

Implementing Strategies to Support Families

The Center, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, brought together 12 exemplary programs from around the U.S. with a long and successful history of working with health practices and social service organizations to engage and connect diverse families to services and supports.

The goal was to better understand and document the strategies and practices the programs found to be effective in better serving diverse families with young children.

Exemplary Programs

National

- **Child First**, Connecticut
- **Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems**, NICHQ National Office; Florida site
- **Healthy Steps**, DC national office; Illinois site
- **Help Me Grow**, Connecticut National Office
- **Project DULCE**, Center for the Study of Social Policy; Vermont site
- **Medical-Legal Partnerships**, GWU national office; Chicago site
- **Safe Environment for Every Kid (SEEK)**, University of Maryland

State and Local

- **Healthy Development Services**, San Diego, CA
- **Maricopa Integrated Health System Medical Home**, AZ
- **MYCHILD & Project LAUNCH**, Boston, MA
- **Primary Health Care, Inc.**, Des Moines, IA
- **The Children's Clinic**, Long Beach, CA

Children's health and social and emotional well-being begin before birth. While still in utero, babies are affected by their mothers' ability to access high-quality prenatal care and support. Once born, children are profoundly impacted by experiences at home, in health care settings, and in their communities. A growing body of research known collectively as P.A.R.E.N.T.S. science (Protective factors, Adverse Childhood Experiences, Resiliency, Epigenetics, Neurobiology, Toxic stress, and Social Determinants of Health) points to the critical importance of safety, stability and nurturing in the child's environment to a child's healthy start in the earliest years of life.

Many states have agencies and programs providing services and support to children and their families. The effectiveness of the agencies and programs efforts relies on how well they communicate and engage with the families they serve—and with each other. What are effective strategies for communication and engagement? What can child and family-serving agencies do to better work with each other and meet families' needs?

Below are best practices identified by the exemplary programs in four key areas—care coordination, community linkages, family engagement and health equity.

Best Practices in Care Coordination

Immediacy and seamlessness of response

Once issues of concern to the family, including medical, psychological, social or educational needs are identified, the provider implements an immediate warm handoff to a care coordinator or someone within the practice setting for direct follow-up.

Patient/family centered, with concerted and persistent engagement of families

The care coordinators often benefit from training in motivational interviewing, appreciative inquiry, supervision, and reflective practice to help hone and develop skills in establishing rapport with isolated and distrustful families.

Underlying emphasis on fostering family capacity, strengths and resiliency

Most parents serve as care coordinators and case managers for themselves and their young children. Through encouragement and mentoring, professional care coordinators work at building families' capacities to be more effective in this role.



Recognize the care coordinator as partner in the care team

Care coordinator's role requires the exercise of substantial discretion and results in greater knowledge about the family than other partners. This role should be recognized as a valued partner across the different systems with which they collaborate.

Engage with other agencies/partners

Because of the varied needs families may have, care coordinators need to be in communication with various community partners. These relationships help them better understand the strengths and needs of families they serve.

Continuous improvement and learning

Regardless of backgrounds and pre-service education and training and because of the diversity of the families they serve, care coordinators confront new situations and needs often. Continuing skill building is vital to address these challenges.

Flexibility, humor, humility and self-care

A care coordinator's ability to be flexible, find humor and humility and use self-care strategies is related to their competency in this role. On-going training helps to build these competencies and avoid burn-out.

Best Practices in Community Linkages

Identify resources and resource gaps

Exemplary programs are often in the best position in their communities for both identifying specific needs of families and for advocating for the development of services and supports to meet them.

Build and sustain partnerships

Organizations must build strong and trusting relationships with the community agencies offering services and resources families need. Building and sustaining partnerships means finding opportunities to collaborate and work together. Strategies include:

1. engaging other agencies in community initiatives
2. building and supporting systems of care, including protocols, agreements and care pathways
3. measuring referrals, linkages and systems processes

Best Practices in Family Engagement

Build trusting relationships

Training in cultural competency, family engagement models

and listening skills help care coordinators better understand family needs and how to respond.

Put families at the center of the care planning process

Effective programs see families as the drivers and decision makers of the services and support they want and need.

Families' perspectives are essential to service quality

Measures of consumer satisfaction and family input on service design should inform quality improvement projects.

Intentional peer learning opportunities

Fostering or developing mechanisms for peer support creates opportunities for parents to build social relationships.

Engage families in leadership and development

Parents are encouraged to share their experiences and to be actively involved in programs' and agencies' organizational decision making.

Best Practices in Promoting Health Equity

Hire staff from diverse backgrounds

Hiring bilingual, bicultural staff, when possible, that represents the community.

Staff training on cultural competency

Cultural competency is a process. Ongoing cultural competency training, support, and reflective practice help staff increase their skills.

Engage parents in peer support

Engaging parents with similar cultural, language, values, and experiences in peer support activities helps families feel less isolated and provides a place for support and education to be delivered.

Data collection

Knowing who makes up the community being served, who is using services and who has access to services is necessary in implementing culturally competent services.

Conclusion

The strategies identified here do not represent a cookie-cutter approach. Instead, they are a myriad of strategies, which can be combined with current work and tailored to different structures of family-serving systems and organizations, whether in urban or rural settings. ■