

Pediatric Health Care as a Key Partner in an Early Childhood System

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From their first breath, babies are born wired to learn through loving, responsive interactions with their parents and other close caregivers. All families need to know how young children develop and learn and to have the skills and resources to support their child's development. By intentionally building a developmental promotion system that supports children and families from birth, we can work together to make sure all young children and families have what they need to thrive. This document provides a brief introduction to early childhood systems building and demonstrates how pediatric health care can serve as a foundation for building a statewide system to promote child development.

Building Early Childhood Systems to Improve Developmental Outcomes

There are many systems that support child development by working alongside families with young children, such as health care, home visiting, early intervention, child care, and preschool. Using an early childhood systems perspective means thinking about how these systems can work better both within themselves and together, to support children and families. The following two conceptual frameworks can support strategic thinking within any part of early childhood systems, including developmental promotion: Building Early Childhood Systems through Two Interrelated Processes and Building Service Capacity through Access, Quality, and Integration.

Building Early Childhood Systems through Two Interrelated Processes

Building Early Childhood Systems: Two Interrelated Processes	
Systems Organizing	Service Capacity Building
Systems efforts to facilitate collaborative, integrated system planning, implementation, and evaluation	Systems efforts to build the capacity of an early childhood system within a particular area (such as health, mental health, early care and education, family support)
Goal: Facilitate development of an integrated early childhood system...so that the parts of the system work well together for families	Goal: Facilitate capacity building of services within the system...so that families can access needed services
Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public and private partners work together to develop a cross-sector early childhood initiative Health and education agencies develop common goals, strategies, and/or outcomes to support young children and families A state blends federal funding streams to align early childhood efforts and leverage resources Early childhood partners develop a common system where health and early care and education providers can access information about community programs and services for families 	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A state expands families' access to insurance through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program A federal initiative funds home visiting services for families with young children A statewide school readiness initiative supports expansion of early literacy programs Federal, state, and/or private funding is used to increase infant and early childhood mental health consultation services in early childhood programs A state increases family access to child care subsidies funded by the federal Child Care Development Block Grant

To improve outcomes for children and families across the population, systems must do two complementary things: work well together for families and provide needed access to services within those systems. Thinking of these two goals together, and understanding which processes are being addressed by any strategy, are fundamental to building effective systems.

■ Building Service Capacity through Access, Quality, and Integration

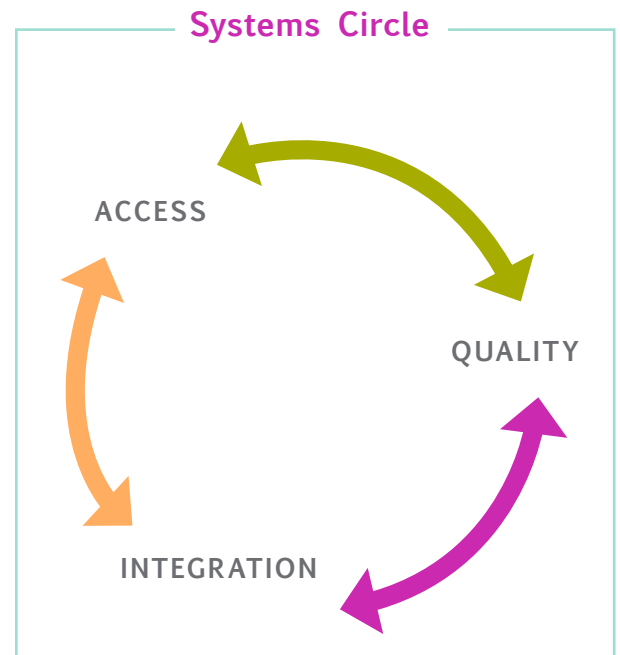
To systematically improve outcomes for children across the population, services must be scaled and sustained. They must be reliably accessible and work for children and families, particularly those with the most need. To do this effectively, the following elements are all required:

Access: Population-level impact requires both broad accessibility and focused attention on those who have the most need.

Quality: Achieving desired program outcomes is only possible through high-quality implementation.

Integration: Implementing and sustaining high-quality programs and services at scale requires the integration of access and quality efforts into ongoing processes and systems.

Together, these elements assure children and families across the population can continuously access high-quality services that are sustained over time.



■ Pediatric Health Care as a Powerful Place to Support Parents and Child Development

Creating a comprehensive system to serve all families effectively may seem daunting, but it can be done by building efficiently from what already exists. The pediatric health care system provides a strong foundation for a statewide developmental promotion system because it can be universally accessible, build on relationships families trust, and provide an individualized approach to teaching families, and connecting them to other services. Despite this unparalleled opportunity, sometimes the health system is not an integral partner within a comprehensive early childhood system. This results in missed opportunities to reach and partner with families to promote child development.

