

EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS BUILDING OVERVIEW

Early childhood (EC) systems development is focused on activities that affect children and families across four domain areas. The domain areas are Health, Social Emotional and Mental Health, Family Support and Parent Education, and Early Learning. Health includes services that directly impact a child's health; Social Emotional and Mental Health includes services that address a child's mental health and emotional well-being; Family Support and Parent Education includes services that assist families and children grow and thrive with each other and their community; and Early Learning focuses on facilities and services that care for and educate children outside the home. Historically, families have had to access services in each of these domain areas separately -- even though each domain area has an enormous impact on a child's ability to thrive. Research has consistently demonstrated that children must have ready access to relevant services across all these domains in order to thrive. For example, a child receiving all recommended immunizations may not thrive if that child does not have consistent access to high quality child care. A child in a high quality child care setting may not thrive if there are high levels of stress in the home. It is imperative a locally-based EC system create and implement the mechanisms necessary for children and families to easily access appropriate and coordinated services during the child's formative years. The goal for these grant funds is to create capacity within local communities to develop and implement an effective, efficient, and equitable EC system that will grow to include the four domain areas for families and children.

What is Systems Building?

The term "systems building" is used to refer to the process of bringing together resources and services and effectively integrating them to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of services for children and families. Systems may only be built if stakeholders are fully engaged, committed to change, and recognize that an effective system will be better able to address the individual program goals of the respective stakeholders. The foundations of systems building include:

- Building and supporting partnerships;
- Funding and investing in EC;
- Changing EC policy;
- Building political will and engagement;
- Sharing accountability; and,
- Generating education and leadership opportunities.

Why build a system?

A high-functioning system provides distinct benefits to local communities over traditional program-based approaches.

- A system is better able to make use of a wider range of resources within a community to address identified needs;
- An effective system begins to leverage additional resources because of gains in efficiency, clarity of multi-disciplinary goals, the cohesiveness of services, and unity of messages to potential external stakeholders;
- A high-functioning system encourages active stakeholder participation by helping stakeholder organizations more effectively address the organizations' goals;
- An effective system provides ready access to services to children and families without requiring families to become experts in how to access discrete services to meet their needs; and,

- A system creates a conceptual, and often a physical, framework for communities to build long-term community investment in EC.

One of the tenets of systems building is community flexibility. Communities must be given the latitude and the resources necessary to address specific community needs. A range of activities may be funded dependent on the demonstrated developmental readiness of a community for building a comprehensive EC system. Funded activities may be in the following domains:

- Early Learning;
- Social Emotional and Mental Health;
- Health;
- Family Support & Parent Education;