
Coming Together During COVID-19:

Early Childhood Systems Supporting Families

October 2020



About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices. For more information, visit <http://www.CSSP.org>.

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Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC)

EC-LINC is a network of partners working to support families and improve results for young children in communities across the country. EC-LINC communities quickly adapted their priorities and partnered with local leaders, parents, and organizations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This series of briefs highlight those efforts at a community and practice level:

- **Coming Together During COVID-19: Early Childhood Systems Supporting Families** highlights how the infrastructure and partnerships EC-LINC communities have developed over years of building their early childhood systems have allowed them to address the needs confronting families with young children.
- **Equity in Action: DULCE Addresses the Health and Emotional Needs of Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic** demonstrates the power of DULCE (a pediatric clinic-based approach to family support) in addressing critical concrete needs of families with newborns during the pandemic. The five original DULCE sites are EC-LINC communities.
- **Hope in the Time of Chaos: CHOC Children's Strengthened Response to COVID-19 through DULCE** provides a snapshot of how one pediatric practice in an EC-LINC community was able to keep their clinic open during the pandemic to care for families and address their needs.



Introduction

During the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, families with young children faced a variety of new or intensified challenges. Across the country, service providers and decision-makers scrambled to find ways to meet families' needs in a changed landscape. Among the patchwork of services and programs for young children and their families, a coordinated effort was needed. In this moment of crisis, the value of local early childhood systems became especially apparent.

System-building efforts have enabled many communities to improve how well families are served by the wide

range of providers in their communities, developed data systems that lead to better understanding of the strengths and needs of families with young children, and brought partners together to tackle complex challenges like school readiness. Communities that had invested time and resources in these efforts in the years, or decades, prior to the pandemic were able to leverage the partnerships and relationships they had developed.

This brief outlines the ways that local early childhood systems enabled communities to respond creatively and efficiently to the pandemic, based on interviews with members of the Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC).

Local Early Childhood Systems and Early Learning Communities

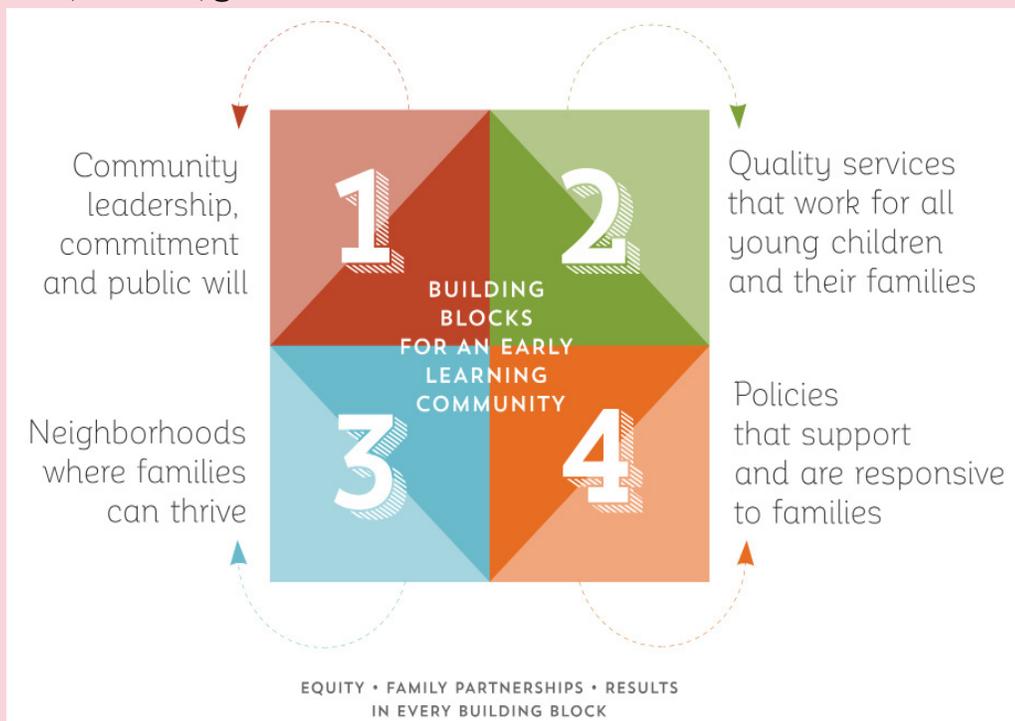
The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) defines an early childhood system as an aligned set of multi-sector services, supports, programs, and policies aimed at achieving better and more equitable outcomes for young children and families, in partnership with parents. Such partnerships seek to develop a seamless system of care for young children within a given city, county, or region, eliminating redundancies and covering gaps.