■ Serving as a Universal Access Point

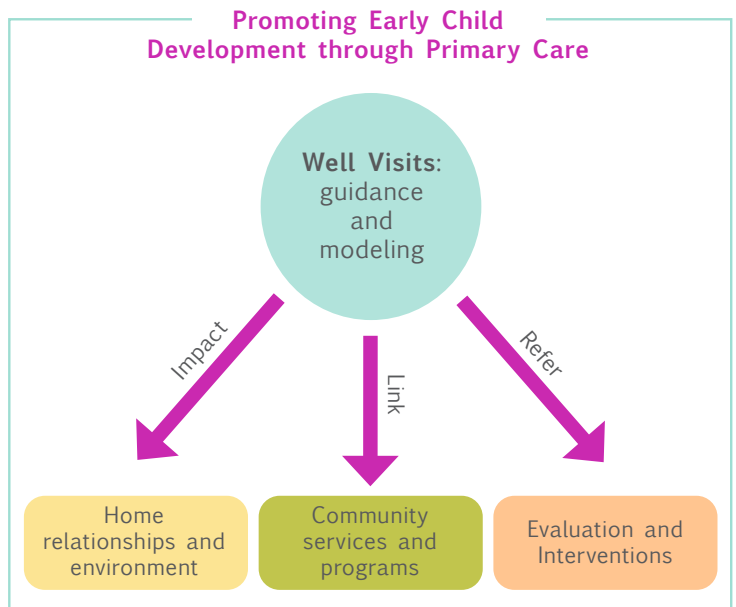
Most children in the U.S. have access to health insurance and medical care, and the health care system is the only nearly universal way to reach families before kindergarten. These visits are most frequent in the earliest months and years, when parents are seeking information, and when children's brains are in their most rapid period of development. In the first three years of a child's life, families attend up to 13 well-child checkups. Each of these visits provides an opportunity to build positive relationships between pediatric providers and families that in turn help support nurturing interactions between the parent/caregiver and their child at home. Because the pediatric health care setting is the only place where these developmentally promoting interactions happen consistently and repeatedly for families across the population, the system is uniquely positioned for broad-scale positive impact on child development.

■ Building Trusting Relationships

Pediatric primary care providers offer those first professional words of support, encouragement, and modeling for parents, helping them learn how to support their child's development. Studies show that families trust their child's doctor more than any other source of information about their child's health and development, and this trust builds over time. The relationship between pediatric providers and parents can enhance families' support structures as they navigate the challenges and rewards of parenting.

Teaching Families and Connecting Them to Services

A central part of these checkups is “anticipatory guidance,” where pediatric providers talk with parents about their child’s development, what to expect, and how to nurture and support their child’s health, development, and learning at home. Through their support for parents, doctors and other providers and partners can directly impact parent-child relationships and the home environment, which together form the foundation for a child’s health and development. Pediatric providers can also link families to community programs that promote child development and refer families for evaluation and intervention when developmental concerns are identified. Together, these steps provide a continuum of services to support parents and help each child reach their developmental potential.



Systematically Scaling Systems and Programs that Work for Children and Families

There are many exemplars of programs that leverage the pediatric care setting to foster early development in ways that go beyond the traditional well-visit and that have proven positive impact on child and family well-being. Pairing the early childhood systems concepts shared here with scalable, proven programs in the pediatric primary care setting will enable communities to reach and partner with families to promote child development across the population. More information on such programs and associated financing strategies can be found at <https://cssp.org/our-work/project/pediatrics-supporting-parents/#story>.

The Child Health and Development Project: Mississippi Thrive! is working in Mississippi, the state with the highest level of child poverty, to develop a statewide system of early developmental promotion, screening, linkage to services and interventions. This project is also studying and elevating successful strategies to be used in other states, tribes and territories to improve early childhood health and development. Childhood poverty has significant deleterious effects on lifelong health and well-being, and disproportionately affects development during the earliest years. This project is built upon a recognition that when policies and practices 1) support responsive relationships between children and adults, 2) strengthen caregivers’ core life skills, and 3) reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families, improvements in child health and well-being outcomes can continue for generations.

(Citation: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>).

For more information see MS Thrive Website link: <https://mississippithrive.com/>

Sources: The section on Building Early Childhood Systems through Two Interrelated Processes modifies information initially published by the Washington State Department of Health in Sells J. (2007). *An Introduction to Kids Matter: Improving Outcomes for Children in Washington State for Early Learning Communities*. Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant, Washington State Department of Health.

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