Building Early Links for Learning
Connections to Promote Resilience for Young Children in Family Homeless Shelters

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Abstract
This article describes the Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) initiative in Philadelphia, PA. BELL looks to promote resilience in young children staying in emergency housing for homeless families. The goal is to make the settings more responsive and supportive to children's developmental needs as they adapt to experiences of homelessness and other adversities. BELL strives to increase the developmental appropriateness of shelter contexts while helping to make high-quality early childhood programs more accessible. Activities emphasize building relationships between emergency housing and early childhood program staff, along with trainings, shelter improvements, and advocacy in a context of collective impact.

The Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) initiative in Philadelphia, PA, looks to promote resilience among young children staying in emergency housing with their families. It primarily focuses on increasing the developmental appropriateness of shelter practices, policies, and spaces; increasing connections between the emergency housing and the early childhood education systems; and furthering advocacy efforts. We describe BELL as the product of cooperation and coordination between housing, education, advocacy, philanthropic, and research efforts.

Resilience as the Product of Interconnected, Dynamic Systems

Young children are more likely to show resilience if they are in settings that support typical development and positive adaptation to adversity. Consistent with an ecological-systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), children who experience family homelessness are embedded in multiple dynamic systems, spanning family, shelter, early childhood programs, and local, state, and federal policy contexts, to name a few. These systems can support resilience for young children, especially when they are aware that young children are experiencing adversity and are well informed about how to encourage positive adaptation. Sometimes this support is direct, such as when children receive positive parenting within the family system, when shelter staff respond to the needs of children and families, or when children attend high-quality early childhood programs that are sensitive to their experiences of adversity. Other times the support is indirect, such as when local, state, and federal policies initiate and sustain effective programs and practices. BELL operates by catalyzing relationships, both formal and informal, within and between these dynamic systems so that they can be more responsive to the needs of young children experiencing homelessness.

Young children in homeless families experience co-occurring threats to their development and are at-risk for poor developmental outcomes (Brown, Shinn, & Khadduri, 2017). Families staying in emergency shelter are more likely to be living in deep poverty, headed by a single parent, be from racial minority backgrounds, and have experienced other

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recent adversities like residential mobility, loss of possessions and relationships, and exposure to violence (Cutuli & Herbers, 2014). These experiences are underscored by the recognition of early childhood as a period of increased plasticity. Unprotected negative contexts can be particularly detrimental while enriching contexts can have especially positive effects (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006).

Despite high levels of risk, many children in homeless families show resilience (Cutuli & Herbers, 2014). Resilience is the product of dynamic systems that respond when children and families experience adversity, helping to support healthy development and allowing children to avoid the negative implications of risk (Cutuli & Herbers, 2018). Not a trait or immutable personal characteristic, resilience describes when a child has experienced some threat to her development but has gone on to show good functioning, nonetheless. Resilience happens because of one or more assets or protective factors in the lives of children (Cutuli, Herbers, Masten, & Reed, in press). Powerful assets and protective factors, such as positive parenting, supportive relationships with mentors or teachers, or attending a high-quality early childhood program, buffer the negative effects of adversity. The presence of these positive factors signals that the dynamic systems making up the child's ecology are responding in ways that aid successful adaptation. Development is more likely to go in a positive direction when assets and protective factors are present, despite the threats of adversity.

The BELL initiative recognizes that homelessness can interfere with some ordinary assets and protective factors that otherwise would help children and families successfully navigate trauma, deep poverty, and homelessness itself. When families move into emergency housing, parents find they are unable to control developmentally insensitive aspects of shelter. These include practices that interfere with family routines, a lack of developmentally appropriate spaces and activities, exposure

to other families in crisis, lack of privacy, and other aspects of congregate living foreign to typical family contexts (Perlman, Cowan, Gewirtz, Haskett, & Stokes, 2012). Furthermore, many families relocate to a different geography when they enter shelter. Many become disconnected from their communities, programs, and supports, including early childhood programs or informal care arrangements with friends and extended families.

