



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

How can child protection agencies partner with early care and education to **improve outcomes for children?**

Participation in early care and education (ECE) provides many benefits for children involved with the child protection system. Enrollment in ECE programs is linked to a lower likelihood of removal from the home and a decreased number of subsequent child maltreatment reports.¹ For children in foster care, the [benefits include](#) improved language development,² social skills,³ and school readiness.⁴ Many ECE programs utilize a two-generation approach, supporting the needs of both children and their caregivers. Further, ECE participation provides an opportunity for prevention and early identification of maltreatment risk, as ECE staff can identify needs and provide or refer families to necessary supports without opening a child protection case.

Despite demonstrated benefits, ECE is underutilized by children involved in the child protection system. **Developing strategic, collaborative relationships between ECE and child protection can increase the utilization of ECE among young children involved in (or at risk for involvement in) the child protection system, thereby providing benefits to more children and families.**⁵



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Federal framework

The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) and the Office of Child Care released an [information memorandum](#) emphasizing the value of child protection and child care partnerships, and several policies, projects, and initiatives further emphasize the federal government's support for coordination between the two systems.

Policies

Federal policies supporting ECE enrollment and early intervention for children involved in (or at risk of involvement in) the child protection system include:

- **Eligibility and enrollment.** [Children in foster care are entitled to enrollment in Head Start](#) even if their income exceeds income guidelines, and the Office of Head Start encourages Early Head Start and Head Start agencies to [prioritize enrollment of children in the child welfare system](#).
- **Subsidies and reimbursement.** All children who need protective services are eligible for subsidies through the [Child Care Development Fund](#). [Title IV-E agencies can be reimbursed for child care costs](#) for children who are in foster care.
- **Early intervention services.** The [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act](#) (CAPTA) requires CPS to refer all children under age 3 who are substantiated victims of maltreatment for evaluation for early intervention services (e.g., physical or speech therapy, home visiting) through

Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In addition, ACYF's [Tip Sheet for Early Childhood – Child Welfare Partnership: Policies and programs that promote educational access, stability, and success for vulnerable children and families](#) summarizes federal policies and programs (as of 2011) supporting ECE access for children involved in the child protection system, and identifies a series of information memoranda issued in 2010 and 2011 calling for increased collaboration across agencies.

Projects and initiatives

Many of the strategies for partnership between ECE and child protection have been informed by findings from federal demonstration projects and initiatives:

- The [Early Head Start – Child Welfare Services Initiative](#) funded 24 grantees from 2002 to 2006 to develop and implement plans to increase coordination between child protection agencies and Early Head Start agencies.
- In 2011, as part of the [Child Welfare – Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Children With Child Welfare Involvement](#) program, the Children's Bureau awarded funds to eight projects to support collaborative service delivery among early education providers and child protection agencies.

Child maltreatment is a community problem with a community solution. Early childhood education and child welfare are a part of that, but it's not a problem of the early childhood system or child welfare system to solve. It's a community problem, so it's a community responsibility. The places that have been able to frame it that way have been able to make some progress.

— KENDRA DUNN,

CHILD MALTREATMENT PREVENTION DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD, COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

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- The [Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships](#) program, established in 2014, brings many of the facets of Early Head Start programs (serving children ages 0 to 2) into traditional child care and family care settings, such as instructional materials, staff supervision and training, and low student-to-teacher ratios.

Building bridges

Although staff in child protection and ECE both work to improve outcomes for young children, there are differences in how they [approach their work](#) (child protection's primary focus is safety, while ECE's primary focus is well-being), work regulations and environments, and the nature of relationships with families. Developing collaborative working relationships between staff from the two systems requires some bridge-building to address these differences. Once established, several strategies may be helpful in further advancing an effective partnership.

Plan for effective service coordination

Staff from both agencies should review ECE recruitment and enrollment policies for children involved in the child protection system and jointly develop standardized recruitment, referral, enrollment, and service coordination protocols (including referrals to child care subsidy programs).

Child protection case plans for children age 5 and under should include ECE services, and ECE providers should be included on case planning teams.

Develop cross-program communication

Partnering agencies should jointly develop a communication plan (including expectations around information sharing), and check in regularly regarding successes and challenges. Child protection agencies may wish to designate a staff member to serve as a liaison to ECE programs. The liaison can track and share children's progress, attend service planning meetings and court hearings, and educate staff about the importance of ECE. Staff members may be co-located (or may take turns being co-located) to promote ongoing collaboration.

In 2016, a Blue Ribbon Commission [report](#) in the state of **Washington** recommended the creation of a new department focused on children and families. As a result, the Department of Early Learning (including home visiting, early childhood education, and child care) and the Children's Administration (including Child Protective Services, adoption support, and foster care) were [combined into one agency](#), the [Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#), to increase proactive supports for struggling families, and to target efforts to prevent deeper penetration into the child welfare and

The Arkansas partnership toolkit has a letter from the child welfare program director and the child care division director saying it's OK to talk to each other. And please do. When you are sharing information in the best interest of the child, it's encouraged. We're not asking you to share the nuances of the child-specific trauma experience or to reveal things that don't need to be revealed. But it is relevant if the child has specific needs related to trauma or if a court date is coming up that might mean it's time for the child to go home.

