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Understanding Barriers and Facilitators to Program Engagement as a Means of Improving Program Participation

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Rationale: While the benefits of early intervention for child development are clear, not all families participate equally in services offered to them. Understanding reasons for this can help to identify avenues for program improvement, ensuring that services meet the needs of more families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, literacy level, support system or availability.

Objective: This paper shares results of a program evaluation seeking to understand barriers and facilitators to engaging with an early intervention program that offered services in family homes and local centres.

Method: This program evaluation involved collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was collected using a cohort longitudinal design over 2 years with five data collection periods at 6 month intervals. A total of 1050 children contributed to the final analysis. Data was collected regarding rates of appointment attendance (defined in this study as program engagement), program graduation and program retention. Qualitative data was collected from interviews with 18 caregivers and focus groups with 42 service providers. Qualitative data was coded and then grouped into themes.

Results: There was no statistical difference in program retention, graduation or engagement based on gender. Home-based care had an 82% program retention rate compared to 70% for children receiving centre-based care. The graduation rate was slightly higher in the centre-based program compared to the home-based program (11% vs 7%). The main reason children dropped out of either home-based or centre-based care was moving out of the catchment area. Program engagement varied depending on type of disability, but not severity of disability. Children receiving home-based therapy and families with higher income levels had greater program engagement.

From qualitative data, we learned that the following factors impact program engagement: caregiver perceptions and expectations of early intervention therapy, caregiver experiences with and perceptions of service providers, caregiver knowledge and attitudes, caregiver mental health and supports, accessibility of early intervention services, diversity of services, caregiver education and training, and child factors. By addressing these barriers through rapid cycle action

throughout program implementation, program engagement improved over time from 60% to 95%.

Conclusion: By understanding barriers and facilitators to program engagement, program implementers can better meet the individual needs of families and improve program participation.