

Conceptual Frameworks for Intentional Approaches to Improving Economic Security and Child Well-being

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Programs that address the needs of low-income parents and children at the same time may hold promise for reducing the transmission of poverty across generations. Contemporary programs of this type address some key weaknesses that may have limited the effectiveness of earlier such approaches, including too little attention paid to the quality, intensity, and intentionality of services for both parents and children. Administrators who lead these approaches today may regard quality and intensity as necessary, and they may also believe that delivering intentionally coordinated and aligned services is essential to achieving the desired outcomes. Yet further evidence is needed. Virtually no large-scale evaluations of the impacts of newer service delivery models of this type have been published to date (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014).

This brief describes two conceptual frameworks that have the potential to expand our understanding of programs that aim to meet the needs of low-income parents and children through intentionally combined activities and approaches. It is geared particularly to program administrators and researchers who are interested in the services that could be involved in these approaches, how these services relate to mutually reinforcing outcomes for parents and children, and strategies for effectively delivering and coordinating services across programs and agencies.

Conceptual frameworks use both theory and research evidence to create a logical pathway that links, for example, program services to participants' outcomes (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). The hypothesized pathways can then be measured through additional research and evaluation. A conceptual framework does not depict a proven program design but rather suggests possible associations between services or activities and intended outcomes yet to be tested. The resulting findings can inform program improvement and offer evidence of effectiveness.

The conceptual frameworks for programs that intentionally combine services for children and adults discussed in this brief provide visual, systematic pictures of our hypotheses about (1) program activities and outcomes and (2) service collaboration. The first conceptual framework focuses on services and outcomes for children and

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their caregivers as reflected in contemporary programs that align services for adults and children. This framework uses theory and evidence from developmental science and economics to illustrate potential outcomes for parents and children, as well as possible changes in the home environment. The second conceptual framework addresses the dimensions of service collaboration and the progression from cooperation between independent programs (and possibly agencies) that serve generations separately to deeper collaboration and even co-location of services that are aligned, coordinated, and mutually reinforcing for parents and children.

The conceptual frameworks build on the two-generation change model presented by Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn (2014) and on partnership frameworks from the business and public management fields (Keast et al. 2007; Austin and Seitanidi 2012). The project team created the frameworks by drawing lessons from the literature review, the scan of contemporary programs, and field work.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 1: A CHANGE MODEL FOR ECONOMIC SECURITY/CHILD WELL-BEING PROGRAMS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES

The first framework is a change model for approaches that have an economic security and child development and well-being focus. The model (1) identifies the populations served; (2) describes the service model for parents/primary caregivers and children in the same family; (3) explains how intentionality, quality, and parent-child mutual motivation are important factors in building on these approaches to deliver services and influence outcomes; and (4) illustrates the set of shorter- and longer-term outcomes that may result for parents, children, and the home environment. Across the top of the framework diagram, dark blue boxes show services that might be linked to outcomes for parents and other primary caregivers, while lighter blue boxes along the bottom of the figure show services and possible corresponding outcomes for their children. Across the center of the figure, the lightest blue boxes show how services are intentionally aligned and coordinated across generations (in the services column) and how these programs might result in changes in the home environment (in the outcomes columns). Vertical arrows between the boxes indicate that services and outcomes for each generation contribute to how programs are delivered and to the outcomes that programs may produce. Cross-arrows between the services and outcomes column indicate that we

About This Project

This project, *Integrated Approaches to Supporting Child Development and Improving Family Economic Security*, was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and Northwestern University for the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It focused particularly on programs whose goals are both to improve the economic security of families and to support the development and well-being of children. These programs typically offer services to help parents get a job and increase their educational attainment and skill level and to foster the development and education of their children.

The project was designed to give ACF, administrators and funders of programs with an intentional approach to serving parents and children together, and other stakeholders an overview of the current state of the field, including theory, program models, evidence from research on the programs, and directions for future research. Project activities included (1) a literature review, an environmental scan, and field work to identify and describe existing program models; (2) development of a conceptual framework to inform program design and research; and (3) an assessment of future directions for research and evaluation.

Other briefs in this series describe the project's conceptual framework and directions for research and evaluation. The findings from the project are presented in the final report submitted by Mathematica to ACF. Project information and publications are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/integrated-approaches-supporting-child-development-improving-family-self-sufficiency>.

expect intentional pairing of services for parents and children to be mutually reinforcing. We describe the framework in greater detail below. We conclude this section with questions that program administrators and researchers could ask as they apply the framework to their work.