— NIKKI EDGE,

PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS FOR MEDICAL SCIENCES COLLEGE OF MEDICINE, DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

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juvenile justice systems. In addition, the [Child Welfare – Early Learning Partnership](#) (managed by Children’s Home Society) convenes partners from child protection and ECE monthly in one of the state’s largest child welfare offices. Caseworkers discuss current challenging cases and providers share information about relevant child development services (such as availability, referral process, and contact information).

Engage in ongoing joint trainings

Joint training opportunities on topics of mutual interest (such as mandated reporting, administering and interpreting assessments, and working with high-needs families) can provide opportunities to establish relationships and develop a common understanding of each other’s terminology, policies, and services. In particular, it can be helpful to provide training about the [importance of quality in ECE programs and how it is assessed](#), and how to ensure all families have access to early learning services.

In 2014, as part of its [System Change for Successful Children](#) project, the [Collaborative for Educational Services](#) in Massachusetts created two comprehensive toolkits to support trauma-informed practice for vulnerable young children and their families, and collaboration between the child protection and ECE systems: the [Child Welfare Toolkit for Early Childhood Professionals](#) and the [Early Childhood Toolkit for Child Welfare Professionals](#). In addition to resources specific to Massachusetts, the toolkits include information on trauma-informed practices, materials to share with parents, and tips on collaborating across disciplines. In addition, the project created several training sessions for child protection professionals and early educators, one of which is a [cross-training session](#) to increase collaboration between ECE and child protection.

ARKANSAS’ PROJECT PLAY

A needs assessment conducted by Arkansas’ [Project PLAY](#) (Positive Learning for Arkansas’ Youngest) revealed that [70% of children](#) in foster care who were receiving childcare vouchers were attending ECE programs that were not quality rated. This is no longer the case because the state implemented a policy requiring that ECE programs accepting childcare subsidies enroll in the state’s [quality rating system](#) and make progress over time towards higher quality ratings. In addition, before caseworkers can submit a childcare referral for a 3- to 5-year-old, they must show they have confirmed whether a Head Start or state-funded pre-K slot is available, and provide a justification for requesting other care.

Minimize transitions and create transition plans

Whenever possible, children entering foster care who are already attending high-quality ECE programs should maintain their enrollment; similarly, children exiting foster care should maintain their enrollment in high-quality ECE programs. Jointly written policies and procedures can facilitate this stability.

To decrease the number of disruptive transitions among young children, Arkansas has implemented an ECE [expulsion prevention program](#), which provides [online resources, technical support, and child mental health consultations](#) to help ECE providers manage challenging behaviors. The program has resulted in a significant decrease in the number of children being suspended or expelled from ECE programs.

Engage families around the importance of ECE

It is important to develop collaborative relationships with families, child welfare workers, foster parents,

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and kinship providers to ensure they understand the benefits of ECE services. The state of **Washington** is collaborating closely with the [Harvard Kennedy School's Government Performance Lab](#) to strengthen efforts to provide prevention and early supports by connecting families to community-based early learning and family preservation services. Through a six-step assessment process, it became clear that a significant reason referrals weren't being completed was because parents declined services. That led to a current effort to develop a set of conversation guides to explain the value of and normalize the use of ECE programs, while simultaneously empowering the parent as the decision-maker. In addition, three new early learning liaison positions were created to support caseworkers in matching families to the right early learning services and ensure ongoing engagement with services in three pilot offices. Early results indicate that referrals are increasing.

Increase access to Head Start

Head Start [regulations](#) require programs to “actively locate and recruit” vulnerable children, including children in foster care. However, specified annual enrollment periods and the [requirement](#) to fill any vacancy within 30 days make it difficult for children entering foster care to enroll in Head Start, given that children enter foster care throughout the year. Only 14% of children in foster care ages 0 to 5 were enrolled in Head Start in 2017. Local Head Starts identify their own priority populations based on community needs assessments. The Administration of Children and Families, which oversees Head Start,

could designate children in the child protection system as an automatic priority population.

Busting barriers

Agencies can help mitigate potential challenges when embarking on a partnership between child protection and ECE by:

- **Ensuring leadership involvement:** It is vital to have ongoing and active leadership involvement from both child protection and ECE to demonstrate the importance of collaboration, and ensure policies and procedures are jointly developed and instituted.
- **Mediating staff turnover:** Given the need to educate new staff and build relationships across systems, high turnover rates among ECE and child protection staff at multiple levels pose challenges to partnership. In addition to implementing strategies to reduce staff [turnover](#), agencies can plan for staff transitions by providing informational materials about partnership and implementing protocols for introducing new staff to partners in other agencies. Arkansas' [Project PLAY](#) created briefs for [child welfare system professionals](#) to understand the need for quality and stability in ECE among children in foster care, and for [ECE providers](#) to understand the needs of children in foster care. These resources can be distributed to new staff.

