

Community Settings and Group Instruction

The following information is intended to provide clarification on the issue of determining whether an agency program is viewed as a community setting or a special purpose center. Additional clarification is provided addressing group services within an agency setting.

1. What determines if an agency program is a community setting or a special purpose center?

It is important to look at the program that is offered at the agency and how the services are provided. The ratio of children in the program is not important (e.g., number of children with disabilities vs. without disabilities, the number of students to teacher, etc.). Rather it is the PURPOSE of the program that determines the setting type.

The following are some examples of programs and settings:

- If the program is designed for typically developing children (i.e., childcare program, preschool program) where parents choose the program and Early Intervention services are provided in the classroom or preschool room, then the program is probably a community setting. However, if in this program the services are “pull-out” services where the child leaves the classroom or preschool program and receives services in a special purpose room or therapy room, then the program is no longer a natural environment, it is a clinic setting.
- If the purpose of the program is adapted or designed for children with disabilities who have access to typically developing children without disabilities (i.e., reverse mainstreaming or reverse inclusion) where typically developing children are brought to the program for modeling or shaping behaviors, then the program is probably not a natural environment, it is a clinic setting.

One agency may have two different programs operating in the same building; therefore, it is possible for one agency to have two service location authorizations in First Steps; one program being designated as a community setting and the other program as a special purpose setting.

2. How is “group special instruction” defined?

Group instruction typically refers to a program where multiple children are receiving services in the same room and interacting with one or more instructors and with multiple peers. Generally group instruction has a common focus and intervention intent that is needed for the specific group of children enrolled in the group setting. With infants and toddlers, group settings are not typically required to achieve early intervention outcomes; however, when considered necessary, the IFSP team may decide to recommend a group setting for the child’s services.

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As teams consider the group option for service delivery they should consider the following:

- Does the child require interaction with peers in order to benefit from the services provided?
- Is the child being placed in this group in order to achieve the outcomes identified on the IFSP?
- Is the purpose of the group service intended to meet specific IFSP needs for children with disabilities or similar developmental needs?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, the appropriate setting for the EI services might be group special instruction. If the child's family has enrolled the child in a group preschool or daycare program and EI services will be provided in that environment, but not as an integrated component of the preschool program, the setting for the EI services is probably not group special instruction.

In some cases, two separate authorizations may be needed for an individual child that provides services in both a group setting for interaction with peers and another authorization for direct services when the child is instructed apart from the other children.