



Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Partnerships

Strategies for Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies



Acknowledgments

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement would like to acknowledge the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center for leadership in developing this resource. We recognize and value the role of parents and programs in making a difference for children, families, and communities.

This document was developed with funds from Grant #90HC0014 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care, by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

**For more information about this resource, please contact us:
PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481**

Suggested citation: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2020). *Strategies for Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies.*



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Strategies for Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies

Head Start and Early Head Start program leaders and managers can use this resource to plan community partnerships with child welfare agencies. The resource offers guiding questions and action steps for building effective, engaged, collaborative relationships to strengthen family well-being. Share this resource with staff and partners to use together in your planning efforts.

Community partnerships between child welfare agencies and Head Start and Early Head Start programs can help improve the lives of the children and families with whom both agencies are involved. Child welfare agencies and Head Start and child care programs in communities across the country have developed working partnerships to support each other in ensuring safety, consistency, and well-being for young children and their families.

When these partners work well together, everyone benefits—Head Start and Early Head Start programs, child welfare agencies, and, most importantly, children and their families. A successful partnership, however, requires an investment of time, effort, and human and fiscal resources.

These partnerships work best when four elements are in place:

- A clear, shared vision and purpose supported by strong leadership
- Thoughtful planning and regular communication
- Consistent engagement among local partners over time
- Training and opportunities to build partnerships for staff who work directly with families in both early childhood programs and child welfare agencies

Explore other resources in the Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Agencies Partnerships series available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

- Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies: An Overview
- Engaging Families When There Is Child Welfare Involvement

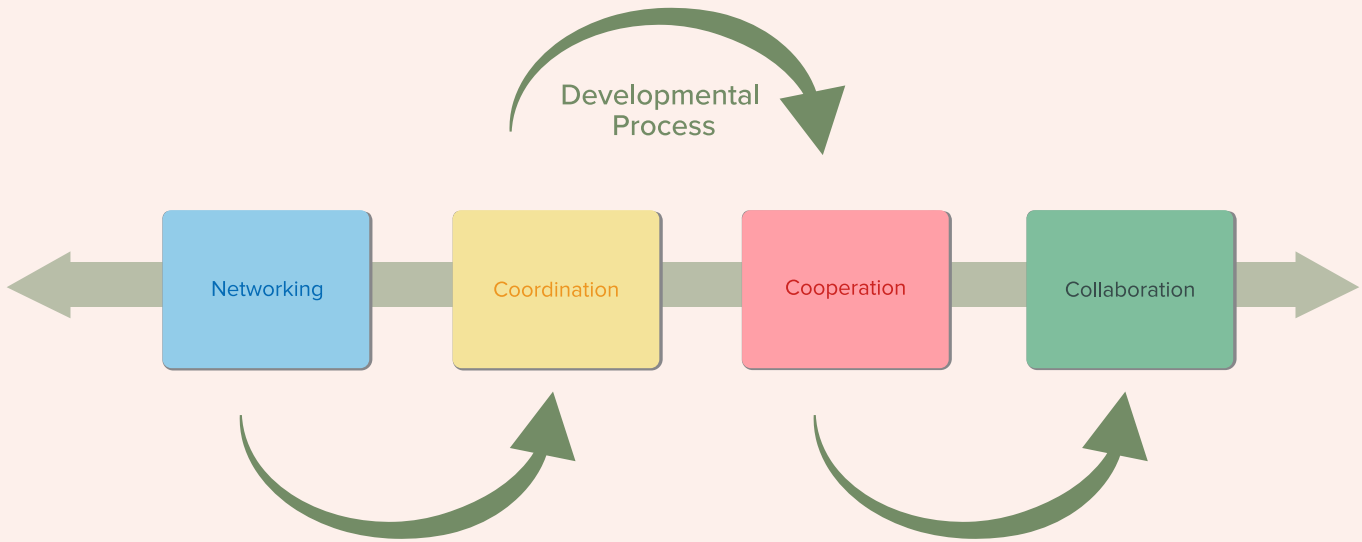
Engaged community partnerships are supportive relationships that are created and sustained through intention and effort. Community partners value and nurture their relationship with each other. They look for ways to strengthen the partnership. Their communication with each other is regular and responsive. These relationships support families' roles as valued community members and their progress toward goals for themselves and their children.