In response, BELL was designed to bolster the developmental appropriateness of emergency housing for young children while increasing connections between shelters and nearby early childhood programs. Families are embedded in these systems, and these systems are embedded in municipal, state, and federal policy contexts. Consequently, BELL also involves organizing for collective impact and advocacy. BELL achieves its goals largely through catalyzing relationships between family shelter and early childhood program staff to improve communication, thereby increasing the likelihood that these systems will share their respective areas of expertise and be able to respond to children in homeless families. BELL engages families directly to provide support and incorporate their experiences in the generation of data-based knowledge. BELL represents these lessons to policy decisionmakers and other allies to best sustain effective programs and innovate new approaches to promoting resilience among young children.

Young Children and Family Emergency Housing in Philadelphia

Philadelphia is the poorest of the 10 largest cities in the United States, with young children experiencing relatively high levels of various risk factors that threaten their development (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018; Murphey, Epstein, Shaw, McDaniel, & Steber, 2018). Municipal agencies in Philadelphia have had an increasing interest in coordinating services and using city data to more effectively reach out to families with children from birth to 5 years old to offer services. Pioneering work integrating Philadelphia social service and education data demonstrated that homelessness and child welfare involvement are two salient risk factors for poor functioning in early elementary school (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010). As a result of this and similar research, there have been multiple recent initiatives in Philadelphia not only to reduce risk experiences for young children, but also to promote assets and protective experiences such as the creation of a municipally funded preschool subsidy. The BELL initiative benefits from this emphasis on young children and serves as a resource to help other initiatives in Philadelphia engage and be sensitive to the needs of families in emergency housing.

In Philadelphia, as in many cities, most children who stay in emergency housing (encompassing both emergency shelter and transitional housing programs for families) are under 6 years old. These children stay in more than 18 publicly funded emergency housing programs. There had been little explicit emphasis on developmental considerations across the emergency housing system for young children in Philadelphia besides certain education services for older children and mandates about food

and nutrition. The emergency housing programs varied widely on how they accommodated young children.

The BELL initiative is possible because the different family-serving emergency housing programs in Philadelphia cultivated relationships among themselves to better serve young children. In 2009, the Philadelphia family emergency housing providers challenged the Philadelphia Deputy Mayor for Human Services to develop a focus on children and youth who experience homelessness. The deputy mayor, in turn, challenged the family providers to work with his departmental leadership to identify issues and solutions that could be addressed without funding and within 1 year. The providers then organized a collaborative that became the "Children's Work Group." Members convened monthly to surface issues and concerns that arise in their programs with respect to serving young children. One service provider and one city employee served as co-chairs of the committee, and more than 40 professionals participated. The Children's Work Group became a means of collective impact for the Philadelphia family emergency housing system. It allowed members to establish a common agenda to address specific issues through changes in practice while advocating for policy change. The Children's Work Group continues today and is also a context of frequent communication in which agencies share promising practices and information about outside resources. In addition, this collective serves as a more effective way to engage outside groups, allowing policymakers to simultaneously interface with multiple agencies through the Children's Work Group or as a mechanism for philanthropy to support initiatives that engage multiple agencies at once. The collective's activities reinforce the partnership as the different agencies work together on their shared agenda.

Specific changes resulted. Agencies together advocated to mandate that emergency housing programs offer parents an established, standardized developmental screen. One agency received a grant to build capacity within the system by providing a one-on-one service to staff and parents. Philadelphia municipal services funded the committee to deliver a training curriculum to more than 300 emergency housing staff annually. Meanwhile, the group published combined data from multiple sources to help articulate needs to local policymakers. Overall, this shared commitment, shared practice, and shared measurement not only resulted in practice change across multiple agencies, but also produced a clear practice model supported by data to be used in advocacy.

Children's Work Group leadership worked with leadership from Allegheny County, which encompasses Pittsburgh, to develop an action plan and advocate for new state legislation requiring that each county's early intervention administration proactively screen every young child under 3 years old in shelter for developmental concerns, offer early intervention services, and monitor their development (Early Intervention Services System Act of 2014). The Children's Work Group has been an effective means of organizing disparate agencies within the emergency housing sector in the service of collective impact.

