



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Partnerships

Partnering With Child Welfare Agencies: An Overview



Acknowledgments

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Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies: An Overview

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can use this resource to enhance their knowledge about building effective partnerships with child welfare agencies to support child and family well-being.

This overview describes the importance of community partnerships with child welfare agencies for program leaders and staff. The resource addresses:

- Why child welfare is an essential partner
- Why partnerships with child welfare are important for children and families
- How these partnerships can benefit children and families and support the work of Head Start and Early Head Start programs and child welfare agencies

To learn about strategies for planning, implementing, and sustaining partnerships, explore *Strategies for Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies*. This resource is available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Explore other resources in the Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Agencies Partnerships series available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

- *Strategies for Partnering with Child Welfare Agencies*
- *Engaging Families When There Is Child Welfare Involvement*

Why Partnerships Between Head Start and Early Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Agencies Are Important

Head Start and Early Head Start programs offer comprehensive services to families in partnership with community agencies, including local child welfare agencies. Program staff connect families with a wide range of resources that support child and family well-being. These resources include housing, health, education, mental health, employment, and recreation resources.

Family well-being is one of the family outcomes of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. (Learn about the Framework on the ECLKC website.)

Programs also help families build their own connections to organizations, services, and peer networks. Providing ongoing support for families and links to these opportunities can help to reduce the likelihood of child welfare involvement.

Head Start and Early Head Start staff consistently assess and monitor the safety and care of each child they serve. If they have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, they are required to make a report to the local child welfare agency. Programs that have established relationships with the child welfare agency can provide a variety of supports for children and their families before and after a report has been made.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can provide:

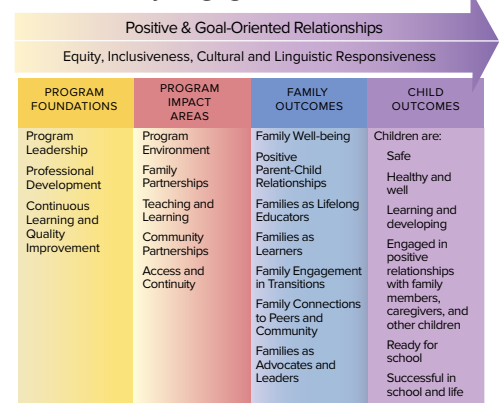
- Stable, ongoing enrollment for children while they are in foster care
- Additional support for the foster family
- Staff who can work alongside a child welfare worker with the birth family
- A neutral and safe place in the program location for an enrolled child to visit with his or her birth parents
- Support for both the child and family when the child returns home

Head Start Program Performance Standards require programs to:

- Take an active role in community planning to encourage strong communication, cooperation, and the sharing of information with community partners [45 CFR 1304.41 (a)].
- Establish ongoing collaborative relationships with community organizations, including public child welfare agencies and service organizations [45 CFR 1304.41 (c)(2)(vi-vii)].

Establishing collaborative relationships with community-based agencies involves considering all parts of the public system, private provider networks, and community agencies that serve families who are involved with child welfare and have children in foster care.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



The Office of Head Start promotes collaboration with child welfare agencies because:

“Children whose families are served by the child welfare system often are developmentally vulnerable due to trauma stemming from early abuse and neglect, and from risk factors that commonly co-occur, such as prenatal drug exposure, prematurity, low birth weight, poverty, homelessness, parental depression, and other mental health problems. The comprehensive services offered by Head Start programs support children by providing a safe and enriched learning environment while facilitating early identification of developmental delays and access to early intervention, health care, and mental health services. In addition, Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide a significant source of family support, parent education, and adult development services for parents and other family members. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2010, para. 3).”



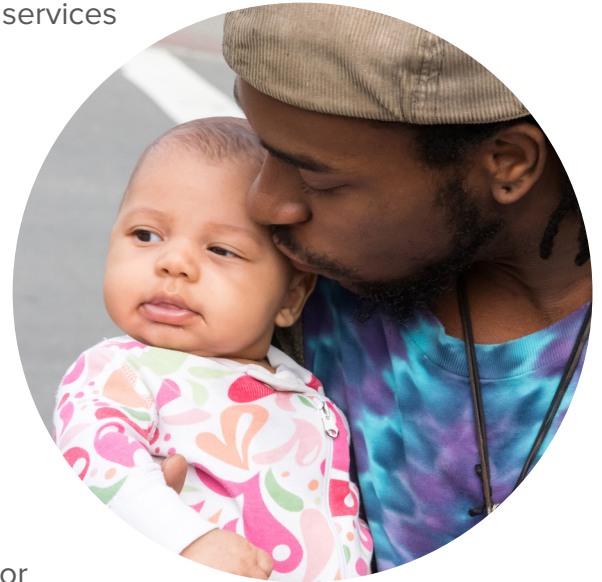
Why Child Welfare Is an Essential Partner