Local early childhood systems are usually convened or coordinated by a backbone organization, which works to build the network of partners and keep players connected to one another, sharing data and policy agendas. The other partners in the network may include direct service organizations, funders, government

agencies, and parent leaders. As part of the Early Learning Nation initiative, and in partnership with the National League of Cities and EC-LINC members, CSSP recently developed the Building Blocks of an Early Learning Community and a set of tools for communities to use to assess their current efforts and work toward becoming Early Learning Communities.

The four building blocks are shown in the graphic below.

These building blocks look beyond the formal partners in an early childhood system to identify elements of a community that can make it more supportive of families with young children.



The Global Challenge and Local Responses

In the first few months of the pandemic, EC-LINC communities found themselves grappling with a host of urgent needs—from illness, unemployment, and food and housing insecurity to closed schools, a lack of child care, and a yawning digital divide. Families were struggling. Stress and isolation were endemic. Routine medical care and vaccinations were delayed. Child care providers grappled with how to stay afloat financially and protect teachers and children while providing care to the children of essential workers.

In response, EC-LINC system leaders, parent leaders, and other partners mobilized. They quickly re-allocated resources to meet emerging needs; they supported home visiting and other programs to rapidly move to online services; and they innovated in providing direct relief—like delivery of food, diapers, and infant formula—to those who needed it most.

In late May and early June 2020, we reached out to EC-LINC communities to learn more about how they were responding to these needs and emergencies. Through conference calls, surveys, and individual interviews, we collected examples of community response. These examples demonstrated the ways in which

early childhood systems, by providing the structure for collaboration and relationship-building, allowed EC-LINC communities to respond in better ways than they otherwise could have.

The key is that these communities had already invested in building partnerships and relationships to support collaborations—and were then able to work flexibly, collaboratively, and efficiently when the crisis arose. As Tim Manning, a former deputy administration at FEMA said, “Disaster is the wrong time to exchange business cards.”¹ The regular meetings and calls, memoranda of understanding, and structured exchanges of ideas required to build the early childhood system had already allowed people to build relationships among providers of different kinds of services, between providers and families, and between the backbone organization and the different providers across many fields. Then, when quick action was required, the major players already knew and trusted each other.



¹Confessore, Nicholas et al. “How Kushner’s Volunteer Force Led a Fumbling Hunt for Medical Supplies” The New York Times, May 2020. Available at: <https://nyti.ms/3dohaBG>

EC-LINC leaders told us about actions that were made possible by long-standing relationships that were (a) facilitated by organizational structures, (b) defined by trust and flexibility, and (c) built on deep knowledge of the communities served. In the following pages, we will look more closely at each of these themes. Finally, we will envision a better early childhood system, building on what the pandemic has taught us.

Structures Supporting a Coordinated Response

In EC-LINC communities, as in most local early childhood systems, a backbone organization brings together, coordinates, and supports the work of child- and family-serving programs and agencies in a city, county, or region. These backbone organizations are supported by various combinations of local taxes, state funds, grants, and philanthropy. For instance, in California, state taxes on tobacco products support a [First 5 commission](#) in every county. Other examples of backbone organizations include Children’s Services Councils, Great Start Collaboratives, and groups convened under umbrella organizations, such as a United Way.

Regardless of their backbone structure, local early childhood systems are made up of partner organizations—and often individual leaders—who have worked together for a long time, solving problems difficult for individual providers to address. Between the backbone organization and partner agencies, leaders work to ensure that all families have access to the services they need; coordinate services across providers and systems; increase the community’s

overall commitment to early childhood; and engage parents in shaping services and systems to achieve more equitable outcomes.

Early childhood systems are trying to avoid “failing our children, one amazing program at a time,” as stated by a member of the [All: Ready Network](#), a Regional Kindergarten Readiness Network in Portland, Oregon. All:Ready and other backbone organizations work to build connections, capacity, and equity both in child- and family-serving systems and in their communities more broadly. Much of this work involves coordination among stakeholders, which emerged as a key element in these systems’ pandemic response.

Some of the most striking examples of this coordination emerged from Palm Beach County, Florida, where [BRIDGES](#), a program of the Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, worked as a liaison to the school district, helping to track which families were having difficulties getting online. Eventually, a coordinated effort with the school district and county led to a multi-pronged effort to boost Wi-Fi signal and create hotspots in both rural and urban centers.