Better connecting our child-welfare-involved families to early care and education is not only foundational to the creation of our new agency, it's critical to improve outcomes for children and strengthen families so they flourish.

— VICKIE YBARRA,
DIRECTOR OF OFFICE OF INNOVATION, ALIGNMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY, WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES

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COLORADO'S EFFORTS TO INTEGRATE ECE AND CHILD PROTECTION

Colorado worked to improve outcomes for young children through a variety of strategies:

- **Infrastructure for statewide coordination.** Colorado created the [Office of Early Childhood](#), which oversees the [Division of Early Care and Learning](#) (including child care licensing, regulation, quality initiatives, and subsidies) and the [Division of Community and Family Support](#) (including maltreatment prevention, mental health, early intervention, Head Start, and home visiting). Locating these two divisions in the same office has centralized staff knowledge and increased opportunities for collaboration. Colorado has been working to more seamlessly [refer children from child welfare to early intervention](#).
- **Strong cross-sector partnerships.** The [Colorado Early Childhood Leadership Commission](#) includes over 100 state partners with a diverse set of perspectives (e.g., nonprofits, government agencies, funders, businesses, advocacy groups) to better align and coordinate programs and services for young children. The [Colorado Partnership for Thriving Families](#) brings together professionals from various sectors and jurisdictions to coordinate funding, regulations, implementation, and evaluation to promote well-being during a child's first year of life.
- **Research to facilitate action.** Colorado's [Birth-to-Five Task Group](#) developed a white paper to address the question, "How do the child welfare and early childhood systems, in partnership with families and communities, prevent maltreatment of children age five and under?" Based on its research, the task group recommended increasing collaboration across systems at three levels: family (e.g., warm handoffs when making referrals, family engagement meetings), community (shared learning events, Early Childhood Councils, referral processes), and system (e.g., workgroups, committees).
- **Strategic planning and investment.** Colorado's [Child Maltreatment Prevention Framework for Action](#) is a tool to guide state and local strategic planning around investing resources to prevent child maltreatment and nurture child well-being. An accompanying [toolkit](#) guides local communities in their planning, including information on engaging families, developing action plans, prioritizing strategies, and evaluating progress. Colorado aims to have local child maltreatment prevention plans in each of its 64 counties.

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- **Addressing information sharing:** Although information sharing among providers is imperative to most effectively serve children and families, state laws prohibit sharing of information without consent. Creating information-sharing agreements is a crucial first step in developing an ongoing partnership. In Arkansas, Division of Children and Family Services and Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education leadership approved a [partnership toolkit](#) that ECE and child protection staff can use jointly to track the needs and progress of young children involved with both

systems, which has resulted in children in foster care receiving more services and supports.

- **Understanding, aligning, and streamlining funding:** [Ascend at The Aspen Institute](#) recommends creating systems that allow local innovations to inform policies at the state and federal level, suggesting that federal offices could play a technical assistance role. The Aspen Institute also recommends that federal agencies take a “[systems view of funding](#),” allowing funding (such as waiver requests) to bridge multiple systems.

- 1 Green, B. L., Ayoub, C., Bartlett, J. D., Von Ende, A., Furrer, C., Chazan-Cohen, R., Vallotton, C., & Klevens, J. (2014). The effect of Early Head Start on child welfare system involvement: A first look at longitudinal child maltreatment outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review, 42*, 127–135.
- 2 Merritt, D. H. & Klein, S. (2015). Do early care and education services improve language development for maltreated children? Evidence from a national child welfare sample. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 39*, 185-196.
- 3 Kovan, N., Mishra, S., Susman-Stillman, A., Piescher, K. N., & LaLiberte, T. (2014). *Differences in the early care and education needs of young children involved in child protection. 46*, 139–145.
- 4 Lipscomb, S. T., Pratt, M. E., Schmitt, S. A., Pears, K. C., and Kim, H. K. (2013). School readiness in children living in non-parental care: Impacts of Head Start. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 31*(1), 28-37.
- 5 Based on interviews with Darneshia Bell, ZERO TO THREE Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams, March 13, 2020; Kendra Dunn, Office of Early Childhood, Colorado Department of Human Services, December 2, 2019; Nikki Edge, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences College of Medicine, March 26, 2020; Julie Hoffman, Amara, March 24, 2020; Scott Kleiman and Kate Lawyer, Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab, April 1, 2020; Joan Ohl, Casey Family Programs, September 5, 2019; Toni Rozanski, Casey Family Programs, August 20, 2019; and Michelle Trulsrud, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences College of Medicine, March 25, 2020.
- 6 Data downloaded from the Head Start Program Information Report and <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-25>.

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