Help Me Grow National Center

Early Childhood Cross-Sector Collaboration Tool Instructions

Introduction

The Early Childhood Cross-Sector Collaboration Tool is an Excel workbook that helps early childhood system leaders identify priority partners, assess existing relationships, and develop action plans to strengthen collaboration. The workbook includes a completed example, a worksheet for exploring priority partnerships, and a partner action plan. This accompanying guide provides instructions for using the workbook collaboratively.

Strengthening Partnerships Through Intentional Leadership

Strong partnerships do not happen by chance. They are built through intentional leadership, mutual understanding, and ongoing collaboration. Every state and community has unique strengths, needs, resources, and service delivery structures. These differences shape which organizations need to be involved, how closely they need to collaborate, and which partnerships should be prioritized for development or strengthening.

Intentional leadership means making deliberate decisions about where to invest time, relationships, and resources based on the greatest opportunities to improve outcomes for children and families.

How those priorities are determined will vary across communities. For example:

- An early childhood system in a rural community may prioritize a single pediatric practice that serves most young children in the community.
- A statewide or metropolitan system may achieve greater reach by partnering with a state AAP chapter, large health system, or intermediary organization that can engage multiple providers.
- One system may prioritize aligning work directly with individual schools, early intervention programs, or family resource centers, while another partners most closely with statewide associations or regional networks that influence practice across many organizations.

Once leaders identify priority partnerships, the next step is to understand what those partners need in order to collaborate effectively.

This requires leaders to replace assumptions with curiosity. Strong partnerships begin with understanding each partner's priorities, strengths, operating conditions, and the value they bring to the early childhood system. Strengthening partnerships is the work of leadership.

Drawing from best practices demonstrated by Help Me Grow systems that work to deepen partnerships that matter most, this tool is designed to help system leaders identify high-leverage partnerships, better understand what matters most to each partner, and develop practical engagement strategies that align with local context, shared goals, and the needs of the children and families they serve.

When to Use This Tool

This tool can be used whenever early childhood system leaders want to strengthen existing partnerships, build new relationships, or more intentionally align partnership efforts with current system priorities. It may be especially useful when:

- Developing or updating a strategic or implementation plan.
- Building a coalition or strengthening and aligning with existing coalitions and steering committees.
- Assessing current cross-sector partnerships.
- Identifying opportunities to strengthen referral pathways or care coordination.
- Engaging new sectors or organizations.
- Planning for sustainability, expansion, or continuous quality improvement.
- Preparing for partnership discussions, retreats, or strategic planning meetings.

Suggested Time Investment: Initial planning sessions typically require **60–90 minutes**, with additional time depending on the number and complexity of partnerships discussed.

Suggested Review Frequency: Review at least annually, or more frequently as community priorities, partnerships, or conditions evolve.

Who Should Be Involved

This tool is designed to support collaborative planning and is most effective when completed by a group of stakeholders. Depending on your community, participants may include:

- ❑ Governance or advisory body members, such as representatives on leadership teams, coalitions, steering committees, and parent or family groups.
- ❑ Representatives from priority partner organizations.
- ❑ Family leaders or individuals with lived experience.
- ❑ Backbone or intermediary organizations.
- ❑ Other community partners who contribute to achieving shared goals.

Including multiple perspectives helps create a more complete understanding of partner priorities, strengthens shared ownership, and supports more effective planning. When completing the tool collaboratively, the partnership rating can reflect the strongest existing relationship that any participant has with the partner. If you are at the beginning stages of forming a collaborative, you can use this tool to map out which partners could be engaged in coalition-building efforts.

Planning for Success

Before using this tool, take time to prepare for productive discussion. The greatest value of this tool comes from the conversations it generates. If helpful, complete the checklist below to assess your team's readiness and ensure the tool is as useful to your efforts as possible.

Have you...

- ❑ Identified your current priorities or populations of focus?
- ❑ Invited appropriate partners and perspectives, including family and community representation?
- ❑ Gathered relevant partnership, referral, or community information?
- ❑ Allowed sufficient time for discussion and reflection?
- ❑ Established a collaborative environment grounded in curiosity and shared learning?

How to Complete This Tool

Complete the steps for the Early Childhood Cross Sector Collaboration Tool in sequence, filling out the workbook throughout the process.

STEP 1: Identify Potential Partnerships

- Review the Example tab to see a sample completed tool from an HMG system.
- Complete the first five columns of the *Partnerships in the Field* tab for your own system (Sector; Partner/Organization; What Matters Most to this Partner?; Key Strengths & Expertise; and How Can Alignment Support Shared Goals).
    - Identify and input the sectors, organizations, and partners across the early childhood field in your region. Consider partners that have the greatest opportunity to improve outcomes at scale for your populations of focus while advancing benefits for all children and families.
    - Explore and input what matters most to those partners, the operating conditions that influence their work, and opportunities for strengthening collaboration.
- Review the list by sector. Where there are sectors missing, consider researching which entities play this role in your region.

STEP 2: Assess Current Levels of Partnerships with Each Partner

- Reflect on your current partnerships and identify opportunities for growth. Review the examples provided for each level.
- Discuss and input the level of partnership for each partner, selecting from the dropdown menu. The "current level of partnership" can be completed on behalf of the overall collaborative effort when appropriate. Alternatively, if working with multiple participants to complete the tool, the level can reflect the highest level of partnership among participants. If completing this way, it is suggested for the participant in question to take on next steps with the partner.

STEP 3: Develop Partner Action Plans

- Complete the final tab for this tool (Partner Action Plan).
- Identify current priorities for the collaborative, and determine which partnerships may be most relevant for the priorities.* Of those, map out the current partnerships, opportunities for growth, and the desired level of partnership with each partner. Integration does not need to be the goal for every partnership; choose the level that best supports the purpose of your work together.
- Develop practical action steps, identify responsible parties, and establish timelines.

**Return to this tool over time to update statuses and revisit partnerships, including those not previously prioritized.*

STEP 4: Review, Learn, and Update

Revisit the tool periodically to assess progress and update priorities as partnerships and community needs evolve.

You do not need to complete every section or every row of the planning grid in a single meeting. Focus first on the partnerships that are most likely to strengthen your system's ability to reach and support children and families.

Expected Outcomes

Using this tool can help systems:

- Ensure a cross-sector approach to early childhood system building.
- Better understand partner priorities, strengths, and operating conditions.
- Strengthen relationships through more intentional and responsive leadership.
- Prioritize partnerships across sectors that are most likely to improve access, coordination, and family outcomes.
- Develop shared action plans with clear responsibilities and timelines.
- Support continuous learning and improvement as partnerships evolve over time.