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The three primary aims of BELL are to build relationships between systems to support families and children, increase developmental friendliness of shelter contexts, and systematically generate information to share with stakeholders.

BELL: Relationships Within and Between Systems

The BELL initiative grew in the context of the Children's Work Group. Following the general model of collaboration and engagement that sustains the Children's Work Group as a whole, BELL responds to key concerns raised by providers about supporting young children from within their programs and through partnerships with early childhood programs as important assets to promote resilience.

Systematic Information Gathering: Opportunities and Challenges Between Systems

BELL continuously generates information to inform its activities, to monitor areas of success and challenges in the dynamic context of Philadelphia, and to constantly engage stakeholders. In the early stages of BELL, our partners undertook several systematic studies. The first involved a series of focus groups with emergency housing provider staff, local early childhood program staff, and families with young children staying in emergency shelter (Hurd & Kieffer, 2017). These sessions surfaced important perspectives on the availability and accessibility of quality early childhood programs. Although there is a literature on the intersection of homelessness and early childhood programs in other cities (Perlman, Shaw, Kieffer, Whitney, & Bires, 2017; Taylor, Gibson, & Hurd, 2015), the Philadelphia focus groups allowed BELL to give voice to the perspectives of families and providers to understand the particulars of the relevant family, emergency housing, and early childhood systems in the specific context of Philadelphia.

Results from the focus groups generally affirmed that parents highly value early childhood programs and are committed to finding quality care. This result contrasted with perceptions of some early childhood program providers and emergency

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housing staff who believed that families were less motivated to enroll their children in early childhood programs. Additional themes from parents and early childhood providers suggested an "empathy gap" and knowledge gap with respect to how early childhood staff interact with families in shelter. Families emphasized the need for trauma-informed care (Cutuli, Alderfer, & Marsac, in press), particularly with respect to how early childhood staff understand especially elevated parent concerns about safety, security, and behavior management for children in crisis. Logistic barriers were also discussed, including the sharing of information with families about high-quality programs close to shelter, difficulties obtaining subsidies for early childhood programs, and scarce availability of quality programs for very young children (birth to 3 years old). Finally, emergency housing providers and early childhood staff emphasized the need for more cross-systems communication.

BELL teammates also completed an analysis of best practices in early care and education for young children in family shelter in other communities (Curran-Groome, 2017). They considered how other locales attempt to support children experiencing homelessness through early childhood programs, and then evaluated the feasibility of those options given the policy context of Philadelphia. Organizations emphasized strong relationships between emergency housing and early childhood staff. Sometimes these relationships were formalized with a memorandum of understanding outlining a shared commit-ment. Many organizations maintained dedicated staff who helped families navigate transitions and effectively participate in early childhood programs. Meanwhile, states and munici-palities established outreach procedures to especially engage families experiencing homelessness to make early childhood supports available. Some municipalities established referral and tracking systems to help homeless families effectively make use of supports for young children.

Responding to the above lessons, the BELL team developed a process to periodically count the number of children staying

in emergency housing who are enrolled in early childhood programs. The approach relied on close collaboration with the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, the municipal agency that oversees emergency housing. Twice a year, staff from the Office of Homeless Services inquire with emergency housing staff at each site, asking about every young child known to be staying there. Over time, many emergency housing providers recognized the importance of this information and began collecting it routinely. Many shelters incorporated questions about families' preferences for early childhood programs into intake interviews, case management meetings, or other routine interactions. Currently, emergency housing providers share information with BELL staff to help support discussions with families about early childhood program participation. BELL partners monitor enrollment rates and locations for children in shelter to this end. These data help guide BELL activities and are shared back in aggregate with providers and other stakeholders across emergency housing and early childhood systems. The aggregate data also inform advocacy initiatives.

