

The services this family received, outside the hospital environment, have come via a friend of a friend. This is 1994: have we not progressed beyond this hand-to-mouth existence? In March this year, a conference on Early Intervention in Oxford asked: 'Where are we now? Clare was born in September. Does her case not make you want to cry with shame: 'Where are we now?' At that conference a statement was made that: 'the underlying premise that the very young child with special needs should receive support as early as possible seems to be universally accepted' (Carpenter, 1994). Can that statement now be refuted in the light of Clare's plight? If so, what would enable us to rebuild our Early Intervention services? This paper will endeavour to answer some of those questions.

### **Where Are We Now?**

Following the growth of Early Intervention programmes for very young children with special educational needs and their families in the 1960s and 1970s there came a reflective period during which the efficacy of Early Intervention was questioned (Marfo and Kyseta, 1985). Buckley (1994) challenged some of the narrow interpretation of effectiveness. She sought to encourage a more holistic analysis of the benefits of intervention programmes for the whole family, not just in terms of direct quantifiable learning gains for the child with special educational needs.

In the United Kingdom, it would be difficult to assert that Early Intervention is currently seen as a priority. So many other pressures seem to be reformulating the agenda for all of the major service providers that Early Intervention at times appears to be lost in the morass. Whilst it used to be a key feature of special education, Early Intervention has found itself reshaped, redefined and recontextualised through a variety of social as well as educational factors.

Early Intervention service delivery in the field of education, where it has retained a high profile, has also been subjected to revisions and updates even. Researchers such as Michael Gurainick (1991) have pointed out that services in the past tended to focus upon helping the child to progress, particularly in areas of motor, language and cognitive development, and that perhaps more attention should be given to the quality of relationships

being established between the child and family members. Families themselves have begun to assert this (Fitton, 1994; Hebden, 1985). Buckley (1994) has reinforced Gurainick's points and has stressed the danger that the emphasis placed on teaching skills in many Early Intervention programmes could actually have an adverse effect on parent/child relationships unless they are handled with care and sensitivity. The demands of therapy might have a disruptive effect on families, preventing them from having undirected quality time to spend playing with their children and limiting their contact with friends.

We must give attention to the context in which we deliver Early Intervention programmes. Whilst the home may be a suitable setting it is at times isolating. Conversely, the large group situation may prevent us from giving the specific attention that some very young children with special educational needs and their carers require. Although Portage has its critics, it has certainly made a major contribution in formulating thinking about home-based learning programmes, particularly with its focus upon involving the parents' knowledge about their child. Such programmes have often laid the foundations for the much talked of 'partnership with parents'. Similarly other schemes have been reported which work with families in settings outside their home (Carpenter and Carpenter, 1989).

Russell (1994) has drawn our attention to the fact that the successful delivery of home teaching programmes, as a strategy for meeting individual needs in very young children, must acknowledge the interdependence of children's educational, social care and health needs, and the importance of offering services which reflect the children's and families' culture, lifestyle and other family commitments. The various changes in legislation in the United Kingdom have impacted upon how services can provide for very young children with special educational needs and their families. In every sector concerned with the empowerment of these children health, education and social services - the changes in legislation have underlined the need for strong interdisciplinary approaches to meet the diversity of special educational needs that exist in our child population.

We are being faced with children with increasingly complex learning disabilities.