POPULATION SERVED

The change model for programs that support parents' economic security and children's well-being focuses on primary caregivers (usually parents) and children in the same family.¹ Our project scope included programs that serve children through age 12, although our scan yielded few programs that focused on children ages 6 through 12 (see Sama-Miller and Baumgartner 2017 for more discussion of the findings of our scan).

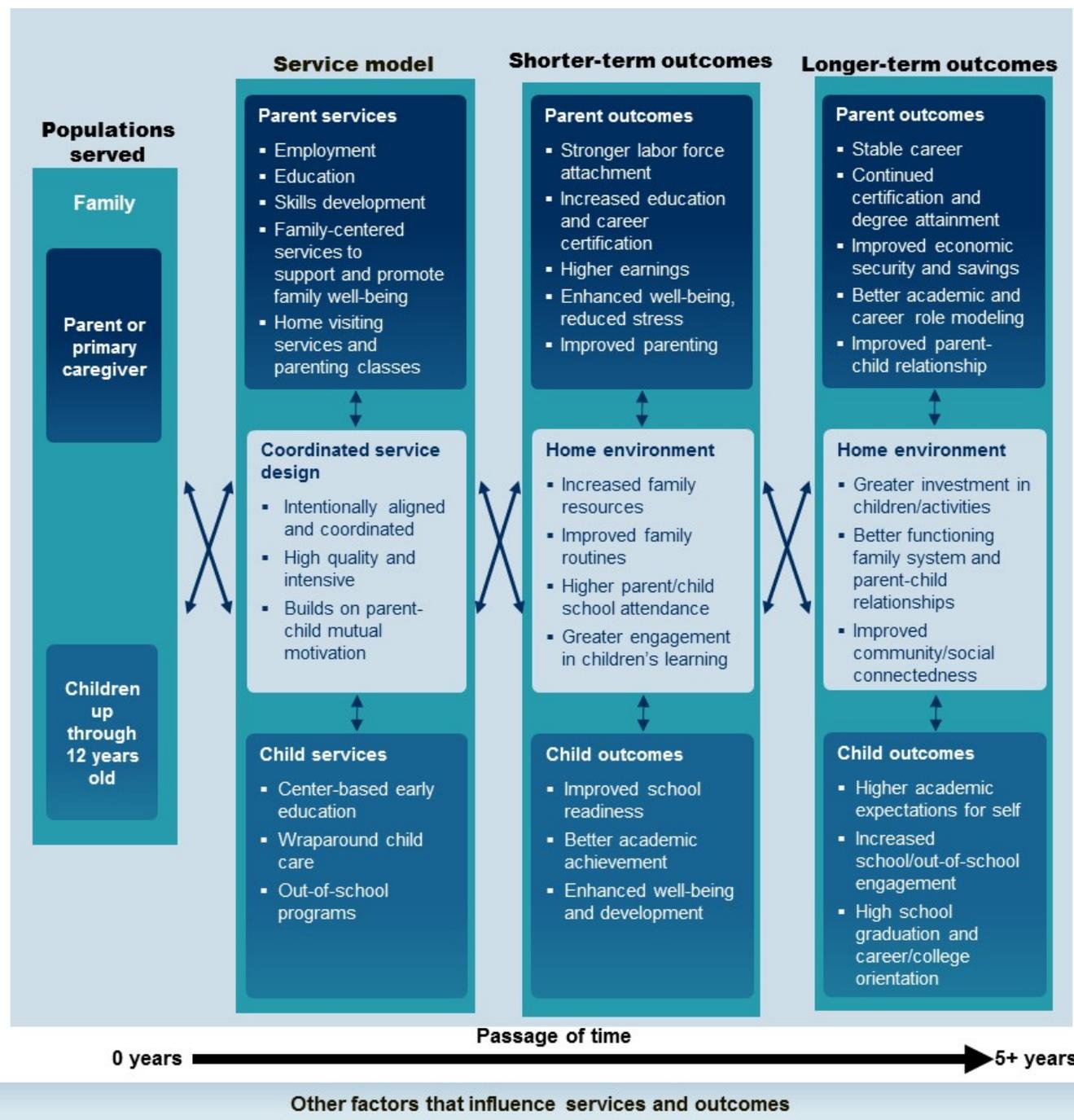
SERVICES OFFERED

Parent services. Services to parents in these types of programs could fall into five categories.