The Children’s Services Council also joined forces with other funders to create a joint funding application for organizations and agencies in Palm Beach County. Funders still retained independence over their funding decisions, but grantees were spared the tedium of filling out multiple applications. Tanya Palmer, Chief Program Officer for the Council, noted that this joint application was developed several years



ago during a series of brutal hurricanes that devastated the region, showing how innovation during one crisis can prove valuable in dealing with a very different challenge later on.

In Ventura County, California, pre-established, standing weekly calls between three local early childhood organizations pivoted from a focus on quality improvement efforts to coordinating pandemic response. The coordinating calls increased as the groups looked to eliminate redundancies and make sure the child care needs of essential workers were met. First 5 Ventura County gave local non-profits latitude to quickly move services online. As Sam McCoy, Director of Programs and Evaluation at First 5, explains, this trust came from the ethos of their organization. “We don’t just cut checks, but rather work hand in hand with grantees and adapt to needs in the community,” McCoy says. When Food Share, a local Ventura food bank, needed help distributing food, First 5 was able to jump in and use their pre-existing relationships to find storage space in schools and local warehouses. Their long-standing relationship with Food

Share also made this teamwork possible. Similar standing calls in Flagler/Volusia Counties in Florida led to coordinated action in other communities, too, where the behavioral health consortium’s weekly call allowed partners to exchange information about everything, from which crisis centers were open to who had thermometers.

Another innovative example of collaboration emerged from Boston, Massachusetts. Aghast at the thought of families forced into long, crowded lines while waiting for food distribution, Lisa Melara, a parent leader, told government officials, “We know where the people are. We’ll distribute the food.” She then led an effort to employ parents and other community members to deliver food to homes; families signaled their need for groceries outside their door, so that personal contact was minimized.

Throughout these efforts, the trust that had been built through years of working together proved crucial to relationships both between providers and collaborators, and the ones between providers and parents.

For example, in Portland, Oregon, Kari Lyons, the Network Manager of the All:Ready network, recalls the first three weeks of the pandemic as a “kerfuffle of exchanging information” among providers. Rather than formal venues for collaboration, groups communicated rapidly, exchanging information about emerging needs in the community through an unguarded, connected community network. “With a structured, supported, people-trust-each-other network, you can go into action quickly,” she notes.

Between parents and providers, trust is even more important. In Kent County, Michigan, Anthony Queen, a parent leader with several organizations, reached out to fathers whom he had known for a long time. Through informal conversation, he found out that the computer tablets distributed by the school district were outdated, and that nearly all parents were accessing virtual services through their phones instead. Because the parents knew and trusted Queen, they spoke frankly about the services’ shortcomings. Queen was then able to pass this information forward.



Flexibility Made Possible by Trusting Relationships

Trust and coordination among partners facilitate another key quality in a crisis: flexibility. Especially during the pandemic, when certain services can no longer be delivered, and other needs become urgent, finding new ability and authority to move funds from one area to another was crucial.

In Flagler/Volusia, once home visiting was halted, the savings on transportation was redirected into other forms of client assistance, including money for rent, food, and cell phones. Many other EC-LINC partners reported passing on unused funds directly to families, rather than letting the dollars expire with the end of the fiscal year.

A robust system, deeply connected to its community, can also make it possible to address other gaps in funding. Several sites reported on their efforts to support child care providers struggling to stay afloat after attendance plummeted. Anissa Eddie, Pritzker Fellow in Kent County, Michigan, noted that when the pandemic made clear that child care was essential to the economy, government entities in Michigan suddenly found ways to renew subsidies and be flexible with eligibility so that both families and programs could stay afloat during the early months of the pandemic. First Steps Kent County also found alternative sources of funding to support providers directly.

Other efforts focused on filling gaps in who was eligible for child care scholarships. In Palm Beach County, Tanya Palmer reports that the

state provided dollars for child care scholarships for essential workers, but these were primarily used to ensure that first responders and health care providers had care for their children. The Children's Services Council and a private foundation provided additional scholarship funds for other essential workers such as grocery store staff and transportation workers. Many of these families were able to qualify for state subsidies, but those additional local funds filled the gap for those who were left out.

In other adaptations, several communities began to pay child care subsidies based on enrollment, rather than attendance, so providers would not go broke when children could not attend. Many began reimbursing for health and related services provided by video, when in the past only in-person services were covered.