Building Relationships to Connect People and Systems

In partnership with the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, BELL has helped encourage each family shelter to designate an educational liaison, which is a staff member dedicated to assisting families who want to enroll their children in early education programs. BELL staff work on-site at each shelter to support these shelter-based liaisons in multiple ways. Foremost, BELL encourages strong relationships between education liaisons and staff from nearby early childhood program providers. Early childhood staff now regularly attend the monthly Children's Work Group meetings as partners who share in the commitment to serve children experiencing homelessness. There are quarterly "Meet and Greet" events where staff from both systems network and deepen collaborations. BELL hosts shared trainings and professional development sessions on topics of common value for both systems, including basics of early childhood development and resilience, trauma-informed care, family homelessness, the importance of high-quality early childhood programs, applying for early childhood program subsidies, and other topics aimed at increasing developmental sensitivity for young children.

BELL also provides information about local early childhood programs to each liaison tailored to their specific geographic area. These packets contain lists of high-quality early childhood programs within 1.5 miles of the shelter, information on how to locate high-quality programs in other sections of the city or state, descriptions of different sorts of early childhood programs (e.g., Early Head Start, Head Start, center-based child care, home-visiting programs), and requirements of different subsidy programs and how to apply. This information is meant to be shared with families to help them know what early childhood programs might be available. Other topics are important information for the shelter education liaisons, such as how to effectively document a family's homeless status and help advocate for their rights as a priority group. This activity is

in direct response to families' comments in BELL focus groups asking shelters to provide more information about quality early childhood programs in the immediate area.

BELL also supports education liaisons with a team of specialists who can provide training and technical assistance as needed. The BELL specialists dialogue with liaisons regularly to encourage shelter staff to have conversations with families about their preferences for participating in early childhood programs. Specialists encourage having at least one conversation each month to learn whether the child is enrolled in a quality program and whether the parent would like assistance in enrolling the child or overcoming any barriers preventing the child from regularly attending. Education liaisons share information with the BELL team to document when these conversations have occurred and any challenges, concerns, or requests that arise from families. BELL specialists help shelter staff problem-solve specific situations that arise, such as when a family has trouble obtaining child care subsidies or has difficulty enrolling in a program. In addition, BELL specialists regularly coordinate with shelter education liaisons, the School District of Philadelphia, and other early childhood program providers on special events to connect families to the early education system. This coordination includes planning information sessions and enrollment drives for families in shelter during key months or at other times when BELL data suggests there are many parents in a shelter who may be interested.

Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters.

BELL facilitates annual completion of the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters (Early Childhood Development, n.d.) at each city-funded shelter. This activity furthers each of the three primary aims of BELL: build relationships between systems to support families and children, increase developmental friendliness of shelter contexts, and systematically generate information to share with stakeholders. On the surface, the self-assessment is a measure of developmental appropriateness of shelter spaces, practices, and programming with respect to young children. Items are recommendations in the areas of health and safety, child and family wellness and development, staff/workforce and training, programming, and nutrition and food. Shelters receive summary scores based on the responses to recommendations in each area. All self-assessments are done on-site at the emergency housing provider as a tour of the facility.

BELL pairs emergency housing staff at each shelter with staff from a nearby early childhood program provider each time the self-assessment is completed. This serves two purposes. First, it is a relationship-building activity as the shelter and early childhood program staff work together to complete the self-assessment. Many of these staff continue to communicate afterward, often to assist in enrolling children staying in shelter into early childhood programs. Furthermore, the activity allows for two-way sharing of information. Early childhood program staff share their knowledge of early childhood development.

They help interpret each item on the self-assessment through the lens of early development and apply that understanding to each specific shelter context. Simultaneously, shelter staff dialogue with the early childhood provider on the realities of family homelessness. This communication includes perspectives on the families' experiences before and during their shelter stays, as well as more practical considerations specific to opportunities and limitations of the emergency housing sector.