- 1. Employment services.** Connecting parents with employers and employment is key for improving family economic security. Services may include job training and employment supports. Employment-related activities also can include goal setting, educational and career coaching, and job search and placement.
- 2. Educational services.** Previous research suggests that combining employment-focused and education-related services might be effective. Education-related activities may include secondary and postsecondary coursework and degrees (including General Education Development [GED], English as a Second Language [ESL], and developmental education at community colleges) and career pathway certification in high-demand sectors of the local economy.
- 3. Skills development.** When bundled with education and employment services, activities to promote skills development may enhance labor force attachment and earnings as part of an overall strategy to improve family economic well-being. Development of soft skills might include budgeting and financial literacy.
- 4. Family-centered, individualized services that support and promote family well-being.** Some families need support beyond education and jobs to maintain economic security and promote individual and family well-being. These additional services may include emergency financial assistance, removing barriers to participation (such as transportation challenges), support in navigating public assistance programs and the courts, identifying and engaging with health and mental health services, and seeking to improve housing opportunities. Services may also involve up-front needs assessment and ongoing case management for the entire family. Supporting parents in this way could help balance and meet the often competing needs of work, school, and the care of children.
- 5. Home visiting services and parenting classes.** For parents with young children, as their schedules allow, home-based services to promote parenting skills, home safety, child health and well-being, and other outcomes may be a component of the array of services offered to both generations. Such services may have a range of formats and durations, but are often delivered by professionals (such as nurses) or trained paraprofessionals who visit families' homes on a regular or semi-regular basis.

Child services. Services for children within programs that aim to meet the needs of children and parents simultaneously seek to promote healthy child development and children's strong academic performance. These may include high quality center-based early care and education for children from infancy through prekindergarten (including Head Start and other community-based early care and education programs) as well as out-of-school programs for school-age children. Services that promote children's emotional well-being and physical health supplement educational programming.

Figure 1: Change model for economic security/child well-being approaches



Source: Adaptation of Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn (2014).

INTENTIONALITY, QUALITY, AND MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT

The framework depicts cross-generational benefits – or the effects that parents and children in the same family may have on each other that are expected to improve outcomes for both – in two ways. First, vertical arrows from parent and child services, respectively, to the center light blue box show that services to each generation can add to one another in a way that creates something new, beyond what each generation receives on its own. Second, crossed arrows between the services and outcomes boxes indicate that services to both generations might influence the outcomes experienced by each generation.

Intentionally aligned and coordinated services across generations are central to programs that serve parents and children at the same time. Yet, for such an approach to be fully effective, the service model requires that programming for each generation be high quality and intensive. This means that services would involve research-informed features of quality and intensity. Ideally, services would also be culturally competent. Aligned and coordinated services across generations can also be mutually reinforcing.

SHORTER- AND LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

Multiple theoretical frameworks from developmental science and human resources and investment theories from economics inform how we think about potential expected outcomes (which Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn [2014] outlined in more detail). More detail on these theories appears in the final report for this project. Applying the theories, this change model identifies a set of shorter- (one to two years) and longer-term outcomes (three to five years and beyond) for parents and children, and that may then occur in the home environment. The links between these services and outcomes are hypothesized and would need to be measured later through evaluation. Below, we first describe expected outcomes of parent-centered services on parents and child-centered services on children, and then we describe the cross-generational effects of coordinated and aligned services to both in the home environment section.

