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# Internship Impact in Early Intervention

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Internship Impact

Internship Impact in Early Intervention

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## I. What is Early Intervention?

Early Intervention is a voluntary, family-centered program that provides early identification, services, and supports to eligible infants and toddlers and their families. Early Intervention works with families whose children from birth to age 3 are experiencing developmental delays, have specific diagnosed conditions, or whose external or environmental situations may result in significant developmental delays. Developmental disabilities or delays can affect a child's speech, physical or social skills. The purpose of Early Intervention is to enable young children to be active and successful participants in a variety of settings, including in their homes with their families, in child care, in preschool programs, and in the community (Human Development and Family Studies, 2015).

## II. The URI Early Intervention Internship Program

The early intervention program at the University of Rhode Island is made possible by the involvement of the Department of Human Development and Family studies and Rhode Island College. The project is funded by the Rhode Island Department of Human Services by means of the Paul V. Sherlock Center on disabilities at Rhode Island College. The program's goal is to encourage careers in the field. The project began in 2006 and since then over 140 interns have been placed in a variety of early intervention settings and careers involving children with special health care needs. As of the fall of 2014 only 28 of these students have found permanent positions as a result of their internships. Careers in early intervention can be challenging because of the nature of the work. The jobs often involve being in environments that are somewhat

atypical for most professionals and require additional sensitivity to parents and their needs as well as those of the child.

Internship opportunities are available for undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Rhode Island. The Early Intervention Recruitment and Retention Office arranges the internships at certified EI sites. EI interns are prepared through the recruitment and retention office and receive information about early intervention and the expectations of the internship. The internship program's hope is to place interns at sites with professionals geared towards their interests. The goals of the internship experience are to provide knowledge of early intervention disciplines, help the intern acquire skills in working on an interdisciplinary team, encourage development of effective strategies for working one-on-one with children and their families, and develop methods to deliver services in a variety of settings as the intern shadows a professional in the field. The goal of this project was to look into the outcome and influence of an early intervention internship experience on the lives of the student interns. Valuable information about the internship program was collected directly from the interns and supervisors about their experience with the program and its future impact through personal interviews.

### III. Literature Review

The book *The Early Intervention Guidebook for Families and Professionals: Partnering for Success*, Keilty (2010) outlines current research, policies and practices and discusses the importance of collaboration between families and professionals. This book gives background on the development of delays and disabilities and infants and toddlers who are at risk for certain delays. One of the main themes is emphasizing that early intervention is a form of support for the

child and the family. Professionals need to work with other professionals and the family to create the best course of action. EI does not replace the support of the family, but instead provides them with strategies and activities created by trained professionals. This book was the main source of background information needed about early intervention therapy.

The article created by Michael True (2015) the director of the Internship Center at Messiah College describes the steps and process of creating and maintaining an internship program. This information is important for setting up an internship program that will benefit both students and employers. The article begins by defining an internship and its characteristics. True goes on to outline the benefits to the employers, and the steps for setting up a program. The first step is to set goals for the program such as “what is the goal of the program?”. Step two is to write a detailed plan of the program and its goals including the topics of compensation, placement sites, academic requirements of the interns, supervision, and what will be asked of the intern. Step three talks about how to recruit interns and how they will be chosen and the areas they will be placed in. The final and fourth step is to determine how and who will manage the interns. This includes providing orientation and resources, supervising, evaluation and always looking at implications of the future. True also discusses the role of the supervisor and defines ten important concerns of interns. These include being given real work, getting honest information about their role as an intern, being provided with feedback, being included as a member of the staff, thoroughly understanding the nature of their work, having an attentive supervisor with time for the intern, being welcomed by their site and provided with the resources to work and finally compensation. It is important to be aware of the concerns that interns might have ahead of time in order to better prepare for them.

A research article by Campbell, Chiarello, Wilcox and Milbourne (2009) discusses that a lack of preprofessional preparation and postgraduate professional development gives rise to ill prepared personnel. Inadequate preparation encourages a look at professional associations, educational programs, and state Part C agencies. The American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) discusses seven main areas that professionals should be well versed in. These areas include; prevention; evaluation and assessment; planning, implementing, and monitoring intervention, communication with and education for team members, as well as families and other professionals; service coordination and transition planning, advocacy; and awareness and advancement of EI knowledge (Campbell et al., 2009). The paper describes studies that looked at how well students were prepared in these focus areas. The surveys for these studies asked about preparation in five early intervention practice areas: family-centered practices, natural environments, IFSPs, teaming practices, and service coordination. The results indicated that there was a major emphasis on family-centered practices, some preparation in natural environments. Much less preparation was given in IFSP, teaming, and service coordination (Bruder & Dunst, 2005). A second pair of studies focused on actual practice at in home visits and found that professionals were not actually implementing true family centered practices. They were working with the children and the parents were observing, as opposed to working with both parent and child on strategies to use in everyday life when the therapist was not present (Campbell & Sawyer, 2007).

