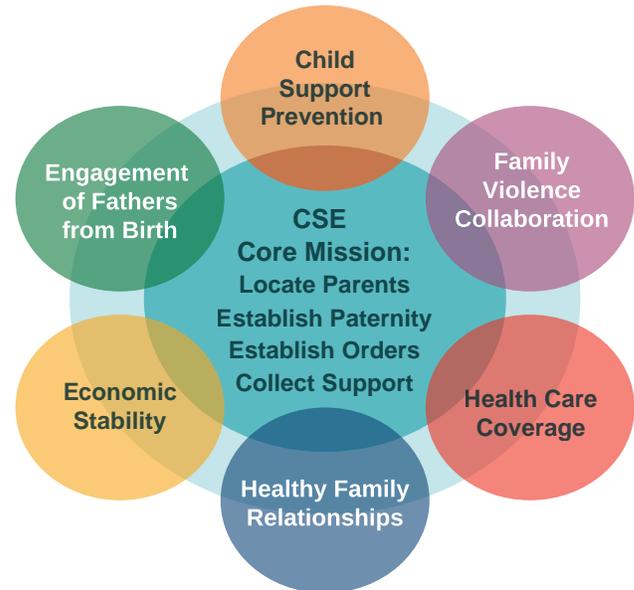


Family-Centered Innovations Improve Child Support Outcomes

The Promoting Child Well-Being & Family Self-Sufficiency Fact Sheet Series discusses how and why the child support program provides innovative services to families across six interrelated areas to assure that parents have the tools and resources they need to support their children and be positively involved in raising them. The series highlights examples of the family-centered approach that child support programs are undertaking to successfully serve all 17.5 million children in the program, representing one in four children in the country.



Over the past decade, a number of child support programs have demonstrated that a range of innovative strategies can improve the reliability of child support payments, particularly for the low-income families that need child support most. States are modernizing their child support programs by implementing policies to establish realistic child support orders, reduce child support debt, and intervene early when parents begin to struggle to make payments. They are working collaboratively with other programs to prevent the need for child support, to engage fathers in the lives of their children, to increase noncustodial parent employment, to improve family relationships, to secure health care coverage, and to help prevent family violence.

The Need for Family-Centered Child Support Services

The child support program serves one quarter of all children and half of all poor children in the country.¹ Moreover, the child support program serves these children and their parents for extended periods of time, typically until the children reach the age of majority.

One quarter of all custodial and noncustodial parents are poor and nearly two-thirds of custodial families in the child support program have incomes below 200 percent of the poverty threshold.² Thus, the child support program is uniquely positioned to help a large percentage of poor and near-poor families.

State child support programs have found that family-centered child support services can increase the reliability of child support payments, especially for low-income families who face multiple challenges to providing for their children. Connecting families to other services and delivering enhanced child support services can help low-income families meet the needs of their children. This approach recognizes that collecting support depends on responsive child support services, employment for noncustodial parents, cooperation between parents, and parents' emotional connection with their children.

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Child Support Program Accomplishments

The child support program has dramatically improved its performance since the passage of welfare reform in 1996.

- Annual child support collections have nearly tripled from \$11 billion to \$30 billion.
- The total number of paternities established or acknowledged per year has doubled.
- Cases with a child support order have increased 40 percent.
- The amount of child support collected for every dollar spent on the program has gone from \$3.59 to \$4.88.

The program reduces child poverty and promotes family self-sufficiency by making child support a reliable source of income. In fact, the program removes about a million people from poverty each year, and provides 10 percent of income for all poor custodial families and 40 percent of income for those poor custodial families who receive child support.³

The child support program is now recognized as one of the best performing government programs.⁴ These accomplishments were made possible as a result of the 1996 welfare reform law, which gave states sweeping new enforcement tools and automated interstate databases. Employers and banks have now become crucial private partners of the child support program.

The child support program works well for most parents in the child support caseload—the 75 percent or so who have steady incomes through regular employment or other means. However, it has been less effective for the approximately 25 percent of noncustodial parents who have a limited ability to pay child support. We know that 70 percent of unpaid child support debt is owed by parents with no or low reported earnings.⁵ A growing body of research suggests that reduced orders and debt relief can improve employment and child support payments.⁶

The Evolving Child Support Program Policy Agenda

Created in 1975, the primary purpose of the child support program was to recover welfare costs. But Congress has steadily embraced a broader mission for the program through legislative changes, which has resulted in the gradual shift in the child support program toward a family-centered service delivery model. Today, the child support program is a family-first program, distributing 96 percent of the child support collected to families.

Reflecting this family-centered focus, state child support programs have also started to update and broaden their collections strategies. Child support programs no longer rely exclusively on debt-driven enforcement remedies. Instead, most child support is collected through automatic income withholding. This strategy is combined with data analysis, early intervention, and customized service delivery that relies on proactive case management by child support staff. Traditional enforcement tools are still used when appropriate—that is, when parents have the ability to pay, but fail to do so. This approach has been successful because staff intervenes early to address the reasons parents cannot or do not pay child support. In particular, child support programs have begun to:

- Encourage parents to participate when child support orders are established.
- Educate parents about the child support program.
- Establish realistic child support orders.
- Use automated systems to detect non-compliance as early as possible.
- Notify noncustodial parents of missed payments before enforcement actions are taken.
- Modify obligations to ensure that they stay consistent with a parent's ability to pay.
- Reduce that portion of child support debt owed to the government if noncustodial parents start paying current support.
- Adopt federal options to pay more support to families, instead of keeping it to repay cash assistance.

In collaboration with its state and local partners, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) is working to improve policies in these areas. This policy agenda is part of the family-centered approach to child support.

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Family-Centered Service Delivery Strategies in the Child Support Program

Over the past decade, the child support program has broadened the range of partnering organizations it works with to help parents meet the financial and emotional needs of their children. Today, child support programs are engaged in outreach, referral, case management and other strategies in partnership with numerous organizations, including fatherhood, workforce, and reentry programs. Sometimes the most effective way of increasing the reliability of child support payments is to address the underlying reasons parents are not paying their obligations, whether those reasons are related to unemployment, parental conflict, or disengagement. These activities have been organized into the following six areas:

- Preventing the need for child support enforcement.
- Engaging fathers from the birth of their first child.
- Promoting family economic stability.
- Helping build healthy family relationships.
- Ensuring that families have meaningful health care coverage.
- Preventing and reducing family violence.

This fact sheet series discusses each of these areas in turn. Each is part of a family-centered service delivery strategy, often conducted in collaboration with other programs, to benefit children by increasing the reliability of child support payments. These areas are interrelated, and many programs serving families and fathers provide comprehensive services across multiple service delivery areas. In this series, programs are generally included in the area that covers their primary function.

State child support programs are delivering family-centered services with child support program matching funds provided under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act as well as other funding sources. These other funding sources include competitive grant funding from OCSE and State Access and Visitation grant funding. Also, some state child support programs have requested and received waivers to use their federal child support incentive funds or child support matching funds for these purposes. Still others partner with other organizations to utilize services funded through other sources. OCSE plans to issue formal guidance that addresses the use of federal child support matching funds for family-centered services.

References

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