- **Parents.** Parent participation in services related to employment, education, skills development, and family-centered case management could lead to stronger labor force attachment and increased education and career certification in the near term. Effects could be even stronger when combined with children’s early care and education services and other supportive services. Higher-skilled employment is also likely to produce greater earnings. Together, these outcomes are likely to result in enhanced well-being of parents (perhaps characterized by optimism and self-efficacy) and reduced parental stress or emotional distress. If improvements in education, employment, and well-being continue, parents may achieve a stable career, continue to improve their credentials and certification, and possibly increase their overall economic security and savings. In turn, they may be better equipped to serve as academic and career role models for their children. Parent involvement in home visiting services may lead to improved parenting skills in the short run and improved parent-child relationships in the longer run, as well as a host of other outcomes.²
- **Children.** For young children, participation in quality early care and education environments and other key services (such as home visiting and developmental supports) are expected to improve children’s school readiness, academic achievement, and overall well-being and development in the first two years. These are expected to result in children having higher academic expectations for themselves, increased engagement in school and out-of-school activities, and higher educational attainment (for example, high school graduation) and a greater career and college orientation (among older children) over time.
- **Home environment.** As outcomes for parents and children improve, we also expect to see enhancements in the home environment that are likely to result from coordinated services for parents and children, and the expected bi-directional (or cross-generational) influence of one generation on the outcomes of the other. For example, parents’ stable employment and higher earnings are likely to increase available resources in the

home and reduce family stress. Consistent and coordinated parent and child schedules might also result in improved family routines and better school attendance for both generations. As economic security and savings increase, parents may also invest further in enrichment and out-of-school activities for their children. Such investments might, we believe, improve children's well-being, family functioning, and the community and social connectedness of parents and children.

USING THE CHANGE MODEL FRAMEWORK

Administrators and funders of programs that intentionally combine services for children with services for their parents should not necessarily expect to see changes across all outcomes depicted in the framework. Instead, they might focus on the outcomes that are most likely to occur for a particular target population and combination of services. Moreover, many contextual factors could influence the extent to which such approaches or programs achieve their intended results. These factors include the state and local policy context, local labor market conditions, and the availability and quality of services for adults and children within a community. For example, state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) rules influence the level of cash assistance for which low-income families qualify, and whether parents' participation in workforce training and career certification training programs counts toward benefit eligibility requirements. The strictness of such requirements could have an effect on parent take-up. Additionally, higher rates of employment and higher wages available in the local labor market could increase the likelihood of labor market success for parents participating in such a program. Similarly, if quality and affordable early care and education are widely available with flexible or extended hours, parents of young children may be more likely to be involved in stable employment.

Program administrators should develop a change model tailored to their own approach, informed by Figure 1, and by their own experiences and local context. To do so, they may wish to consider the following questions:

1. Which populations of parents and children might be best served by a program that is intentionally designed to address both family economic security and child well-being?
2. Which services for parents and children does the program already offer? What additional services should it offer to support economic security as well as child development and well-being?
3. Given the characteristics of the population and the services offered, what outcomes do we expect in the short term for parents and children, and in the home? What outcomes might be expected in the long term?

The change model conceptual framework can support research as well as program planning. For the framework to be used that way, program administrators and researchers should plan to (1) collect and use measures of the outcomes that are most relevant to their approach and (2) measure program processes such as service enrollment and the dosage of services parents and children actually receive. They can identify appropriate and feasible measures for each process and outcome of interest. Administrators can devise and support systems to collect outcome measures. Administrators should reach out to researchers for input on the design and plans to measure the progress of individuals and families in order to assess client needs, monitor the implementation of the approach, and identify areas for program improvement. These partnerships can also use outcome data to measure the impact of such approaches if circumstances allow.

The framework for services and outcomes shows how the content, delivery, and schedule of services for parents and children complement and reinforce each other and potentially influence outcomes for parents and children. In order to deliver complementary services to parents and their children, partnerships supporting such an approach may develop between separate organizations or programs, or among different departments in the same

organization. Together, the entities may be able to successfully offer high quality, intensive, and intentionally aligned services for parents and children.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 2: DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS IN APPROACHES THAT AIM TO MEET THE NEEDS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER

This second framework builds from the first in that it offers strategies for achieving the parent and child outcomes that stakeholders set out to achieve through partnerships. Specifically, by drawing lessons from business and public management (Keast et al. 2007; Austin and Seitanidi 2012), the framework identifies stages of partnerships between organizations, suggesting an increasing investment of shared resources over time as partnerships evolve. The development of partnerships between at least two organizations or departments may be an essential component of any approach that aims to meet the needs of both children and parents, although an organization could theoretically begin with a whole-family lens—a full complement of services for parents and children—and not need to partner with external providers. Partnerships allow for a broadening of the range of activities than a single organization or program can typically accomplish. Over time, cooperation between two independent organizations may lead to greater coordination or deeper collaboration, and thus a shared identity or mission.

