



Developing a High-Quality Early Learning Continuum

The Need for Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships

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Research on brain development has documented the importance of high-quality learning experiences during the first five years of life.¹ Yet many young children continue to grow up in homes and neighborhoods with limited access to the resources that will allow them to thrive. Children from low-income families are less likely to have access to high-quality early learning programs that can help them prepare for school and the rest of their lives.² In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama recognized the importance of high-quality early learning programs by proposing a series of new investments to establish a continuum of high-quality comprehensive early education from birth through school entry.³ As part of these efforts, competitive grants were awarded to support communities in establishing partnerships between Early Head Start and child care providers to serve children from birth through age 3.

The goal of these Early Head Start-Child Care, or EHS-CC, Partnerships is to use existing resources efficiently and creatively to both increase quality and serve more low-income children over time.⁴ To ensure that the program was implemented successfully, EHS-CC grantees received technical assistance and a delay from the Office of the Administration for Children and Families in adhering to formal monitoring processes and the Designation Renewal System, both of which determine if EHS-CC providers are providing high-quality services.⁵ As this 18-month grace period⁶ for formal monitoring of these partnerships comes to an end in the coming months, it is important to consider the next steps needed so that they can collaborate and coordinate programs effectively to meet the unique needs of low-income working families.

Why low-income infants and toddlers and their families need EHS-CC Partnerships

Low-wage workers are more likely to experience irregular and unpredictable work schedules, including evening and weekend shifts, than all other workers.⁷ In addition, lengthy workweeks and rotating shift times can make it difficult for families to find stable care for their young children. Access to reliable, high-quality early care and education services is a necessity for low-wage working families.

- In the 2014-15 school year, 83 percent of two-parent households in Early Head Start had one or both parents employed.⁸
- In single-parent households during the same school year, 50 percent of parents were working.⁹
- In 2013, 48 percent of all infants and toddlers in the United States lived in low-income families.¹¹
- In the same year, 14 percent of children in the United States lived in areas of concentrated poverty.¹²

Infants and toddlers who live in low-income families in the United States are more likely to grow up lacking stable employment, food, housing, medical care, and/or reliable transportation. These stressors can lead to higher rates of depression and overall poor mental health in low-income parents and can have detrimental effects on young children's cognitive development.¹⁰

Access to high-quality child care programs allows parents to continue to be productive workers and supports healthy development for children. Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships leverage resources to effectively expand access to high-quality early learning programs to meet the needs of low-income working families and their children.

Coordination and collaboration with Early Head Start and child care

Recognizing the importance of providing affordable, high-quality child care to working families, the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, announced the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grant in 2014, awarding \$500 million in EHS-CC Partnership and EHS Expansion grants to states and communities.²⁰

EHS-CC Partnerships aim to combine the strengths of both EHS and the CCDF to provide expanded access to high-quality care that is responsive to the needs of low-income infants and toddlers and their families.²¹ Alone, EHS and the CCDF do not fully meet the needs of working families. EHS lacks the resources to provide the full-day, full-year care that many working families with children need. Similarly, child care subsidies alone do not provide access to the high-quality comprehensive services—such as nutrition and health, development, and behavioral screenings—that many families need.

The benefits of integrating these two programs in local communities are threefold: It increases the quality of care for children and families currently enrolled in both programs; it ensures that the programs are responsive to the schedules of working families; and it expands access to the programs for additional eligible working families.

Early Head Start

The EHS program serves pregnant women, infants, and toddlers up to age 3, when the child becomes eligible to transition into Head Start or another pre-K program.¹³ EHS helps families care for their infants and toddlers through safe and developmentally enriching care and comprehensive services.¹⁴ To accomplish this, programs must use evidence-based curricula and maintain low teacher-to-child ratios and group size requirements.¹⁵ EHS staff members work to engage parents as the first and most influential teachers of their children, an important goal of all Head Start programs.¹⁶

The Child Care and Development Fund

The Child Care and Development Fund, or CCDF, provides block grants to states, territories, and tribes to increase access to high-quality child care programs in the form of subsidies.¹⁷ States' CCDF programs target families that need assistance most—low-income families and other high-need families—by helping them afford the cost of child care so that they can continue to work or go to school, a requirement under CCDF. The subsidy can follow children wherever their parents choose to send them, including eligible center-based or family care providers.¹⁸ In 2012, CCDF served, on average, more than half a million infants and toddlers per month.¹⁹

The challenges of EHS-CC Partnerships

Although Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships can positively affect many families, they must address several challenges. These include differing teacher and staff requirements, eligibility requirements, and classroom requirements.

Staff and teacher certification requirements

EHS requires every teacher to have, at a minimum, a Child Development Associate Credential and training with a focus on infants and toddlers or a comparable credential from their state.²² All child care providers in an EHS-CC partnership must adhere to EHS educational requirements, which tend to be higher than those for typical infant and toddler programs.²³ This presents a challenge for child care providers, who must quickly provide training and educational support in order for their teachers to meet the requirements. Therefore, EHS partners must work with their respective child care partners to develop professional development plans and provide support for all teachers to meet these new requirements.²⁴

Eligibility requirements

The new eligibility requirements in the 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant stipulate that children must receive a full 12 months of service before a family's eligibility for the child care subsidy is redetermined. They also require states to have a sliding scale for continuing eligibility thresholds that allows families to build their financial stability and gradually phase out of the subsidy program, with benefits decreasing as income increases. EHS-CC Partnerships will need to overcome potential funding decreases for partnership grantees due to a loss of child care subsidies, since children can still remain in the program even without a subsidy.²⁵

Classroom requirements

EHS-CC Partnerships require one teacher for a maximum of four infants and toddlers and a group or classroom size of no more than eight children. Additionally, EHS-CC Partnerships are expected to provide full-day, full-year child care to meet the needs of working families. This requires programs to plan sufficient staffing numbers that allow for primary caregiving relationships to develop and provide continuity of care for children. EHS-CC Partnerships must meet these requirements by providing additional teachers and staff to cover full hours of operation to maintain the EHS-to-staff ratio mentioned above.²⁶

Next steps for EHS-CC Partnerships

As the 18-month grace period for formal monitoring comes to an end, it is important to examine the next steps to improve the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships:

- Both the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care are currently in the process of revising their relevant program standards. This is a prime opportunity for both offices to work together to determine where they can align their program standards to reduce the burden on local EHS-CC Partnership child care providers as they implement their programs.
- As the Administration of Children and Families, or ACF, considers how to document lessons learned, it should ensure that EHS-CC grantees are substantively involved in the process. ACF should require regular updates on the status of EHS-CC grantees during the implementation of their programs and consider using existing training and technical assistance funds to provide coaching directly to grantees to meet the unique needs of the implementation process.
- ACF must review and revise the existing monitoring protocol so that it takes into account not only whether the grantees are in compliance with EHS regulations but also the efforts and processes that grantees have implemented to try to meet the regulations.

Over the next five years, it will be critical to use the lessons learned from the EHS-CC Partnerships to date to improve the programs. At this time, two lessons stand out. First, the federal government should work to provide flexibility and support to grantees as they shift and change their programs to meet the needs of the families they serve in their communities. Second, the government must ensure that it provides grantees a realistic amount of time to make improvements without fear of losing their grants.

Conclusion

Access to high-quality early learning programs supports the schedules of working parents and the healthy development of children. These programs are particularly impactful for low-income families and can play an important role in effectively expanding access to high-quality early learning programs to meet the needs of many of the families that need them the most.

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Endnotes

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