Community partners also seek to understand each other's goals, perspectives, strengths, and challenges. They recognize that the goals of each partner are best met through their work with each other. Together, they share leadership and assess effectiveness to inform continuous learning and improve the quality of their partnership.



There are four different types of partnerships that Head Start and Early Head Start programs can form with a local agency, other programs, families, and community stakeholders. The four types are: networking, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration (James Bell Associates, 2011).

Developmental Continuum of Collaboration



Networking involves partners exchanging information or discussing common concerns.

Coordination involves partners meeting regularly to share information or working together on short-term projects.

Cooperation involves partners sharing resources or facilities, having a formal system of information sharing, and working together toward a common goal.

Collaboration involves pooling resources, sharing products, and creating a program or project aimed at a common mission.

Source: Adapted from a resource developed by the QUILT (Quality in Linking Together) Project, through a partnership with the Community Development Institute, the Education Development Center, and the National Child Care Information Center. QUILT was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2002. Adapted from Kagan, S. L. (1991). *United we stand: Collaboration for child care and early education services*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.; Winer, M., & Ray, K. (2003). *Collaboration handbook: Creating, sustaining, and enjoying the journey*. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Steps to Planning an Effective, Engaged Community Partnership with Child Welfare Agencies

Developing effective, engaged community partnerships involves a comprehensive planning process that provides the framework for collaborative action. This process includes the following six steps. Use the questions under each step to guide planning as you explore ways to partner with a child welfare agency for the benefit of the children and families you serve.

Step 1. Define the partnership's mission.

- What do our partnership stakeholders—including parents—need to do to intentionally take time to learn about each other and the individual organizations?
- What do we need to do to create and sustain a climate of mutual respect, acceptance, and trust?
- What are our partnership stakeholders' individual and/or organizational self-interests? What do our partners need from the collaborative partnership?
- What is our shared mission? What are the future possibilities that lead us toward actions and desired outcomes? What can we envision beyond what we see as current challenges or problems?

Step 2. Assess the environment and the partnership's capacities.

- What type of partnership do we have? What role does the Head Start and Early Head Start program play in the partnership? What role does the child welfare agency play in the partnership? What role do families play in the partnership? What role do staff who work directly with families play in the partnership?
- What are the current strengths of our partnership? How can we build on the strengths of our partnership? What else can we do to strengthen our partnerships?
- What are the challenges or gaps? What do program staff who work directly with families need in order to work effectively with child welfare?
- What are the current relationships and understandings between child welfare workers, program staff members, and families? What is working well? What can be improved?
- What are the issues or barriers in our interactions with child welfare? What are the issues or barriers in our interactions with the families we work with? What are families' issues or barriers in their interactions with child welfare? What are families' issues or barriers in their interactions with us? How can these issues be addressed?
- What are the current mechanisms for collaboration? What is working well? What can be improved? What challenges need to be addressed? What has worked in the past? What didn't work?

Step 3. Establish goals and expected outcomes.

- What does our existing community assessment and program data tell us about children and families in our program? How many of the families that we serve are involved in the child welfare system (e.g., investigations, in-home services, foster care)?
- What are our program goals and expected outcomes for family well-being? What are the goals and expected outcomes of the child welfare agency? How do our program goals and priorities for community engagement overlap with the goals of the child welfare agency? How do our shared goals support a shared vision for our work together?
- What are our goals and desired outcomes for strengthening our partnership with child welfare? What are the goals from the perspective of staff who work directly with families? What are the goals from the perspective of families?
- How would a closer partnership with a child welfare agency help us reach our goals and desired outcomes? How would a closer partnership help staff in their work with children and families? How would a closer partnership with child welfare help families? How would a closer partnership help a child welfare agency reach its goals?