A further look a preparation showed that there is usually training that spans all ages and no real focus in training for working with infants or toddlers and their families. Professionals seem to get most training aimed directly at early intervention through conferences and workshops.

However, in reality these types of educational settings only help to update professionals and do not succeed in making them more competent or changing their therapy strategies (Campbell et al., 2009). These issues call for reevaluation of preparation programs and education for students considering a career in early intervention. Experiences in early intervention that can be easily worked into undergraduate and graduate study should be looked into. A couple of education programs reported success when students spent time with families of children with disabilities. Important field experience internships and planned observations should be factored into pre-professional programs (Campbell et al., 2009). The main idea is to expose students to the nature of early intervention practices and challenges and prepare them before they begin working as a professional in the field.

Similarly, the article by Bruder and Dunst (2005) examined the degree to which students in early childhood special education, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech-language pathology, and multidisciplinary personnel preparation programs were trained in five areas of early intervention practices. These areas were family-centered practices, individualized family service plans, natural environments, teaming, and service coordination. Colleges and universities with early intervention personnel preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate level were looked at in this study. A total of 449 programs were looked at: 237 undergraduate programs and 212 master's programs (Bruder & Dunst 2005). The department chair or director of the program was contacted and asked to fill out a confidential survey and 23% of the surveys were returned. Bruder and Dunst found that there was a focus on family-centered practices, but less emphasis on service coordination and teaming practices. This study showed a need for standards in the field of early intervention education and training. It might be beneficial for states

to adopt standards that outline areas of competency that are required in order to provide EI services, such as, service delivery requirements. Bruder and Dunst suggest that it is reasonable to have states create personnel standards that would encourage quality services and effective outcomes for children and families receiving Part C. Services and then these could be factored into higher education programs.

#### IV. Methods

In-person interviews were a large part of this study. The idea when the project began was to interview two interns in February at the beginning of their internship and at the end of April as they completed their internship. These interns would be asked a series of initial interview questions about the internship preparation process, their knowledge of early intervention and their initial impression of the program and their placement site. Michael True's article (2015) gives a Student Evaluation of Internship that was utilized when creating the interview questions and an example of an Evaluation of Student Intern form that would have been utilized if observations were able to be conducted for this honors project. Then as they neared the end of their internship, they were asked a different series of questions focusing on their overall experience, the challenges and benefits of the internship, and the interns outlook on EI in their future. Two other interns were interviewed once over the course of the semester. One of these two had successfully completed an internship and the second began an internship, but received and accepted a paying job offer halfway into the semester. Overall, four interns were interviewed.



Another goal of the study was to interview two supervisors were once and ask them questions about whether they felt that they and the interns were adequately prepared by the EI Recruitment office, their view of what students need to become a successful future professional within the field, and whether or not they feel that the interns have gained valuable knowledge and experience. The supervisors were also asked about the difficult aspects of early intervention. Lastly, the internship coordinator for the EI Recruitment office was interviewed once about the roles of this position, the preparation given to the interns and supervisors, and concerns the staff has in regards to finding and securing interns and placement sites. Including the EI staff member, the supervisor, and the interns a total of six interviews were conducted. All of the interviewees signed a Consent to Participate in Research form that explained the purpose of the research and when signed gave permission for the interview to be recorded. Notes were taken during the interview and they were voice recorded and later transcribed. From the transcriptions qualitative data was collected and analyzed in order to find themes in the responses of the interviewed. Similarities and differences in the interns responses were examined, compared and contrasted.

## V. Limitations

Limitations to this project include a relatively small sample of interns and supervisors. The URI EI Internship program is not a large one and setting up interviews with interns and supervisors proved to be more challenging than previously thought. The member of the EI staff interviewed expressed similar concerns. The preferred and most used method of communication between staff, interns and supervisors is email. While email offers many benefits, it is unfortunately a very popular medium and because of this response time was slow and erratic.

