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COMPREHENSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING: A Tool To Inform Discussions On Collaborative, Cross-Sector Planning

What is the purpose of this tool?

The purpose of this tool is to help state and community leaders improve the capacity of their early childhood system. Comprehensive early childhood systems require work across the Health, Early Learning and Development, and Family Support and Leadership sectors in order to achieve agreed-upon goals for thriving children and families. The tool is based on the framework and accompanying graphic developed by the Early Childhood System Working Group (ECSWG).

Who are the intended users of this tool?

This tool is designed to assist facilitators working with state or community stakeholders from multiple sectors to plan for and manage integrated early childhood systems. Stakeholders might include leaders from the governor's or mayor's office, a Children's Cabinet or a State Early Learning Advisory Council, relevant state, county and local agencies, non-governmental agencies, and others in the early childhood policy and professional community. Potential agencies to include in such a discussion are listed in the Appendix to this document; the list includes agencies with authority over relevant federal programs and funding streams for young children and families across the sectors of Health, Early Learning and Development, and Family Leadership and Support.

What is Early Childhood System-building?

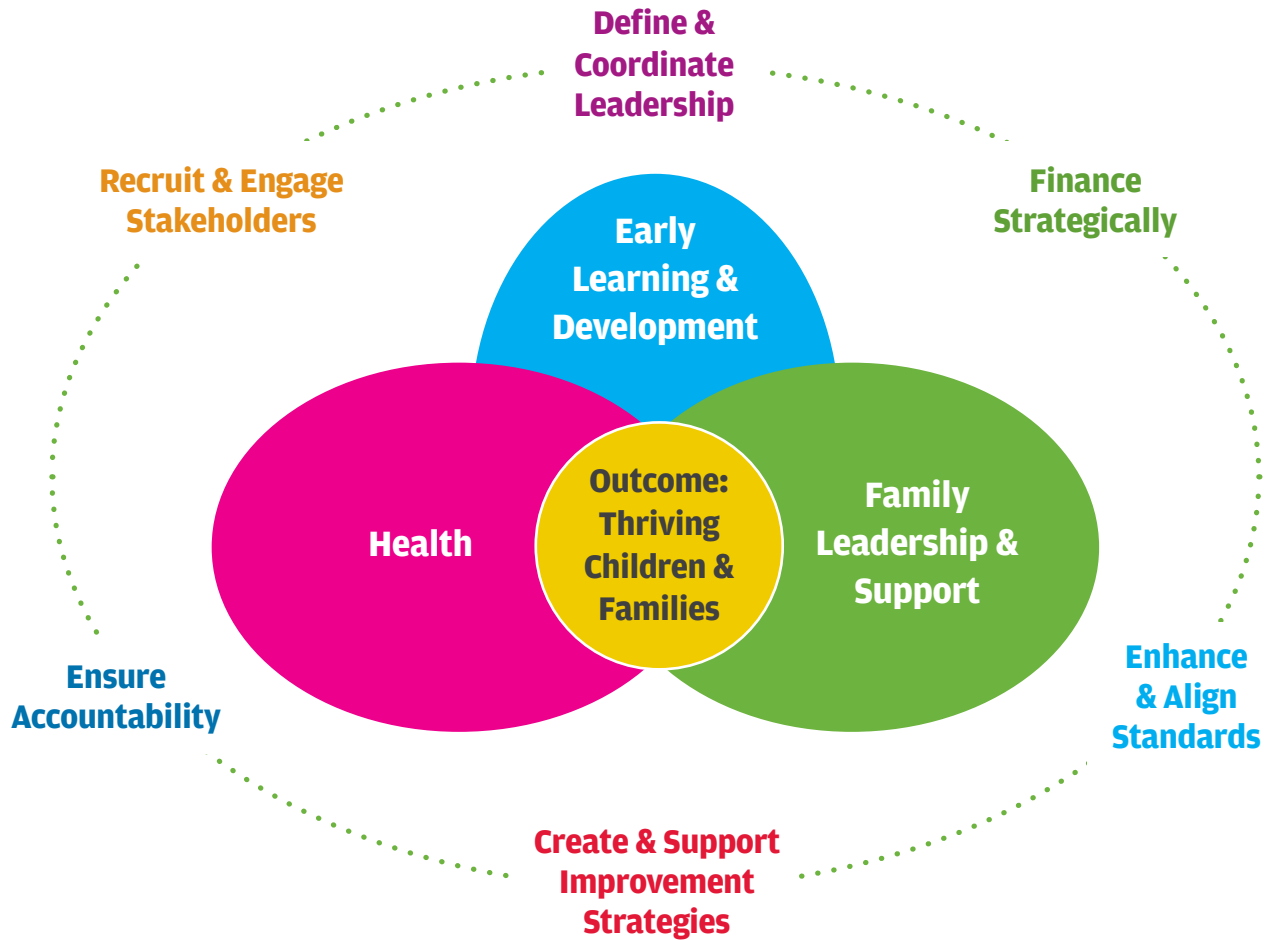
Early childhood system-building is the ongoing process of developing the structures, behaviors, and connections that make all the components of an early childhood system operate as a whole to promote shared results for children and families. The ECSWG developed this tool with the understanding that states and communities each find their own path to building a comprehensive early childhood system and that it would not be possible to develop a tool that recommends a linear process to follow to do so. System-building is dynamic and can occur in fits and starts or double back and start over. The intention is that this tool would be relevant no matter what stage a planning or management group is in.