Examples of Potential Goals for Head Start and Early Head Start and Child Welfare Partnerships

- Head Start and Early Head Start programs serve a greater number of children in foster care.
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs serve a greater number of families receiving preventive, reunification, or other child welfare services.
- Children experience fewer and/or shorter placements in foster care. They are subjected to fewer unnecessary family disruptions.
- Children and families experience coordinated services and continuity of services. They are connected with the timely, concrete supports they need to thrive.
- Children and families expand their strengths and protective factors.
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs and the local child welfare agency have stronger working relationships.
- Head Start and Early Head Start program staff and child welfare workers participate as members of a broader team to support children and families.
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs receive funding as part of the preventive services funded through the state child welfare agency.

Step 4. Explore and select strategies.

- What information do we need from our partnering child welfare agency? What information does our partner need from us? What do we need to know from staff who work directly with families? What do we need to know from families? What do families need to know from us?
- What strategies should we use to consistently engage families and local child welfare agency as partners?
- What new training and experience will staff who work directly with families need in order to be more effective partners?
- What actions are necessary to achieve the shared mission and goals for our partnership?
- What does regular communication look like in our partnership? How can we enhance communication?
- What new training and experience with partners would support staff to be more effective in their direct work with families?

Step 5. Develop a plan of action.

- Based on the identified goals and desired outcomes, what actions can we carry out? How should we prioritize them? What is feasible?
- What is our timeline for action? When do we expect to see success?
- How will we define success? What will success look like to families, to staff who work directly with families, to program leadership, and to the child welfare agency staff and leadership?
- How will we measure our progress? How will we follow up, track, and monitor progress?
- How will we communicate our progress with stakeholders?

Step 6. Consider solutions with potential for community impact.

- What do we mean by community impact? What kind of impact would we like to have in our community as a result of our work together? How would things be different?
- What actions/solutions have the greatest potential for community impact?
- What are the most efficient ways to coordinate processes across partners?
- What data can be shared (with parent permission) with the child welfare agency to improve services? What data-sharing practices can we develop that will strengthen interagency relationships and identify service gaps?
- What can be done to strengthen how services are delivered to families? What can be done to fill service gaps? How can partners work together to make it easier for families to access services? How can we gather and learn from families' feedback?
- What services can be bundled to reduce the number of family visits? How can we work together to reduce family stress resulting from contact with many different agencies?
- What should be done to maintain families' privacy and confidentiality across partners?

Opportunities for Action

Program Leadership

- Establish a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Head Start and Early Head Start program and the child welfare agency. Ensure that the MOU addresses collaboration to benefit individual families as well as policy issues across the two systems. If an existing MOU is in place, take the opportunity to revisit it as a team, and decide on any needed updates to further strengthen or expand partnerships.
- Allocate resources to support professional development, continuous learning and improvement, and staffing.
- Identify leaders, including family members, who can serve on each other's governance groups (e.g., Policy Councils, advisory committees, or community boards).

Continuous Learning and Improvement

- Examine Head Start and Early Head Start data to assess how effectively the program is reaching and serving all families, with particular attention to families involved in child welfare (e.g., data related to enrollment, attendance, education assessment, health requirements, family service goals).
- Deliver joint presentations about the work of Head Start and Early Head Start programs and of the child welfare agency for program and child welfare agency staff.
- Share information that describes how the Head Start or Early Head Start program responds to the needs of the agency and to the interests and needs of the families served.
- Emphasize unique features of the Head Start and Early Head Start program. Examples include the benefits of a high-quality education, particularly for children in low-income households; eligibility for children in foster care; services that are free of charge; and comprehensive health screening, nutritional services, and family engagement services that include support for foster parents.

Professional Development

- Ensure that teachers, family services staff, and managers receive the training they need to become responsive partners who support the child welfare agency's mission.
- Provide a basic orientation to and understanding of child welfare services and policies; strategies for accessing family supports and interventions; and staff's roles as mandatory reporters. Pre-service training or in-service professional development can ensure that all key stakeholders understand these requirements.
- Conduct training together on issues of interest and importance to both child welfare agencies and Head Start and Early Head Start staff.

- ❑ Provide training on such topics as supporting families by providing comprehensive primary prevention and early intervention; reducing the impact of racism and implicit bias; understanding trauma and promoting healing; considering the circumstances of families who have moved to our community from other countries; using best practices for engaging families; working with parents who identify as LGBTQ; and promoting staff self-care and wellness.

