



Strengthening Early Childhood Systems: Relationship & Connection 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 **relationships and connections** are the quality of communication and interactions among people in a system, especially among those with different backgrounds and perspectives.¹

State and local systems leaders, providers^{i,2}, and other partners can adopt the following evidence- and expert-informed relationship and connection 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.

Foster relationships among all systems partners including providers and families.

Develop trust and strong interpersonal relationships to support consensus building. Host informal meetings for partners to share their work, competences, and goals before formal collaboration begins.³ Use these conversations to understand experiences, motivations, and challenges, then establish shared norms and a common vision for collaboration.

Acknowledge and address power dynamics. Train providers on best practices for family engagement, prioritizing human-centered design approaches. Create transparent processes that recognize differences in decision-making authority and promote quality connections between providers and families.

Put families' real-life experiences at the center of strategy development. Create opportunities for families to lead systems work and guide action plans based on their experiences navigating systems. Family-led strategies are more effective and responsive to real-world circumstances.⁴

Practice authentic collaboration to support a high-functioning system.

Create a collaborative learning environment for interested parties to align. Establish small networks, such as collaboratives and coalitions, where interested parties can discuss implementation challenges, identify potential solutions, and share information across communities.⁵

Align efforts across system partners. Map existing efforts and connect with partners to better understand the landscape. Look for opportunities to combine efforts, avoid duplication, share resources, and leverage existing relationships for greater collective impact.⁶

Promote coordinated referrals and care to support collaboration across the system. Identify initiatives like [Help Me Grow](#) to link families to resources that support child development.

Engage all parties in systems efforts. Maintain regular communication to strengthen engagement and sustain commitment, which is critical for addressing implementation challenges.⁷



Prioritize communication with families that promotes their role as system-level partners.

Ensure follow-up communication with family partners. Communicate consistently with families throughout all stages of systems work to ensure they stay engaged.⁸ Avoid jargon and provide an opportunity for families to ask questions one-on-one outside of collaboration meetings.

Expand community outreach to reach a broader audience. Partner with local media, such as television and radio, to deliver information about opportunities to get involved in systems efforts. Engage trusted community partners (e.g., faith-based organizations, local nonprofits, neighborhood and tribal leaders) to help reach audiences who may not otherwise be aware of system efforts.

References

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The Early Childhood Developmental Health Systems (ECDHS): Evidence to Impact Center was made possible through the support of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$4,740,000 with 0% financed from non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov).

Suggested citation: Rodriguez Ledezma D, McCombs-Thornton, K, Till L. *Strengthening Early Childhood Systems: Relationship and Connection Strategies*. Early Childhood Developmental Health Systems: Evidence to Impact Center; 2026.