How can the ECSWG Early Childhood System graphic facilitate system-building?

The ECSWG has developed a simple graphic (often referred to as "the ovals") depicting the intersection of the Health, Early Learning and Development, and Family Support and Leadership systems that are necessary to develop a comprehensive early childhood system (see Figure One). Since their creation, the ECSWG graphics have been widely used and adapted by early childhood stakeholders to understand, communicate, and support policy improvements for systems. The graphic shows:

Desired Results: In the center of the graphic is the desired result for early childhood systems, thriving children and families. Each planning group will want to bring further clarity and definition to that term reflecting their own unique priorities.

Figure One. Six Key Strategies to Improve the Functioning of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System



Values and Principles

Optimally, a comprehensive early childhood system will:

- Reach all children and families, and as early as possible, with needed services and supports
- Genuinely include and effectively accommodate children with special needs
- Reflect and respect the strengths, needs, values, languages, cultures and communities of children and families
- Ensure stability and continuity of services along a continuum from prenatal into school entry and beyond
- Ease access for families and transitions for children
- Value parents as decision makers and leaders
- Catalyze and maximize investment and foster innovation

Core Values and Principles: Values and principles can serve as critical guideposts to center state and community leaders' decisions and assess the extent to which the existing system is doing what it intends for children and families across all of "the ovals." The ECSWG suggests that groups using this guide revisit their core values and principles during and at the end of their decision-making process to ensure fidelity to their initial list. The following list of guiding values and principles can be used or adapted to drive the continuous development of a comprehensive early childhood system:

“ The ECSWG suggests that groups using this guide revisit their core values and principles during and at the end of their decision-making process. ”

- **Reach all children and families and as early as possible with needed services and supports.** To maximize the effectiveness of services, children and families at-risk of poor outcomes should be identified and receive appropriate services as early as possible in children's lives.
- **Genuinely include and effectively accommodate children with special needs.** Accommodating children with special needs should be a collective goal, not a system unto itself. Children with special needs are part of all the "ovals" and appropriate linkages and services should be integrated throughout the system of systems. At the same time, children with special needs require attention and often specialized professional expertise and additional resources which extend beyond what generally is needed for all children as a core part of each oval.
- **Reflect and respect the strengths, needs, values, languages, cultures and communities of children and families.** The population of young children is becoming increasingly diverse. In order to effectively tailor services to all children, comprehensive early childhood systems should take steps to understand the diversity of their population and intentionally review all systems to ensure they are accessible, equitable and respectful of all cultures and communities.
- **Ensure stability and continuity of services along a continuum from prenatal to school entry and beyond.** Early childhood development throughout this period is critical to future health and success. State and community systems and policies should promote health, family strength, and early learning and development starting with expectant families and extending through the transition to school.
- **Ease access for families and transitions for children.** Systems should strive to make it easy for families to access and maintain services for themselves and their children within and across systems as well as smooth transitions as children age.
- **Value parents as decision makers and leaders.** Across all three systems, parents should be engaged meaningfully in making decisions about their children and contribute to program and policy improvement decisions.
- **Catalyze and maximize investment, and foster innovation.** A system should continually encourage cross-system efficiencies and dynamic, creative solutions to problems.