At the start of the project six interns were contacted and only four responded, but the responses were not always consistent. Often follow-up emails were required. The hope was to interview interns at the beginning and the end of their internship. Unfortunately due to the lack of responses to emails only one intern was able to be interviewed at both the beginning and the end and only one supervisor was interviewed. The second intern was emailed more than six times over three weeks to set up a final interview and never responded. In the future it might be advantageous to contact the interns by phone or to set up a date and time for the second interview at the first meeting. Only one supervisor was successfully interviewed by phone. Five other supervisors were emailed three times, but there was no response. The lack of response from the supervisors affects the validity of the information provided by the only supervisor interviewed, because there were no other supervisor responses to compare it to.

## VI. Preliminary Results and Implications

Results from the interns interviewed have indicated that location, supervisor support, compatibility with the professionals, the dynamics between members of the interdisciplinary team for each child and the time that the interns actually spent observing their supervisor with the children were all important factors in determining if the intern had positive feelings towards their internship experience and whether they would consider working in early intervention in the future at their placement site or elsewhere.

Location is a major issue for early intervention interns and professionals. Early intervention is based around providing support and therapy in the child's everyday environments. This means professionals and interns visit many different settings and spend a lot of time driving

from location to location. The absence of a set location brings into play traffic, weather and other factors affecting travel. Spending the majority of time in the car, especially when as an intern you are not compensated for gas, is one of the aspects of the field that causes many professionals find daunting.

Supervisor support and compatibility and interactions with interdisciplinary team professionals were a determining factor for the interns. The interns whose supervisor was able to find alternative and suitable activities in the case of a cancellation, a no-show or during a supervisor's absence, reported more positive feelings towards their experience. The intern who had opportunities to see other professions at work and view and participate in group therapies such as feeding groups and play groups. The intern who was not able to fill the time left by an absent supervisor, cancellation or no-show reported that she felt discouraged. One intern mentioned "I would drive for an hour to get there and then only get to see one child."

The amount of time the interns actually spent observing early intervention sessions and how often they saw a particular child had a direct effect on how rewarding they found the internship experience. This factor also influenced their perception of the effectiveness of early intervention practices. Practices were seen as less beneficial when interns did not have the opportunity to see the progression of a child over time. When an intern witnessed multiple sessions with any one particular child the benefits of early intervention therapy were much more apparent.

## VII.Results

Upon conducting the final interviews, it was clear that the interns recognized the benefits of conducting therapy in the home. One intern explained, “it was great to work where the kids felt comfortable alongside their families.” In another instance an intern talked about a successful session in which they enlisted the help of the family dog! One of the greatest benefits was having the opportunity to get hands on experience working with the children and learning through observation and the teaching of a qualified professional. Overall, the interns expressed positive feelings toward the internship program and stated that their career goals were appropriately matched to their placement site and supervisor. Each intern was successfully able to complete his/her goals for his/her internship experience. One supervisor stated that an internship is a great experience for any student considering early intervention and a valuable opportunity to see the challenges that are faced by early intervention professionals. Positive interactions with the EI recruitment office were reported. The information provided by the supervisor agreed with the articles used for background knowledge that encourage more preparation in undergraduate and graduate curriculums for professionals working in early intervention.

### VIII. Implications

It was apparent that interns who shadowed more than once a week had the opportunity to see the most progress and as a result had more positive feelings towards their experience. Interns who only travelled to their placement site once a week reported being discouraged by cancellations and an inability to see the positive impacts of EI therapy. The greatest challenge for the interns was adjusting to shadowing. Interns stated that it took some time before they were comfortable in their position as an observer. One of the interns discussed how at first she was not

sure how much she should participate, but as time passed her supervisor gave her specific jobs such as setting up activities or holding props and this made her much more comfortable.

Interns and supervisors reported that the EI Recruitment office prepared them well for the internship experience. Two interviewees commented on the preparation handbook and said that it gave them much needed information and really helped to give them an idea of what to expect going into the internship. It seems that the EI Recruitment office prepares the supervisors and interns well. One recommendation may be to provide more explanation about the challenges that professionals face, such as, cancellations, no-shows and sometimes a lack of consistency. It might also be important to encourage interns to shadow more than once a week in order see a multitude of sessions and the benefits of therapy. It is my opinion that if similar research with a larger sample size and more access to the opinions of supervisors would be beneficial to the program.

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