As part of the self-assessment process, the emergency housing and early childhood program provider review their responses to each item. The pair generates an action plan to improve any areas as needed. These action items can include specific shelter policy changes (e.g., access to special snack and meal breaks for nursing mothers), needed staff trainings (e.g., food allergy safety, trauma-informed care), and capital improvements (e.g., breastfeeding areas, age-appropriate toys). BELL works with other social service agencies to either develop and provide trainings on requested topics, or to make relevant trainings in other sectors available to emergency housing staff. For example, the Homeless Health Initiative of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia provides expertise to emergency housing staff and families in health care, managing common chronic conditions, supporting breastfeeding mothers in shelter, and it collaborates with other partners to provide parenting and developmental education (Sheller et al., 2018). Already-established convenings, such as the Children's Work Group, serve as a natural context for some of these trainings because many emergency housing and early childhood provider staff already attend.

The BELL team works with philanthropic partners to provide many requested improvements, leveraging the systematic self-assessment process to assure funders that requests represent specific shelter needs informed by experts in early development. For example, the William Penn Foundation in Philadelphia supported the initial phase of the BELL initiative, including funding to support improvements identified through the self-assessment process. Another example is through an existing partnership with the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children. The Bright Horizons Foundation operates the Bright Spaces program that helps shelters design and maintain areas to support the developmental needs of families with young children. Not only does the Bright Horizons Foundation assist in outfitting developmentally appropriate Bright Spaces, but they also work to connect volunteers from Bright Horizons early childhood programs with shelters to deliver programming.

Based on data from the first 2 years of BELL, shelters appeared to become more developmentally sensitive to the needs of young children. Shelters completed the self-assessment each year with the opportunity to act on their action plan in between. This permitted a pre-post type analysis of changes in scores. Even though scores were generally high at the first self-assessment, the average scores across emergency housing providers increased at the second self-assessment, achieving

statistical significance in three areas: Wellness and Development, Workforce Standards and Training, and Programming. These improvements were shared with stakeholders, including providers from both systems and philanthropic partners, to demonstrate impact and reinforce the utility of a systematic process of identifying ways to help support early development (Cutuli & Vrabic, 2018).

Connecting to Other Partners

The BELL initiative represents the needs of young children experiencing homelessness to systems beyond emergency housing and early education in Philadelphia. BELL enjoys a close relationship with the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office, charged with facilitating partnerships between Head Start agencies and groups like BELL that work to benefit low-income children. Through this partnership BELL provides professional development presentations focused on the unique needs and barriers for families in shelter to Head Start staff from around the state. Because the Collaboration Office is part of the state agency responsible for providing human services and education to young children, this partnership is also a means of suggesting ways that state program agendas attend to the needs of young children in shelter.

BELL staff facilitate community-researcher partnerships to further the goals of shelter and early childhood program providers. For example, there is low availability of programs for children from birth to 3 years old in Philadelphia, and there are no evidence-based parenting or early childhood programs specifically for families with young children in shelter (Herbers & Cutuli, 2014). BELL participates in a partnership with university research teams and the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children to implement and test effectiveness of the My Baby's First Teacher program developed for families with an infant staying in shelter (Herbers & Henderson, this issue, p. 35). Other BELL partnerships at earlier stages look to develop other models to address this gap for very young children, including alternative models of Early Head Start and Head Start delivery that blend home-based programming in shelter coupled with family supports during the transition out of shelter and the option to transition to center-based care once the family is residentially more stable.

Advocacy and Dissemination

As mentioned previously, BELL proactively shares information to engage stakeholders. These stakeholders include not only provider staff within the emergency housing and early education systems but also representatives from philanthropic agencies as well as decisionmakers and other staff in municipal, state, and federal policymaking. Information dissemination takes several forms. Regular newsletters and policy briefs

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update stakeholders on policy-relevant changes, updates, or initiatives. BELL staff put these developments in a local context, often using data and provider perspectives specific to Philadelphia. BELL has advocated in the state's capitol with other network leadership for increasing resources for home visiting, child care, and Head Start. BELL has increased its network of contacts through joining other initiatives focused on young children locally, and BELL staff have joined and co-organized statewide stakeholder groups and initiatives.