Necessary Systems and Services: Each service sector contributes important aspects to the system and to the desired result of thriving children and families:

- **Health:** Comprehensive services that promote children's physical, developmental, and mental well-being.
- **Early Learning and Development:** Nurturing relationships, safe environments, and enriching experiences that foster learning and development.
- **Family Leadership and Support:** Resources, experiences, and relationships that strengthen families, engage them as leaders, and enhance their capacity to support children's well-being.

Core Strategies to Improve System Functioning: The graphic shows key strategies to improve the functioning of a comprehensive early childhood system circled around the system of systems, which in turn results in the central, shared outcome of thriving children and families. The functions - Recruit and Engage Stakeholders, Define and Coordinate Leadership; Finance Strategically; Enhance and Align Standards; Create and Support Improvement Strategies; and Ensure Accountability - act as the "glue" and support for connecting the three sectors into a comprehensive system. Only when all these functions and systems are effectively connected can the desired result of thriving children and families occur.

Options for using this tool

The ECSWG recommends that groups review and agree to their shared desired results, core values and principles, and necessary systems and services. This tool then can serve to provoke discussion around the six strategies ECSWG has identified to improve system functioning. For each of the six there is a description of what success in that area means for the early childhood system and a set of key considerations for improving system capacity in that area. The key considerations are not in order of importance. Although all strategies are critical, facilitators may choose to use all or some depending on context. The considerations are meant to stimulate thinking about the issues that cross-system conversation and planning ought to address.

Note to Facilitators:

Two questions typically arise about this version of the ECSWG graphic. Here are answers you can provide:

Where is the 4th Oval on Early Intervention/Special Needs?

Unlike earlier versions of the ECSWG graphic, this no longer has a separate oval representing early intervention/special needs. Based on the above stated principle that appropriate linkages and services for children with special needs should be integrated throughout the system of systems, the fourth oval is now considered integrated into the remaining three. Given that this is an aspirational goal, state and community groups will want to discuss this issue in the context of their own relevant early childhood systems.

Where is the Provider and Practitioner Support strategy?

Supporting providers/practitioners is considered to be part of Create and Support Improvement Strategies. In addition, professional standards and competencies are discussed in the Enhance and Align Standards section.



The Early Childhood Systems Working Group (ECSWG)

is a volunteer group of national leaders engaged in technical assistance to state and local policymakers in the development of comprehensive early childhood systems. The group came together in 2005 to consider how they and their respective organizations could work together more effectively in supporting early childhood system building efforts. The ECSWG seeks to help states and communities implement systems that can provide an integrated continuum of policies, services and programs across early learning and development, health, and family leadership and support, so that children and families thrive. Since 2006, this group of expert organizations and individuals has met voluntarily on an as-needed basis to engage in a peer learning community and develop resources for the early childhood field.

The Subcommittee that developed this tool included: *Charlie Bruner, Gerry Cobb and Susan Hibbard, BUILD Initiative; Stacie G. Goffin, Goffin Strategy Group, LLC.; Christine Johnson-Staub, Center for Law and Social Policy; Lynn Kahn, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center; Anna Lovejoy, consultant for Center for Study of Social Policy; Jana Martella, Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, National Institute for Early Education Research; Cindy Oser, ZERO TO THREE; Ann Reale, ICF International; Rachel Schumacher, R. Schumacher Consulting; and Albert Wat, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.*

Members of ECSWG represent:

*Alliance for Early Childhood Finance
Alliance for Early Success
BUILD Initiative
Center for Law and Social Policy
Center for Study of Social Policy, Strengthening Families
Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes
Child Trends
Council of Chief State School Officers
Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center
Goffin Strategy Group, LLC.
ICF International
National Academy for State Health Policy
National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Center for Children in Poverty
National Center on Child Care Subsidy Innovation and Accountability
National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices
Ponder Early Childhood, Inc.
R. Schumacher Consulting
ZERO TO THREE*



Recruit & Engage Stakeholders

How can recruiting and engaging stakeholders improve system functioning?