The encouraging theme here is that when faced with crisis, these systems were able to change even long-standing and fundamental rules. Dixie Morgese, of Flagler/Volusia, comments, "In the pandemic, we see if there's a will, there's a way."

Place-Based Knowledge

Lisa Melara, the parent leader who organized the delivery of food to families, exemplifies another key element of effective community response: know your neighborhood.

To find out what families really needed, many EC-LINC communities conducted surveys of families. Existing relationships, and their attendant

infrastructure, made it possible for providers and backbone organizations to ask and get answers quickly.

In the Portland Metro region, the All: Ready Network quickly distributed a survey to more than 70 partners to better understand the needs of families and caregivers with child ages 0-5 who are economically disadvantaged, have a child with a disability, or are Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color. One result was a significant Portland metro area collaboration to distribute 1,500 culturally responsive family care boxes to those most impacted by COVID-19.

In Palm Beach County, families were surveyed both about their experience with virtual learning and their general well-being. In Ventura County, efforts to survey clients were aided by the fact that 400 families had just completed intake forms when the pandemic began, making contact information readily available.

Elsewhere, informal outreach to parents, often by other parents, helped providers and system leaders complete their picture of what work was truly urgent. These surveys and outreach efforts helped ensure that response was grounded in local knowledge.

Some of the adaptations made for the pandemic have actually allowed providers to reach parents who may not have been as well served by in-person service delivery models. Morgese, in Flagler/Volusia, was one of several EC-LINC members who noted that some parents participate more fully in online platforms, where they apparently feel more comfortable. The pivot to provide

services this way during the pandemic may have opened a door to increased understanding of parents' preferences in each community.

Looking Forward: Building More Just Systems

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the inequities that have long dogged the U.S. In late May and June, the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests made even more clear these inequities must be addressed, and the only way to address them is to dismantle the White supremacy at the heart of many American institutions.

And so, even as the coronavirus continues, early childhood systems leaders are beginning to think through how to build a better, more just system.

Even before the pandemic, there was a growing sense in the field of early childhood that it is no longer possible to think about early childhood systems without addressing racism. Young children are the most racially and ethnically diverse cohort in the nation, and they are the most likely to live in poverty. As Dana Hepper, the Director of Policy & Advocacy at the Children's Institute in Oregon, notes, "Knowing that children are acutely impacted by trauma, and that trauma [rates] are affected by race and income, we are called upon to be even more acutely focused on race."

Robust parent engagement and leadership is critical to addressing racial equity in early childhood. As Anthony

Queen, the parent leader from Kent, Michigan, says, "If you have twelve 'you's' sitting around the table formulating the program, how are you going to get in the mindset of people you're trying to help?"

To help early childhood system partners listen more closely to parents, Queen, along with forty other parent leaders, created the [*Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems*](#), which details five commitments for change and calls on early childhood systems to address racism directly and to cultivate and support parent leaders. Released in 2018, the Manifesto is particularly useful as early childhood systems grapple with the inequities exposed by COVID-19.

"Now is the perfect time to recalibrate what your program is all about and where you want it go," says Queen. "And it will go so much better if you have people of color sitting at tables while you're formulating [policy], instead of formulating and then trying to sell it to people of color afterwards, because that's all they've ever gotten all their lives."

Many EC-LINC communities are in the early stages of the hard work of grappling with racism and figuring out how to build anti-racist early childhood systems. Queen hopes that the pandemic will allow for White people to grow more empathetic to how communities of color have long been marginalized by racist systems. The uncertainty that we all feel, he says, is precisely the uncertainty experienced by many people of color all the time: "A lot of people [now] are cut off. Imagine feeling that way 365 days a year."

Conclusion

When COVID-19 struck, families, neighborhoods, and service providers were in crisis. Relationships among early childhood system partners, forged over years and bound by trust, made possible the most flexibility and speed needed to respond effectively. The crisis made clear the value of EC-LINC communities' ongoing efforts to make the patchwork of early childhood services more coordinated, more efficient, and more equitable.

Perhaps most importantly, the pandemic has revealed that we have the resources to meet family needs. Without sacrificing quality and safety, agencies are finding ways to center families, rather than bureaucratic “qualifications,” in their services. Early childhood systems, overall, are also learning to ask not,

“Does this family meet the eligibility criteria for service x?”, but rather “What does this family need and how can we use existing relationships to get it to them, fast?”

The adaptability that EC-LINC communities have demonstrated during this crisis will be more critical than ever as we all continue to push to create fully functional and anti-racist early childhood systems going forward to support all families with young children.