The child welfare system is a continuum of services designed to ensure the safety and permanence of family placement and the well-being of children in a community. Child welfare agencies typically:

- Coordinate services and supports to prevent child abuse and neglect
- Provide services to families that need help protecting and caring for their children
- Operate a hotline for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect
- Receive, investigate, and assess reports of suspected child abuse and neglect
- Assess child and family strengths, resources, and needs
- Provide critical information to the courts regarding children who are victims of abuse or neglect
- Arrange for children to live with relatives or foster families when safety cannot be ensured at home
- Oversee and monitor the well-being of children living with relatives or foster families, including ensuring that their educational needs are addressed
- Work with children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving foster care
- Provide training for mandated reporters (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018)

Public child welfare agencies often collaborate with private child welfare agencies, community-based organizations, and other public agencies to offer an array of supportive and therapeutic child and family services, including:

- **Preventive services.** Provide family-strengthening services to help parents gain parenting skills and other resources they need to keep their families safely together when children are at risk of maltreatment or require foster care placement. Early Head Start programs are considered child abuse prevention programs.
- **Protective services.** Receive, screen, and respond to reports of suspected abuse and neglect, conduct investigations of those reports, and make decisions about actions necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of children.
- **Foster care services.** Place children with relatives or resource/foster families who provide safe, temporary care for children; supervise these placements; and manage visits of parents and other family members with their children.
- **Permanency services.** Plan for children to be reunified with parents, live with other family members, or be adopted.
- **Support services and other efforts.** Address the problems that necessitated foster care placement and that stand as barriers to reunification while the child is in care and during a period following reunification.



As a part of carrying out each of these services, child welfare agencies are mandated to regularly assess the developmental, educational, and health care needs of children, as well as each child's general well-being. Following these assessments, the agencies have a mandate to link children and their families with appropriate supports and services, including high-quality early care and education.

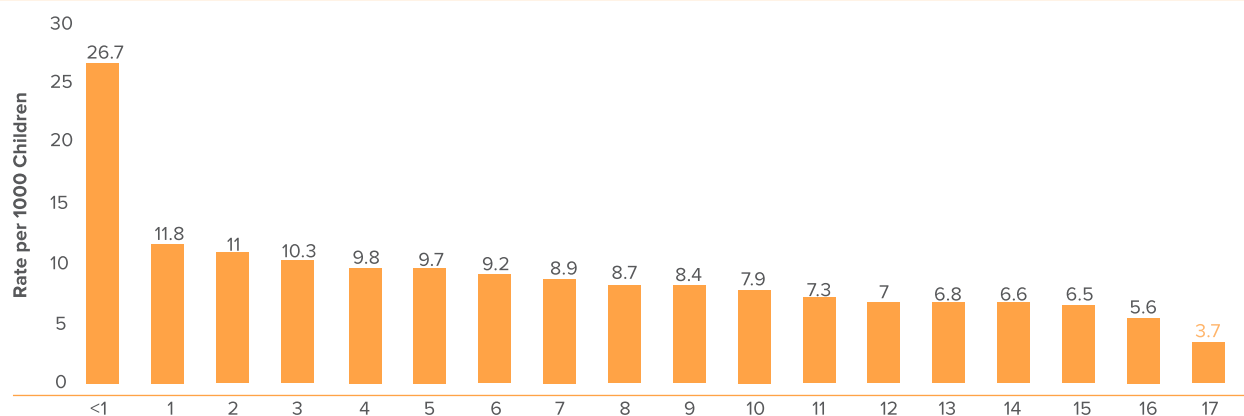
Benefits of Partnerships Between Head Start and Early Head Start Programs and Child Welfare Agencies

Collaboration between child welfare agencies and Head Start and Early Head Start programs is important for many reasons. Here's what the evidence shows:

- **Young children are the most vulnerable to maltreatment. This is the age group that Head Start and Early Head Start programs serve.** In 2018, national statistics showed that more than one-quarter of child maltreatment victims (28.7 percent) are younger than 3 years old. Children younger than 1 year old are most often victimized. In a group of 1,000 children of this age, 26.7 percent experience maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020).