Decisions are informed by and responsive to the needs and interests of a broad array of stakeholders.

Consider how to recruit and engage stakeholders:

- A. Consider important groups of stakeholders to engage in system development, including: families participating in the early childhood system; providers, administrators, and other professionals within delivery system partners (*sectors of health, early learning and development, and family leadership and support*); policymakers; and private stakeholders (*business, civic, faith-based, and philanthropic communities*). Different strategies may be appropriate for engaging each stakeholder group.
- B. Include representation from groups which understand the diversity of the child population and the importance of addressing special needs that children may have for professional, family, and community supports.
- C. Support active and ongoing engagement with each group of stakeholders.
- D. Use strategic communication to increase understanding of requirements and benefits of a comprehensive early childhood system.
- E. Where feasible, develop and implement a plan for building greater stakeholder engagement at the community level through an approach that emphasizes local collaboration and coordination.
- F. Leverage and build opportunities for families to engage in leadership and inform decisions at all levels of the early childhood system.
- G. Ensure effective lines of communication among service providers, administrators, policymakers and other professionals across sectors regarding state or community plans, goals, and policies.
- H. Use available data and assessment systems to reach out and inform stakeholders about early childhood.
- I. Develop and use benchmarks and indicators to measure stakeholder engagement and, in particular, parent engagement and leadership in programs and policy decisions at all levels of the early childhood system.



Define & Coordinate Leadership

How can coordinating leadership improve system functioning?

Leaders work together according to shared understanding of common goals and what their roles and functions are within the system.

Consider how to define and coordinate leadership:

- A. Identify cross sector leadership (*sectors of health, early learning and development, and family leadership and support*), with clear authority to modify existing cross sector relationships, establish priorities, leverage fiscal and human resources, and implement system change.
- B. Ensure that cross sector leadership is inclusive and representative of families participating in the early childhood system; providers, administrators, and other professionals within delivery system partners (*sectors of health, early learning and development, and family leadership and support*); policymakers; and private stakeholders (*business, civic, faith-based, and philanthropic communities*).
- C. Set vision, mission, and principles or group norms for how the system sectors work together.
- D. Set outcomes and benchmarks across sectors for what the comprehensive early childhood system delivers.
- E. Establish processes for ongoing communication, coordination, and decision-making among governance structures and across system sectors as they relate to achieving shared goals.
- F. Identify or build organizational structures, rules, or policies that can be a foundation for ongoing collaboration and coordination across sectors.
- G. Promote development of individual and collective skills that facilitate collaboration and coordinated cross-sector early childhood leadership sector leadership.
- H. Use cross-sector data to inform planning and policy decisions.



Finance Strategically

How can financing strategically improve system functioning?

Financing strategically will enable policy makers to leverage and maximize all available resources and improve access to additional financial support to achieve common goals for children and families.

Consider how financing decisions support and incentivize system-building goals:

- A. Develop fiscal policies that build connections among system sectors and mandate or incentivize comprehensive service delivery.
- B. Analyze all available data to understand whether resources are targeted to improving affordability, access, and quality for families and closing disparities in child outcomes, particularly for high needs children.
- C. Map all current funding allocated for services to children and families to identify opportunities to connect policies across funding streams. *(See Appendix list of funding streams.)*
- D. Develop detailed cost estimates of quality improvement implementation and analyze expected impact on providers and programs before launching new programs.
- E. Give competitive priority to grant or contract applicants who leverage private sector matching dollars with public funds.
- F. Require that quality standards are met to receive public funds, particularly for programs serving high needs children.
- G. Provide tools and resources so that recipients of new program funding can provide comprehensive fiscal information and data to inform future budgetary decisions.
- H. Plan for the need to continually anticipate changes in funding and the need to continually seek new funding sources to scale-up and sustain services.
- I. Increase the awareness of funding recipients of the need to finance strategically at the program level.