Family Partnerships

- ❑ Designate a point person in the Head Start and Early Head Start program, as well as one in the child welfare agency, to handle referrals, coordinate ongoing family services, answer questions, and resolve problems.
- ❑ Prepare teachers and family services staff to support parents or other family members who choose to share information about involvement with child welfare.
- ❑ Ask if and how Head Start and Early Head Start staff can be supportive. Formal support could include participating in case planning and family meetings, or referring families to community resources. Informal support could include listening, helping families to advocate for themselves, or responding to family members' requests for information on child development.
- ❑ Organize fun activities together that are recreational, educational, and engaging for all families or for particular groups (e.g., mothers, fathers, new parents, young parents, grandparents). Examples may include parent cafés, health or neighborhood fairs, back-to-school events, special outings, mural painting, community gardening, and picnics.



How Head Start and Early Head Start Staff Who Work Directly with Families Can Play an Effective Role in Child Welfare Partnerships

Head Start and Early Head Start staff who work directly with families can be very effective partners with child welfare workers as they both work toward positive outcomes for children and families. To be effective, Head Start and Early Head Start programs must provide staff with clear policies:

- How they are expected to interact with the child welfare system and its workers
- What is considered adequate supervision and consultation when a family is involved with child welfare

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can provide their staff with training to help them effectively fulfill their roles as partners with child welfare staff. Examples of how staff who work directly with families can help to build an effective partnership with child welfare include:

- Learn the responsibilities and legal requirements for reporting families to child welfare, as well as the procedures and protocols of local child welfare requirements that align with Head Start Program Performance Standards.
- Gain greater understanding of services offered by child welfare, including child protection, foster care, adoption, kinship care, prevention resources, and family strengthening.
- Focus on strengths-based practice, including identifying strategies that can help families build protective factors and resilience.
- Identify and share sensitive strategies about how to talk with families when a concern for children's safety and well-being arises.
- Discuss and define specific language and approaches for navigating sensitive conversations with families involved with child welfare. Build an understanding of how best to coach and support each parent involved.
- Identify actions and strategies that programs can implement to demonstrate their readiness to meet families involved in child welfare where they are.
- Provide supports, including timely, concrete resources that strengthen families and their ability to thrive in their communities.
- Understand how the contexts in which the families in your program are raising their children may influence their decisions and behaviors. These influences may include culture, economic conditions, substance misuse, child or adult health or mental health issues, and child temperament, among others.
- Understand the role of implicit bias in observing, blaming, reporting, and assessing children, parents, and families.

Partnership Scenarios

Consider these scenarios for possibilities for partnerships between Head Start and Early Head Start programs and child welfare agencies.

Partnership Possibility 1

The child welfare agency is hiring and training early childhood specialists to be child welfare workers in several jurisdictions. The focus is on ensuring that the child welfare agency has resources that are developmentally appropriate for young children.

The strong family engagement orientation of local Head Start and Early Head Start programs can help newly hired early childhood specialists learn how to create and sustain positive relationships with families to support their children's development. Joint training opportunities for Head Start staff and the early childhood specialists can further enhance coordination and collaboration. Joint training can help ensure that staff are working in partnership to serve children and families.

Early childhood specialists also can work closely with Head Start and Early Head Start programs to identify the supports that families need. These specialists also can supervise parental visits and monitor foster parents' ongoing connections with children, as well as the children's progress.

Partnership Possibility 2

Head Start and Early Head Start programs in several states have partnered with child welfare agencies to develop collaborative regional relationships. To promote effective partnerships, these programs have put in place policies, training, and supervision to support Head Start and Early Head Start staff as they work with child welfare staff.

With appropriate training, staff can increase their knowledge about:

- Making a report to child welfare about a family in need of services
- Coordinating parental visits when children are in foster care
- Working with foster parents to maintain consistency for children while in foster care
- Working sensitively with parents to resolve safety issues for their children
- Making referrals to community services and other supports following reunification

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can serve as safe locations for parental visits for children in foster care. These programs also can support successful family reunifications.



References

James Bell Associates. (2011, November). *Early childhood/child welfare service partnerships: The challenges and the potential.*

The QUILT (Quality in Linking Together) Project, a partnership with the Community Development Institute, Education Development Center, and the National Child Care Information Center.



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement