



First Steps Service Coordination Program Description & Scope

Every family wants their child to grow and learn. Families with young children who have special needs or developmental delays may require a little extra support. This support is called early intervention. Early intervention is about helping infants and toddlers with delays or disabilities develop important developmental milestones or skills, such as crawling, playing, talking, and eating, during their first three years. By bringing families together with early intervention specialists, families can learn new ways to encourage and support their child's development within their daily activities. **First Steps** is Missouri's Early Intervention program for children ages birth to 3 who have developmental disabilities or delays.

Abilities First has held the System Point of Entry, Region 8 (SPOE 8) contract with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to provide First Steps since February 2006. Abilities First provides First Steps services in 13 counties in South-Central Missouri (Christian, Dallas, Douglas, Greene, Hickory, Laclede, Ozark, Polk, Taney, Texas, Stone, Webster, Wright).

Referrals to First Steps come through various means; most commonly from medical providers, social service entities, and self-referrals. A First Steps Service Coordinator is assigned to every individual/family at time of referral. The Service Coordinator assists each family with having the necessary evaluations completed to determine eligibility. First Steps Service Coordinators are responsible for completing intake, determining eligibility, facilitating Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) meetings for eligible children and their families, and ensuring the services outlined in the IFSP are provided as authorized.

In order to qualify for First Steps services, a child must meet one of the following criteria:

1. Newborn Condition, for a child referred before 36 months of age with a birth weight of 1,500 grams (3.31 pounds or 3 pounds 4.9 ounces) or less with one or more of the following conditions diagnosed at birth or within 30 days post birth:
 - Any Positive Pressure Ventilation greater than 48 hours, including continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), ventilator or oscillator;
 - APGAR scores of 6 or less at 5 minutes after birth;
 - Interventricular hemorrhage (IVH)(Grade II, III, or IV)
 - Resuscitation/code-event requiring chest compressions.
2. A diagnosed medical condition known to be associated with developmental delays.
3. A developmental delay of one-half of the child age in one of the following developmental areas:
 - Cognition;
 - Communication;
 - Physical development;
 - Social-emotional development;
 - Adaptive/Self-Help Behavior



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Once a child has been found eligible, the Service Coordinator, the family, and the evaluator hold a meeting to complete a Family Assessment and develop the child's Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). The IFSP documents the family's concerns and priorities, as well as strengths and resources of the child and family. The IFSP team identifies the specific services needed, develops outcomes, and the team determines which early intervention specialist provider(s) will work effectively with and meet the child/family needs by assisting the family/caregiver to incorporate the therapeutic strategies into the child and family's daily routines. This has been accomplished by developing a system that includes Early Intervention (EI) Teams located throughout the 13 counties included in SPOE 8. Each EI team includes a speech therapist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, special instructor, and a service coordinator.

Services available include Service Coordination, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech Therapy, Special Instruction, Assistive Technology, Social Work, and Counseling to children and families who are found eligible for the program. The First Steps program offered by Abilities First provides Service Coordination as a direct service, and purchases/ distributes assistive technology for the child/family as recommended by Early Intervention Team therapists on the child's early intervention team. The other First Step services listed above are provided through provider staff who have written agreements with DESE. Days and hours of services are agreed upon by the family and the First Steps team members. The frequency of services is driven by recommendations from the EI team, in collaboration with the family.

The First Steps Program emphasizes that services are provided in the child's natural environment, which is generally the family home, childcare, or other places the family typically would go, and directly includes the family member and/or caregiver.

Typically, one Early Interventionist will be considered the "primary" and will schedule visits more frequently than any others. Other therapists are "support" and will interact less frequently with the primary therapist responsible to assist the family in incorporating all the strategies into the daily activities. The First Steps philosophy is that the primary provider is only with the child and family one time per week and by providing training and instruction, the family/caregiver will have the skill and knowledge to incorporate the strategies into their daily routines. The Service Coordinator schedules plan reviews and annual meetings to be sure all those needed can attend.



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Costs for services are managed through DESE. The following services are provided at no-cost to all children and families referred to First Steps:

- Child find activities,
- Evaluation and assessment,
- Service coordination,
- Translation and interpretation services,
- Administration and coordination activities (including the development, review, and evaluation of IFSPs and the provision of parental rights).

All other First Steps services (occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, special instruction, assistive technology, social work, and counseling to children and families) are subject to a fee. DESE implements a system of payments which establishes family participation in the cost of providing First Steps services as mandated in state law. Each eligible child and family participating in the First Steps program is assessed to determine an ability to pay a participation fee. FCP fees are based on a sliding scale that considers the adjusted gross income for the family and the number of family members. If it is determined that the family is not able to financially contribute to the cost of services provided by First Steps, the sliding fee scale will be set at \$0. Any family participation cost assessed is paid by the family directly to DESE. Abilities First neither assesses nor collects fees.

Children are eligible for First Steps until their 3rd birthday. Most children receiving First Steps services transition to the Early Childhood Special Education program with their local school districts upon their 3rd birthday, if they are eligible for Early Childhood Special Education. Service Coordinators work together with the school districts to make this process as smooth as possible for each family. Service Coordinators also assist by making referrals to the Regional Office for Department of Mental Health (DMH) case management services for families who need ongoing support. Children referred to DMH in Greene County are assigned to a support coordinator with The Next Step, also a program of Abilities First.

It is exciting to work with families during this early time period in their child's lives. It is a pleasure to watch each child grow, meet milestones, and accomplish things that may not always seem possible at first.