INFANT TODDLER (FIT) PROGRAM





ALLYSON RHATIGAN
ICC PARENT REPRESENTATIVE

Mother of Leela (age 8), a creative, dynamic and medically complex child

Serves as a Parent Representative on the ICC, and Co-Chair of the ICC PR Committee

Guest Lecturer with UNM School of Medicine Families as Faculty Program

Advocate for Early Intervention, Inclusion and Maternal Mental Health

Masters in Business Administration (MBA) and Masters in Health Administration (MHA)



KRISTIN MORA
ICC PARENT REPRESENTATIVE

Mother of River (age 5) - a rambunctious, inquisitive and incredibly social child who happens to be hard-of-hearing

Serves as a Parent Representative on the ICC, and Member of the ICC PR Committee

Serves as Vice-President of the NMSD Board of Regents

Senior User Interface / User Experience Designer and Developer for 15+ years

Advocate for Early Intervention and Early Education Programs that support the children and families of New Mexico

Through sharing about our families, we hope to inform others of the tremendous benefits of Early Intervention, garner support for the FIT program and ensure its accessibility for all in need.

WHAT IS THE FAMILY INFANT TODDLER (FIT) PROGRAM?

The Family Infant Toddler (FIT) Program is located within the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD). The FIT Program provides supports and services to children who have or who are at risk for developmental delay, and their families. This program is responsible for making sure that the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are carried out in New Mexico. Part C of IDEA applies to children age birth to three. The FIT Program offers supports and services to families through 30+ early intervention provider agencies across New Mexico. These agencies are funded through a combination of state and federal funds, including Medicaid and health insurance. No family will ever be turned away because of inability to pay for supports and services.

WHAT IS EARLY INTERVENTION?

Early intervention supports a child's learning and development during the important time from birth to three years of age. Local FIT & early intervention service providers support each family in meeting their child's developmental and health-related needs. Professionals provide ideas on how families can best help



promote a child's development and how to use their suggestions for intervention throughout the day. R.A. McWilliam, a researcher and father of a child with a disability, reminds us that *"the child's learning occurs between sessions."* There are opportunities for a child to learn and develop throughout the day, both when the service providers are with families and when they are not.

WHAT IS THE ICC (INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COUNCIL)?

A council of members appointed by the governor to advise and assist the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD)'s Family Infant Toddler (FIT) Program in planning and promoting the implementation of a coordinated and family-centered service system in order to address the needs of infants and toddlers with or at risk of developmental delays, and their families.

BENEFITS TO FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND STATE:

- **Changing the Trajectory of a Child:** Supporting families with child's developmental delay can often "close the gap" towards "typical development" or shift the developmental timeline.
- **Empowering Family:** Parents may not know HOW to help their infant/toddler and/or have anxiety or stress around their infant's developmental challenges - FIT team coaches families to support the child's development rather than "doing it to" the child. Parents gain skills and feel empowered which transcends the FIT program.
- **Local Providers:** 30+ small businesses across New Mexico provide local services to all counties and the Navajo Nation. Local therapists provide services within their communities - local knowledge, meeting linguistic needs and respectful of cultural practices. This means access to a network of highly educated and trained, local professionals (Bachelors, many with Masters, some with PhD, RN, NP).
- **Resource Access** for rural communities and underprivileged populations.
- **Providing Individual Service Plans (IFSPs) and evaluations** to provide all qualifying resources: home services, access to therapies, education, access to other families, support and advocacy groups.
- **No cost to families:** All resources are provided to qualifying families at no cost, and are covered by insurance and funded by the State.

LEELA'S STORY

My daughter, Leela (age 8) had a traumatic birth. She was full term, barely 4lbs, born silent and blue. She was our daughter - and we were instantly in love. However, all our love and parenting skills weren't enough for Baby Leela. She spent 7 weeks in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) full of tubes and lines, surrounded by bright lights, beeping sounds and nurses. Then at 2mo old - weighing in at a "hefty" 6lbs, Leela had lifesaving open heart surgery. The nursing and medical staff at UNMH were extraordinary and saved our baby's life several times. While in the NICU, Leela was diagnosed with Trisomy 21, or Down's Syndrome - this explained the array of medical challenges doctors were uncovering, more with each passing day.