Organizations or programs that work together to serve parents and children are likely to bring a range of expertise, staff, and community resources to the partnership. Together, they could identify or develop a shared mission. These initiatives aim to engage adult workforce programs and early care and education agencies—from small nonprofits to public agencies—in joint discussions about how to align their activities to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty (Sama-Miller and Baumgartner 2017).

The partnership framework we created shows the deepening of partnerships as a continuum. We hypothesize five dimensions along which organizations partner to provide coordinated services to parents and their children (drawing on work by Austin and Seitanidi 2012).

- 1. Engagement.** Programs move from cooperative cross-referrals and task-oriented engagement to significantly increasing dialog and investments of time by each program.
- 2. Mission.** Partnering programs shift from separate missions to a shared mission that focuses on the entire family, and the programs develop goals that result from more frequent and deeper joint planning, including developing and measuring shared outcomes.
- 3. Resources.** As programs partner more intensively, they are no longer simply sharing individual services or money. They are rethinking how to strategically and equitably use human and financial resources to achieve maximum benefits for all.
- 4. Co-creation of value.** Programs co-create value by moving from operating separately and maximizing distinct assets and strengths to co-designing and co-delivering approaches to services that benefit both adults and children.
- 5. Innovation and systems change.** With deepening partnerships, programs shift from limited joint planning to collaboratively addressing challenges and using knowledge from co-designing services to change how an entire system or approach is delivered.

These dimensions can evolve along a continuum of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration, increasing their level of engagement and investment of resources. Partnerships to deliver such approaches can also deepen through

the co-creation of value, in which partners identify shared values and develop joint missions. Doing so may be critical to the intentional delivery of services. Innovation and systems change is a dimension of partnerships identified in our literature review (noted in the Austin and Seitanidi 2012 framework) and echoed during our field work. We include these elements of organizational improvement in the matrix and framework as possible practices that warrants further research.

In less-developed partnerships, the model assumes that stakeholders from programs may begin to cooperate and communicate—perhaps often—even while operating independently. The same is true for service providers or agencies that plan to partner. In deeper partnerships, stakeholders might guide the programs to develop more complex relationships that will support opportunities for cross-program referrals, task-oriented engagement, and coordination. At the farthest end of the continuum, programs fully collaborate to offer an approach in which they co-design programming and engage deeply to achieve a shared agenda or goals.

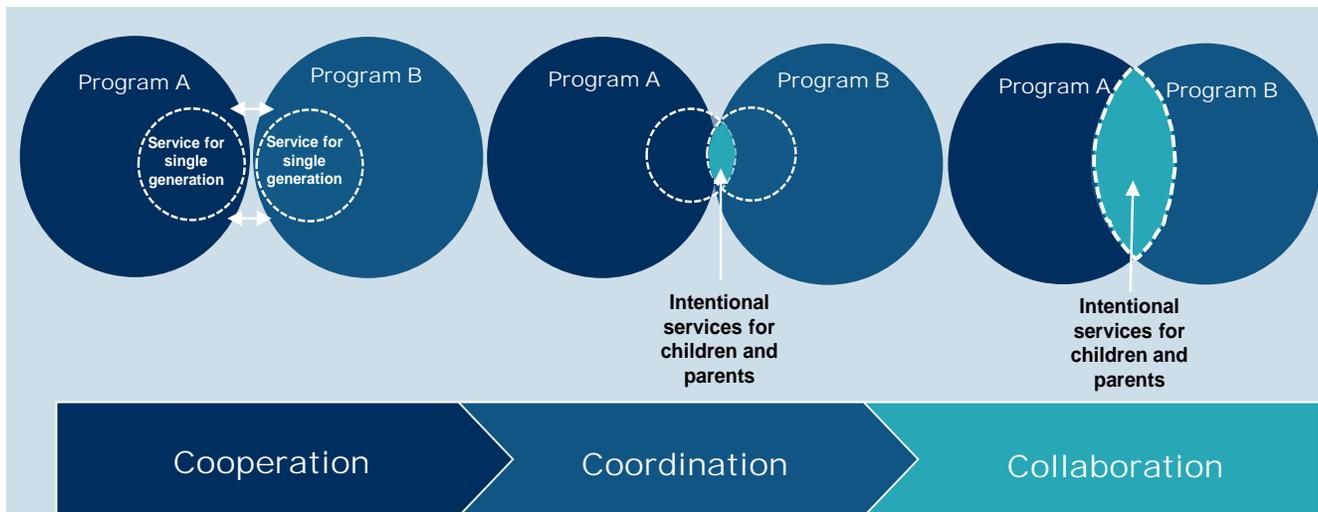
For example, a child development program and a job-training program might change the depth of their partnership when delivering services intended to benefit the whole family. They may begin by scheduling services so that parents and children can participate in their respective educational activities simultaneously. Then the two programs may develop a shared mission statement about coordinating with each other to help each generation achieve key outcomes and possibly share resources such as space and materials. Eventually, they might merge services to offer one program to parents and children. Full collaboration involves joint design and delivery of an intervention that benefits the entire family, something that might not be fully feasible or desired if resource investment is too great.