Enhance & Align Standards

How can enhancing and aligning standards improve system functioning?

Clear and aligned expectations for programs and professionals enable services and practice to reach common goals for children and families.

Consider how the system enhances and aligns standards:

- A. Revise and crosswalk *existing* early learning and development, health, and family leadership and support standards for programs and practitioners to identify gaps and improve alignment so that all services and professionals are promoting complementary goals for children and families and are coordinating relevant services.
- B. Enhance or develop guidelines for early learning and healthy development of children to inform all sectors about age-appropriate expectations for how young children develop and what they can do across essential developmental domains.
- C. Enhance or develop program quality standards for all sectors and support services that facilitate best practices, coordination, and alignment across sectors.
- D. Enhance and develop culturally and linguistically responsive family leadership and support standards that clarify how providers and professionals across all sectors of a comprehensive early childhood system can engage parents or primary caregivers, help them build protective factors and strengthen their capacity and leadership to support their children's development and learning.
- E. Articulate aligned or integrated cross-cutting core competencies that incorporate the child development and health guidelines, program quality standards, and family leadership and support standards for professionals working with children and families across the system.
- F. Ensure standards – for early learning and development, programs, practitioners, family support and leadership – inform policies and priorities of the quality improvement and accountability functions of the system.
- G. Incentivize and/or require the adoption of high quality standards through policy and financing support and payments for services.



Create & Support Improvement Strategies

How can creating and supporting improvement strategies improve system functioning?

Improvement plans are based on effective system change, coordinated across sectors, and allow for ongoing review, sequential progress, and refinement to achieve common goals for children and families.

Consider how the system creates and supports improvement strategies:

- A. Develop approaches to system improvement that address both the quality of services and the efficiency with which they are delivered.
- B. Provide culturally and linguistically responsive opportunities for families to inform continuous improvement for specific programs or services and for the system as a whole (*e.g., needs assessments, satisfaction surveys*).
- C. Consider that improvements in any part of the system have implications for other parts of the system. Use principles of system change in strategic improvement planning.
- D. Align improvement activities within and across service sectors, ensuring that improvement efforts are connected to achieve common goals.
- E. Plan collaborative improvement activities, *e.g.* opportunities for professional development across health, early learning and development and family leadership and support sectors to strengthen the capacity of all sectors.
- F. Ensure that approaches, interim measures (*benchmarks*) and goals for improvement are culturally and linguistically appropriate and responsive.
- G. Coordinate intake systems and eligibility requirements for high need children and families across programs, making it easier for families to sustain access to and continuity of services as their eligibility shifts from one funding stream to another.
- H. Ensure that workforce development approaches incorporate training and professional development that ensures cultural and linguistic competence and the ability to work with diverse groups of children and families and that creates avenues for culturally and linguistically diverse individuals to advance professionally.
- I. Use data to inform strategies and investments for systems improvement



Ensure Accountability

How can governance and management systems facilitate responsible decision-making, implementation fidelity, and stronger results for children and families?

Ensuring accountability enables policy makers to effectively use governance and management systems to plan, support, and monitor change efforts.