Once Leela recovered from heart surgery and was medically stable, our family began to receive support for Leela's development - all tailored around our family's needs, Leela's needs. This was our lifeline - the Early



Intervention Family/ Infant and Toddler (FIT) Program. Leela needed highly structured, intense support to progress through developmental milestones that other babies naturally followed, often with little support. Our multidisciplinary, sensitive and highly skilled Early Intervention Team became like family - through 3 years of frequent, in-house support - using our furniture, Leela's toys, our spoons, bringing health care to us with kindness and respect.

During those years our family lived in Albuquerque and we were fortunate to have access and choices for our Early Intervention Services. Over 3 years we accessed: Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, ASL Deaf Mentorship, Physical Therapy, Music Therapy, Hippotherapy, Massage Therapy, Craniosacral Therapy, Nutrition and Nursing Services and Deaf/ Hard of Hearing Developmental Specialist Support.

RIVER'S STORY

My second son, River (age 5), was born in 2017 and was soon after identified hard-of-hearing. Naturally, it was an emotional and challenging time for us as new parents and we were quite uncertain about where to even begin. The medical steps were tricky to navigate. Even getting him a diagnostic ABR within his first 6 months was a challenge but we managed to get him hearing aides by 4 months old. We found ourselves in unfamiliar territory as the medical advice pretty much stopped there, and we had no idea what to do to support River's needs beyond the devices. We just knew that we would do anything to be the best advocates possible for him.



Thankfully, River was referred to Early Intervention when he failed his Newborn hearing screening and a service coordinator contacted us early on, scheduled our first home visit and got us on the path to the resources that we needed to get River started on his journey.

Early Intervention was integral in supporting our family, including River's two siblings, in the following ways:

We became the designers of River's IFSP (Individual Family Service Plan), in a way directing our own team of professional service providers and therapists. The evaluations helped us all to understand where River needed support and we, as parents, were educated and informed about tools and methods to help us feel equipped to achieve our goal to support River as a whole child.

We took advantage of many of the home services offered including Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Deaf Mentoring and ASL Studies, and our service providers also helped us with navigating the day-to-day routines, from activities as simple as how to read a book to River, to the



more complex undertaking of learning and using a new language to support communication and access for our son as well as providing access to the Deaf Community and Deaf Culture so we could embrace his culture.

River is almost 6 years old now. He just graduated from Pre-K to Kindergarten and is thriving. Our whole family has benefited from our experiences with Early Intervention. I am forever grateful they found us.

Unfortunately, I was unaware of the Early Intervention and FIT program until our son needed it and that is why I take advantage of opportunities to advocate and share my story in an effort to inform others about the benefits of this amazing program that provided tremendous support for my family, and ultimately helped to change the trajectory of my son's future.



CHALLENGES:

- **Staffing Recruitment & Retention:** Like many other professions in rural New Mexico, it's difficult to attract and retain qualified Early Intervention staff, also provider agencies compete with area schools for the same staff positions. This may result in delay of services, or lack of services in some areas.
- **Parental Mental Health:** Many parents currently enrolled in FIT are expressing fatigue, stress, anxiety about the diagnosis process, hospitalizations, surgeries, level of care needed, ongoing advocacy. Many cry and feel isolated. Need for support for parents - build their personal wellness so they're equipped to help their children.
- **Getting the word out there:** Many physicians and families are not aware of how our program works, the services we offer and most importantly how successful our program is. **This is an active item for ICC and ECECD Marketing.**

OUR PROGRAM IS A SUCCESS!

Despite our challenges the program has impressive success rates and we continue to set an example to other states for providing support and services to the children and families of our state and communities.

As of April 2023, Early Intervention Family Infant Toddler(FIT) Program ranked first in the nation in identifying and serving babies (birth to 12 months old) by the federal Office of Special Education Programs.

Let's continue to set an example for how to run a successful program serving and supporting Children and Families of New Mexico.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS LEGISLATORS:

- **Fully fund ECECD Budget** for FIT (support pay for staff).
- **Support creative solutions to recruit and retain** Early Intervention providers in New Mexico.
- **Support Maternal/ Parental Mental Health** initiatives.
- **Support broadband expansion and IT equipment** to close the digital divide in New Mexico.
- **Spread the word** about Early Intervention and the Family Infant Toddler(FIT) Program.
- **Utilize the ICC as a resource when researching, writing, and/or revising laws that impact children and families in the State.** The ICC is a valuable advisory body of parents, service providers, physicians, and law-makers that



works to consistently gather and evaluate important data. The council's evaluative process results in informed recommendations for improvements and continued success with our programs and cross-agency collaboration.



Thank you for your time!