



Align Early Childhood Development Across Policy, Practice, Partnerships and Research

Alignment of efforts across public and private agencies and sectors is necessary to ensure that early childhood development is a central aspect of working across child, youth, and family serving programs operating in states, territories, tribes, counties, and local communities. There are number of opportunities for states, territories, tribes, grantees, and their cross-sector partners to come together to improve early learning opportunities for young children and their families. No single program or sector can fully meet the needs of young children and their families – this work requires collaboration and partnerships across programs and agencies including early care and learning, early intervention, health and behavioral health, human services, employment, education, community and faith based organizations, researchers, businesses, philanthropy and other child and family serving systems. The collective impact of this work will strengthen families and support resilient, safe, healthy, thriving and economically secure children, youth, families, and communities.

The following information includes opportunities to align early childhood development across policy, practice, partnerships and research in the following four areas:

- 1) **Align Planning and Policies**
- 2) **Align Intake and Services Delivery**
- 3) **Align Partners**
- 4) **Align Systems**

1) **Align Planning and Policies**

- **Leverage existing leadership and governance structures to improve state and county level planning and coordination with early childhood leaders.** There are opportunities to bring together and leverage early childhood leaders in the Governor’s Office such as Statewide Early Learning Councils, Human Service Agencies, state public health and behavioral health leaders, education agency leaders, Head Start Collaboration Directors, Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems leaders, state Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting leads, child welfare or child abuse prevention leaders, Part B and Part C Coordinators, or other state and local leaders to prioritize early childhood development.
- **Consolidate and leverage statewide or local needs assessments to inform multiple programs and services to meet state and local needs.** States or communities can leverage resources and data from one program’s needs assessment to inform or meet the requirements for other programs, especially when the information pertains to the needs of young children and their families in the same geographic area.
- **Align statewide strategic plans or state plan requirements across multiple programs to incorporate early childhood development.** Several federal programs require that states develops plans on a regular basis. State leaders could review proposed and existing plans together to identify ways to align priorities, outcomes, performance measures, and strategies to be implemented.

- **Examine and align policies and funding streams to better meet needs of young children and their families.** State and communities should review existing resources available from different programs for families to identify policy levers and ways to leverage existing funding to expand service delivery options and support system changes for early childhood.
- **Tailor statewide disaster preparedness or pandemic plans to address the needs of all children in early care and education settings.** Natural and manmade disasters can happen anywhere and at any time. Statewide plans should address evacuation, relocation, shelter-in-place, and lock-down procedures, and procedures for communication and reunification with families, continuity of operations, and accommodation of infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, and children with chronic medical conditions. The plans should also have guidelines for the continuation of child care services in the period following the emergency or disaster or a national pandemic, as well as identify resources and supports needed to ensure the health and safety of essential workers.
- **Integrate family and parent voices in state and local planning and policy development.** Parents must play the leading role in choosing the early care and learning programs best suited to their family’s needs. State and local programs should directly engage parents in developing policies and strategies to improve access to high-quality child care in their communities.

2) Align Intake and Service Delivery

- **Simplify intake and screening and create family friendly cross-program referral systems to improve access to early care and learning, health and family support services.** Families with young children often must navigate complex, duplicative, and burdensome systems and requirements to access public assistance and other programs. A careful analysis of the referral and intake processes across systems can identify structural barriers and potential solutions to increase access to early care and education services for families that have the greatest needs.
- **Build coordinated enrollment systems for young children and families as they transition from early childhood programs to school settings.** Preschool children make the transition into kindergarten more successfully when their schools and families prepare for it together, and when their preschool and kindergarten teachers connect. By coordinating transition efforts, infant and toddler, preschool, and elementary programs can help children maintain and maximize the gains they made in preschool.
- **Co-locate and align services where families live and work.** As state and local leaders plan to open or expand programs, they should review options for co-location of services for families. Early care and learning and family support programs, such as Head Start, family resource centers, or community action agencies, can be hubs for connecting families with other community-based resources including concrete supports in times of need, an important strategy in a comprehensive primary prevention approach to ensuring child and family stability and well-being.
- **Create environments that highlight early childhood development as a critical factor in strengthening families.** The design of the physical space of buildings where services are provided can facilitate and strengthen parent child relationships.

3) Align Partners

- **Explore and leverage research and university partnerships.** Researchers and state or local agency staff can form collaborative partnerships to conduct needs assessments, evaluate and assess programs and service delivery, and promote the use of administrative data for continuous improvement. The use of data-driven policymaking and projects emphasizing the importance of data linkages and using administrative data to answer policy-related questions is important.
- **Engage and foster business and philanthropic partnerships.** Other sectors have resources and expertise to help seed and develop innovative strategies to improve early care and learning opportunities for young children and their families. These other sectors may also be in a position to support convenings or conferences that bring leaders, innovative programs, researchers, families, and other stakeholders together to identify needs and share best practices.

4) Align Systems

- **Develop cross-training opportunities and align professional development for staff.** Ongoing training that contributes to a progression of professional development must reflect current research and best practices to promote the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of all children. States should leverage existing training opportunities across funded programs and open up opportunities for staff from other sectors to attend in order to enhance workforce skills and capacity to effectively support families.
- **Leverage efforts to integrate data across early childhood programs.** Children and families may receive support from a wide range of programs and services across multiple systems, including early care and education and health and human services. Connecting and coordinating service provision across these sectors has become a priority for many states and communities as it can inform both intervention and prevention. Connecting these data across services can provide a more holistic perspective on how the field supports children and families.
- **Build peer sharing and learning opportunities across programs and sectors for continuous improvement.** As programs are serving the same families across multiple funding streams, learning for improvement should also occur with key leaders and implementers of those programs together. Given the pace of rapid change in the state or local context, policies, and funding, real-time learning in complex environments should leverage shared learning from successes and failures across programs and grantees. Building this culture of shared learning and establishing policy to practice feedback loops will help generate insights and knowledge, which can be used to shape future decisions and policies.

View more information at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/eed>