BELL staff and partners also regularly present on its activities, data, and proposed innovations. BELL convenes annual forums in Philadelphia to provide data-based reports and discussions on the impact of BELL activities. These forums are attended by providers as well as policy decisionmakers at different levels of government. The forums involve Philadelphia-specific content that is contextualized by experts working at the state and national levels. Furthermore, BELL collaborates with national advocacy groups such as Schoolhouse Connection and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth to disseminate information broadly. These efforts include presentations at national conferences, informing state and federal testimony, blog posts, and webinars.

Summary and Recommendations

The BELL initiative looks to promote resilience in young children experiencing family homelessness by making their contexts more responsive and supportive to the developmental processes of adaptation in early development. It relies on a shared commitment to the well-being of these young children by diverse providers within the emergency housing system and with early education programs. BELL activities catalyze and sustain relationships between programs and staff so that they can better respond to the needs of young children and families in shelter, including efforts to improve the developmental appropriateness of shelter while increasing accessibility of quality early childhood programs. BELL also engages in advocacy to represent the needs of young children experiencing homelessness, and the systems that serve them, in local, state, and national deliberations. These activities are informed and sustained by the constant generation of data-based knowledge as a key tool for planning, guiding activities, and informing advocacy. This initiative informs the dynamic systems that make up children's experiences of family homelessness, helping those systems be more coordinated and more equipped for supporting the developmental processes of positive adaptation for young children.

Preliminary evidence suggests that BELL has helped improve the developmental appropriateness of shelter spaces while also increasing preschool enrollment for children staying in

emergency housing programs, though more work is needed to generate higher-quality evidence (Cutuli & Vrabic, 2018). Even so, lessons learned from the early stages of BELL in Philadelphia, and from programs in other locales (Curran-Groome, 2017), suggest that communities interested in supporting young children in emergency and transitional housing should first recognize the complexity of those embedded, dynamic systems that guide children toward or away from resilience. Communities and programs should seek out ways to support the family system directly, such as through deploying promising parent programs for families with young children. Individual shelter spaces can work to become more developmentally appropriate through using tools like the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters. More important, providers in local emergency and transitional housing systems can build relationships. These include relationships among different local emergency housing providers, themselves, to help share information and resources while also forming a collaborative for collective impact. Supporting families also involves having relationships with providers in other systems that promote resilience in early development. Relationships with early childhood programs are key in this regard, both to infuse developmentally appropriate experiences into the lives of children and to inform early childhood programs about the experiences of young children in homeless families. Effectively engaging families with young children in shelter seems to require personnel in both systems dedicated to outreach and to helping families navigate transitions, such as understanding early childhood program options, locating quality programs, applying for subsidies, and ensuring trauma-informed care once enrolled. Data-based knowledge is central to these sorts of collaborations, serving to help keep partners engaged, to constantly generate evidence and guide new approaches, and to engage broader audiences through advocacy efforts to develop and sustain quality programs. In these ways, the systems that serve young children in families experiencing homelessness can be more attentive to their developmental needs and be more effective at promoting resilience.

Acknowledgments

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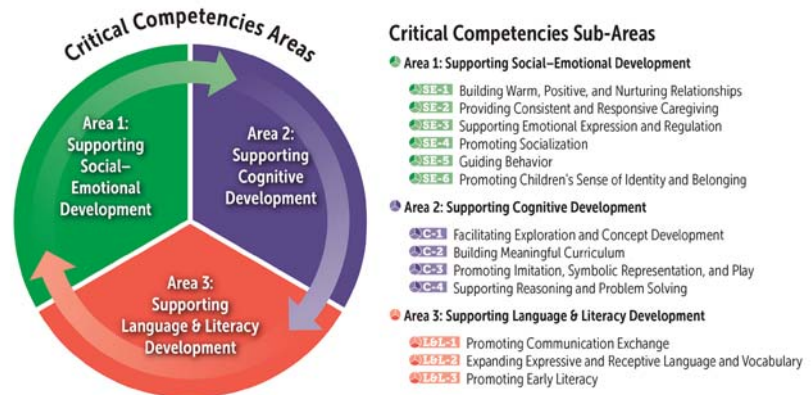
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