Exhibit 3—D Victims by Age, 2018

The youngest children are the most vulnerable to maltreatment



Based on data from 52 states, See table 3-5. Percentages do not sum to 100.0 due to rounding

Figure 1: 2018 Child Maltreatment Rates by Age (Substantiated Victims per 1,000 Population)

Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2020

- **Participation in quality early education programs can help reduce involvement in the child welfare system.** A growing number of studies find that children enrolled in quality early education programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start programs, were less likely to be involved in the child welfare system (Klein, 2016).

For example, recent research found that participating in Early Head Start programs leads to a long-term reduction in the likelihood of children becoming involved with the child welfare system—the result of program impacts on parenting and child development (Green et al., 2018). At the neighborhood level, lower rates of child maltreatment are associated with local availability of and participation in early childhood programs (Klein, 2016).

- **Children in foster care are automatically eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start programs, even if family income exceeds the income guidelines [45 CFR 1305.2(1)0].**

Children in foster care are automatically eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Yet many foster parents identify child care as an unmet need (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002). The Office of Head Start encourages Head Start and Early Head Start programs to actively recruit and prioritize children in foster care, as well as children living with their families and receiving preventive child welfare services. Continuous participation in a program provides stability and consistency for children in foster care and support for families along the path to reunification. Despite these clear priorities, there is a gap between who is eligible and who is enrolled.



National Head Start and Early Head Start program enrollment statistics from 2017–2018 show that the overall number of children in foster care enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start programs is very low, as is the number of children whose parents have some involvement with child welfare (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, n.d.; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2018).

While there is little data on the reasons for these low enrollment numbers, practice information suggests that gaps may be due to:

1. A lack of awareness of Head Start and Early Head Start programs among foster parents
2. Transportation and location in some areas
3. Lack of local identification and referral pathways for children in foster care

Strong partnerships between Head Start and Early Head Start programs and child welfare can help to bridge the gaps.

- **A key aspect of the mission of Head Start programs is to link families with services and opportunities in the program and the community.** Families involved with the child welfare system can benefit from the services offered by Head Start and Early Head Start programs. While children are in foster care, these programs offer services and supports for the children, their birth families, and their foster families. By participating in Head Start and Early Head Start programs, families can access health, housing, economic mobility, education, and other community services.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can connect parents to opportunities for parenting support, leadership development, and other parents through social events and peer networks. These supports are often key to family reunification and long-term progress for both parents and children. These connections, however, are not always adequately provided through the child welfare system.

Parents may be more likely to engage in services through a trusted resource, such as a Head Start and Early Head Start program, than through a child welfare agency. These supports remain available to children enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start programs if the children are reunified with their parents or are in a stable family relationship with a family member or a foster parent. This ongoing support can contribute to important continuities in the life of a child.

- **Head Start and Early Head Start programs can provide access to resources that can help families address challenges that could result in child welfare involvement.** Programs can provide linkages to essential services and supports for families on the brink of child welfare involvement to help families achieve more stability. Families are better able to build protective factors when they are connected to Head Start and Early Head Start program staff who interact with their children and families every day. Programs also offer families important support, encouragement, and training in parenting skills as well as links to other services.
- **Head Start and Early Head Start programs offer an opportunity to address inequities for children of color.** Children of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system in relation to their number in the total population in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Patterns of reports of child abuse and neglect are racially disproportionate, as are confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect. Studies have found that higher rates of poverty among African American children in the child welfare system is one contributing factor to this overrepresentation.



- **Head Start and Early Head Start programs are committed to family engagement and parent leadership, which are key to supporting families involved with the child welfare system.** Child welfare involvement is often a stressful, difficult, and complex experience for families. Many child welfare systems recognize the importance of working in partnership with families.

These systems can benefit from collaborating with Head Start and Early Head Start programs for many reasons. These programs have a commitment to creating opportunities for family engagement and parent leadership. Head Start and Early Head Start programs also provide comprehensive services. They partner with parents at individual, community, and system-wide levels.

- **Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide opportunities for children to receive timely developmental, health, and nutrition screenings.** Children with developmental delays and disabilities are at greater risk for abuse or neglect than other children their age. Approximately 50 percent of all young children in foster care exhibit developmental delays—as much as five times the rate seen in children in the general population (Houshyar, 2018). Identifying and addressing early developmental needs is particularly crucial for these children.
- **Partnering with child welfare agencies enables Head Start and Early Head Start programs to be more effective in addressing child abuse and neglect and in working with child welfare systems.** This collaboration can provide several benefits:
 - Better understanding of how to work with child welfare caseworkers and supervisors when a family is involved in the child welfare system, including how to support families through this process
 - Better understanding of how to help families access the broader network of preventive services and supports available in their community
 - More access to and information about mentoring services for families to ensure that their voices are heard when they are involved with child welfare and other child-serving systems.

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Additional Resources

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