Research could explore whether the partnership framework actually reflects how organizations partner to provide coordinated services to parents and their children. Implementation research on such approaches should assess where partner organizations are located along this continuum and whether partnerships change over time (and in which direction). Questions about partnership and program outcomes might also be interesting to stakeholders. For instance, is a collaborative partnership needed to produce improved outcomes for approaches that address the needs of low-income parents and children simultaneously? Is a coordinated partnership sufficient? Evaluations in the future could explore how the depth of partnerships relates to the quality and intensity of services, family engagement, and ultimately, outcomes for families and children.

The partnership framework in Figure 2 provides a structure for a discussion between stakeholders from programs that are implementing an approach that aims to serve children and parents. Questions include:

1. For each program partner, what are the benefits of and barriers to increasing cooperation and coordination, and how can benefits be reinforced or strengthened and barriers decreased?
2. How closely matched are the goals for each generation and program?
3. Are there opportunities to better align goals and services?
4. What is the value added to each organization of sharing resources or pursuing additional resources together?

Figure 2: Conceptual framework for development of partnerships in programs that serve parents and children



Note: Dimensions and phases on this continuum draw from the work of Austin and Seitanidi (2012) and Keast et al. (2007).

As approaches move along the continuum, programs shift in some key areas:

- **Engagement:** Move from cooperative cross-referrals and task-oriented engagement to significantly increased dialogue and investments of time by each program
- **Mission:** Shift from separate missions to a shared mission that addresses the needs of the entire family and establishes program goals resulting from more frequent and deeper joint planning
- **Resources:** No longer simply sharing individual services or money and instead rethinking how to strategically and equitably use human and financial resources to achieve maximum benefits for all
- **Co-creation of value:** Move from operating separately and maximizing distinct assets and strengths to intentionally co-designing and co-delivering services to both parents and children
- **Innovation and systems change:** Shift from limited joint planning to collaboratively addressing challenges, using knowledge from co-designing services to change how an entire system or approach is delivered

SUMMARY

This brief offers two frameworks to researchers, funders, and program administrators who may be interested in developing or refining an approach to simultaneously improving family economic security and children's development and well-being. The two frameworks complement one another.

Program administrators, funders, and researchers may use the first framework in a variety of ways. First, all three groups of stakeholders could use it to jointly define potential target populations, services, and short- and longer-term outcomes for parents, children, and families. This framework may also be used to structure data collection for assessing the strength of the association between services and outcomes. Second, program administrators could use it as a model for their own conceptual framework, which they would then use to guide how they measure the effects of services on parents and children. Third, program administrators and researchers could use the frameworks to consider whether the quality and intensity of services, along with partner engagement, are

likely to result in the intended outcomes of programs that intentionally serve parents and children at the same time.

Partnering organizations may be the stakeholders most likely to use the second conceptual framework. It could help staff to define and discuss opportunities for strengthening and deepening partnerships. Finally, the pair of frameworks could help stakeholders of all types to structure plans for data collection that could help programs monitor progress, identify areas that need improvement, and evaluate results for clients.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Previous economic security approaches that served parents and children alike tended to prioritize single mothers receiving public assistance. The current model is broader and includes programs for a wider range of potential caregivers, including mothers, fathers, grandparents, and non-custodial parents. (We refer to primary caregivers as parents in the rest of our discussion in this chapter.)
- ² Evidence-based home visiting is proven to result in a range of improvements, depending on the home visiting program model, that may include better maternal and child health, better family economic self-sufficiency, and better child development. See <https://homvee.acf.hhs.gov/> for a summary of research results about home visiting.

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