Early Childhood Developmental Health Systems

EVIDENCE TO IMPACT CENTER

Strengthening Early Childhood Systems: Practice Strategies

The Early Childhood Developmental Health Systems (ECDHS): Evidence to Impact Center helps local and state systems advance the health and well-being of young children. ECDHS strategies are guided by the Water of Systems Change framework, in which **practices** are adopted activities, procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise work.[1]

State and local systems leaders, providers[i,2], and other partners can adopt the following evidence- and expert-informed practice strategies to support early childhood developmental health.

Systems Change Conditions

The Water of Systems Change framework identifies six conditions that work together to support authentic and lasting systems change, including:

- Policies
- **Practices**
- Resource Flows
- Relationships & Connections
- Power Dynamics
- Mental Models

i Providers include all those who work with young children and their families, including health care, education, social service, and other community-based organizations.

Promote authentic family and community involvement in all aspects of the early childhood developmental health system.

Establish processes for family involvement. Define a clear role that aligns with your goals and context, and invite families to provide feedback and refine the role.[2] Work with families to co-create materials (e.g., recruitment tools, orientation guidelines, role descriptions, payment structures) to support participation. Sustain engagement by recruiting family advocates on an ongoing basis and creating multiple ways for families to be involved.[3]

Engage families as equal partners in system development. Schedule meetings at convenient times and ensure family input is acknowledged and documented in meeting notes.[2,4] Position families as both recipients of services and active contributors to system design, data interpretation, and decision-making.

Maintain ongoing communication with family partners. Develop structured feedback loops with parents and caregivers to understand what is working well and what can be improved. Share how their feedback directly informs state and local systems improvements.[5]

Strengthen care coordination and navigation across the system, with a focus on the family experience.

Actively connect families with services. Use warm handoffs by introducing families directly to receiving providers whenever possible, as this approach is typically more effective than standard referrals.[6] When in-person introductions are not possible, call the provider on the family's behalf to support a smooth transition. Keep provider contact information, eligibility criteria, and other details (e.g., after-hours contact numbers) current to facilitate linkages to services.[7]

Formalize partnerships among system providers. Use memorandums of understanding (MOUs), charter agreements, and standard procedures to connect providers to coordinated intake and referral systems, or to establish referral pathways and protocols to link to existing services.[8]

Support a system of early identification and universal screening to identify care referral and linkage needs. Offer cross-provider training, using available materials and virtual technical assistance to promote consistent screening practices across the local system. Coordinate with partners to expedite referrals for families based on screening results. Consider using a system-wide referral form and/or tracking process so providers can communicate referral status.[8] Follow up with families to ensure they receive services, and document the status in the health record.

Support integrated and cross-sector care practices.

Build interprofessional or cross-sector teams to foster collaboration. Convene early childhood providers to strengthen coordination and communication.[9] For example, medical providers can hold regular multidisciplinary meetings with primary care providers, specialists, and developmental and family support professionals. They can also train team members together on best practices for working with families to provide prevention and intervention services.[10,11]

Use a multigenerational approach when serving children. Recognize that caregiver and family needs impact child health. During pediatric visits, screen for family needs, check in with caregivers, and offer referrals as needed. Assign care navigators to support referrals. Create a separate chart for caregivers to track referral outcomes.[12,13]

Integrate behavioral and mental health specialists and community health workers into primary care. Use integrated models to help reduce provider burden, offer tailored interventions, and facilitate warm handoffs to specialists or on-demand consultations.[7]

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