Consider how governance and management system can ensure accountability:

- A. Map existing governance and management structures, including their functions and level of authority to identify opportunities to connect people, policies and programs across sectors.
- B. Build a foundation based on the Early Childhood Data Collaborative’s “10 ECE Fundamentals” to ensure that data can be connected to answer critical policy questions.
- C. Establish and track comprehensive indicators of child and family well-being across funding streams, particularly for high needs populations, to focus governance and management systems around common goals.
- D. Build cross sector awareness of various program requirements that can be coordinated to advance community and state indicators.
- E. Promote on-going communication and coordination among the leaders and staff of early childhood agencies and programs to build commitment toward shared outcomes and indicators.
- F. Create a culture and expectation that data will be regularly reviewed and used to guide continuous improvement and inform planning, policy, practice and operations.
- G. Use data to inform families about their children’s health and well-being, empower parents or primary caregivers to make decisions about their children’s care and education, and make informed choices about the programs and services they use.
- H. Incorporate input from families about their satisfaction with services in the regular analysis of data, including through outreach and engagement with different cultural and linguistic groups and representing children with special needs and concerns.

Appendix – Potential Partners & Relevant Programs/Funding Streams

Sectors	Potential Agency Partners	Relevant Programs/Funding Streams
<p>Early Learning & Development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Care Subsidy Assistance • Child Care Licensing • Child Care Resource and Referral • K-12 Education • Head Start – State Collaboration Office • Early Intervention/Special Education • Home Visiting agency • Institutes of Higher Education/State and Community Colleges • Workforce development • Economic development agency 	<p>CCDBG -Child Care and Development Block Grant</p> <p>Head Start/Early Head Start</p> <p>ESEA - Elementary and Secondary Education Act</p> <p>IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Part B, Section 619 Preschool Grants and Part C Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities</p> <p>EHS/HS - Early Head Start/Head Start</p> <p>HEA - Higher Education Act</p> <p>MIECHV – Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visitation Program</p> <p>Title I - Title I of ESEA - Early Childhood Grants</p> <p>SSBG - Social services block grant</p> <p>TANF - Temporary Assistance To Needy Families block grant</p> <p>CSA - Community Service Administration block grant</p>
<p>Health & Behavioral Health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Mental Health • Maternal and Child Health • Medicaid/CHIP • Public Health • Nutrition Promotion • Institutes of Higher Education/State and Community Colleges • Home Visiting 	<p>CACFP - Child and Adult Care Food Program</p> <p>CCMHS - Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program – Part E of Title V, Public Health Service Act, as amended</p> <p>CMHSBG - Community Mental Health Services Block Grant</p> <p>CSBG - Community Service Block Grant</p> <p>ECCS - Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems</p> <p>Medicaid/EPSDT – Medicaid, the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment Program</p> <p>SAMHSA SOC – Substance Abuse/Mental Health Services Administration Systems of Care</p> <p>SCHIP/CHIP -State Children’s Health Insurance Program (Title XXI of the Social Security Act)</p> <p>SNAP - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program)</p> <p>WIC - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children</p>

Sectors	Potential Agency Partners	Relevant Programs/Funding Streams
<p>Family Leadership & Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human Rights/Other Councils • Disabilities Councils • Community Development Boards • Child Abuse Prevention • Child Welfare/Child and Family Services • Welfare/Workforce Development • Substance Abuse Services • Adult Education/ Family Literacy • Institutes of Higher Education/State and Community Colleges • Immigrant/Refugee Assistance • Home Visiting agency • Family Violence Divisions 	<p>Early Head Start/Head Start</p> <p>MIECHV – Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visitation Program</p> <p>SSBG – Social Services Block Grant</p> <p>TANF – Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Block Grant</p> <p>CSA – Community Services Administration Block Grant</p> <p>CAPTA - Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act</p> <p>CBCAP -Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention</p> <p>MCHBG – Title V - Maternal and Child Health Block Grant – Title V</p> <p>SAPT- Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant</p> <p>Title IV-B & IV-E of the SSA - Title IV-B & IV-E of the Social Security Act</p>
<p>Cross-Sector Initiatives Awarded to States or to Select Communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Maternal and Child Health • Housing • Public Health 	<p>State Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grants from the Department of Education and Administration for Children and Families</p> <p>State ECCS (Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems) Grants from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau</p> <p>Promise Neighborhood grants from the U.S. Department of Education</p> <p>Choice Neighborhood grants from Housing and Urban Development</p> <p>Community Development Block Grant from Housing and Urban Development</p> <p>Project LAUNCH grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration</p>