

Portugal's National Early Childhood Intervention System (SNIPI)

Summary

Portugal has a National Early Childhood Intervention System (SNIPI) that provides multidisciplinary, integrated and free support for children 0-6 years old with, or at risk of, developmental delays or disabilities, and their families.

The national ECI system is established in law (281/2009) and designed to be family-centred, strengths-based, and prevention - and rehabilitation - focused; providing individualised support in natural contexts, and particularly in relation to education, health, and social action.



Target audience

- Policymakers and professionals in health and early years settings



Delivery settings

- Natural contexts (home, nursery, etc.)



Objectives

Prevention, child development, empowerment/facility capacity building, family-centred and based on strengths



Costs

Operational costs are shared across Ministries of Education, Health and Social Policy



Responsible organization:

Government - particularly Ministries of Education, Health and Social Policy (national coordinating committee, regional subcommittees and local early intervention teams)



Country
Portugal



Professionals involved

- Healthcare professionals
- Education professionals
- Early years providers

How can this practice be implemented?

- Ensure formal and integrated coordination across sectors.
- Consider if legislation could ground and formalise multi-sectoral ECI coordination.
- Learn from local programmes and consider ways to adapt and scale them for your context.
- Ensure there is focus on and investment in workforce capacity, retention, and skills, including continuous professional development to support sustainable implementation and reduction of family wait times.
- Build awareness and outreach in, so that families and health and education bodies can support referrals
- Make sure that referral is quick and simple.
- Use standardised child development monitoring tools to promote comparability across teams, settings and regions.
- Always involve families as active participants and decision-makers in care.

Implementation Highlights

The ECI system is overseen jointly by the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Policy. There is coordination at all system levels via a National Coordinating Committee, Regional Subcommittees and local early intervention teams, to ensure country-wide coverage. Local early intervention teams have a transdisciplinary focus, involving primary care physicians, nurses, special educators, therapists, and psychologists.

Referrals may be made by any professional such as health, education and social care staff, or by parents themselves. Health services play a key role particularly in the early years due to their role in health surveillance. Health centres also have a central role in promoting interconnections between services.

For each child, there is a key professional within the local intervention team who will liaise with and help coordinate care and support. An early intervention plan is developed in collaboration with families as active participants and decision-makers.

Impact

The ECI system has improved the detection and referral of children. Skills of health professionals in detection and referral have improved. Services are more responsive to family strengths and needs.



What makes this a good practice?

Impact: does it work?

Effectiveness and efficiency

Supporting evidence reports improved detection and streamlined referral of cases to local intervention teams, including via strengthening of the role of health centres in ECI, and services being more responsive to family needs. Effectiveness depends on workforce capacity, professional competence and effective organisation in local areas to enable consistent, relationship-based practices. The integrated and transdisciplinary approach reduces risks of service duplication.

Reach: who can benefit?

Equity and access

ECI services are established in law, offered nationwide and free at the point of use. For each child, a key professional within the local intervention team can support with care co-ordination and liaison with services.

Transferability and scalability

Portugal's approach has been grounded in learning from, adapting and scaling up local ECI programmes (e.g. Coimbra). This grounded approach to implementation, and key elements of the underpinning ECI philosophy can be transferred to other contexts.

Integration: keeping it going and working across sectors

Sustainability

The ECI system builds sustainability into support for children and families through its legal basis and long-term investment, in which operational costs are shared across Ministries (i.e. Education, Health and Social Policy).

Intersectorality

The ECI system is overseen jointly by the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Policy, with intersectoral and transdisciplinary collaboration at national, regional and local levels.

Participation

Portugal's ECI system centres the agency of families, focusing on their active participation and involvement in decision-making.

References and additional tools to favour translation

- Costeira C, Lopes I, Lopes S, Pedrosa VV, Custódio S, Cioga E, Silva CG. Practices and Challenges in Portuguese Early Childhood Intervention: A Descriptive Study. *Children (Basel)*. 2026 Feb 22;13(2):304. doi: 10.3390/children13020304
- Eurlaid. Recommended Practices in Early Childhood Intervention | EURLY AID - E.A.E.C.I. 2019. Accessed January 6, 2026.
<https://www.eurlaid.eu/eciguidebook-englishversion/>
- Franco V, Melo M, Santos G, Apolónio A, Amaral L. A National Early Intervention System as a Strategy to Promote Inclusion and Academic Achievement in Portugal. *Front Psychol*. 2017 Jul 5;8:1137. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01137.