

BUILDING BRIDGES: A Comprehensive System for Healthy Development and School Readiness

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Overview

Throughout the United States, there is growing attention to the need for strategies that respond to the landmark 2000 Institute of Medicine report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, which concluded that:

- Brain development can be optimized by early experiences;
- Early experiences set the foundation for learning throughout life;
- For optimal development and learning, how young children feel is as important as how they think;
- Many U.S. children enter school without the competencies they need to succeed; and
- Service systems are not adequately organized to promote optimal childhood development and readiness for school.

Several nations, as well as many states and local communities are developing increasingly effective early childhood policies and service delivery systems. These efforts recognize the importance of optimizing early childhood development and the long-term cost of compounded deficits.

Closing the gap between what we know young children need and what they actually receive requires a much more comprehensive and integrated approach to policy making, program development, and service delivery. Young children experience risks to their development that are not well addressed by current service systems. For example:

- Children have better developmental outcomes in high-quality early care and education settings, yet capacity falls short of demand. Only 24 percent of preschool classrooms are found to provide good or excellent quality.
- More than half of American parents of young children do not receive guidance about important developmental topics, and want more information on how to help their child learn, behave appropriately, and be ready for school.
- Many of the most needy, low-income, and ethnic minority children are even less likely to receive appropriate services.

These and many other unmet needs highlight the urgency of the problem and suggest potential starting points for building more effective early childhood systems.

State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative

The MCHB's State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative, launched in 2003, assists states in developing more comprehensive early childhood systems. The initiative encourages partnerships between state agencies that have responsibility for health, educational, and developmental outcomes for young children. SECCS funds state MCH agencies to engage in planning (and implementation) of a more comprehensive and integrated service system for young children. SECCS has the potential to make it possible for all young children to enter school healthy and ready to learn. Young children that experience particular risks or have special needs that can impair their learning capacity are of particular concern. A coordinated and efficient systems-level approach is likely to improve the effectiveness of services received and the outcomes achieved because young children's needs often overlap service sectors. SECCS builds on the traditional roles of MCH (e.g., data collection, convening partners, strategic planning, and systems-building) to enhance existing state initiatives or to build new systems.



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Bridge Building as a Metaphor

Bridge building is an effective metaphor for what SECCS is trying to accomplish. Bridges:

- Connect people and places;
- Help promote interactions and exchange;
- Provide safe passage over difficult terrain and predictable hazards; and
- Are open to everyone in a community.

SECCS is intended to help states *build a bridge from birth to school*. It is about how states will support children and families as they make the natural but challenging transitions in early childhood. In this report, we refer to *bridging concepts*, and specific *bridging strategies, pathways, platforms, and tools*.

Principles for Building Bridges

- **Healthy development and school readiness can and should be optimized for all children.** Research on brain development shows that *all* children benefit from supportive learning environments. Currently many services target only the highest risk families and serve only a fraction of these children.
- **Families are central to young children’s health and development.** Families have the greatest influence on child health and development. The epidemiology of child development also shows that more optimal parenting and early experiences could produce better outcomes among all children.
- **All families with young children can benefit from guidance and support.** Parents of all income, education, and racial/ethnic groups have the potential to further improve their young child’s development. A core set of population-based services should be available to all families with young children. Moderate- and high-intensity services will target at-risk populations. This range of services will help states respond to more families more comprehensively and more appropriately. These services are best situated in the local community context. Finally, support for families needs to be accompanied by expectations of parental responsibility.
- **Children’s development is a shared public responsibility.** The general public, as well as service providers, government agencies, and businesses, needs to understand the importance of early childhood for school achievement and adult productivity. Helping these groups to understand what is at stake, to recognize their shared responsibility, and to take action, can help to broaden multisector commitment to building bridges from birth to school.
- **Support and maintain “developmentally informed” public policy and investments.** Public policies that increase strategic investments in healthy development and school readiness produce the greatest gains to human capital.

Policymakers should assess the unique investment opportunities in early childhood and the cost-effectiveness of these investments in allocating resources.

- **Strong and innovative leadership is needed.** Leadership is needed both within MCH and across all relevant sectors because no agency or organization is solely accountable for promoting early childhood development and school readiness. Multisector leadership is necessary to create a common vision and agenda, and bridge funding streams and program responsibilities. Strategic partnerships that combine the energies of parents, providers, the business community, philanthropic foundations, and government can be used to leverage systems-building efforts.
- **Systems should be held accountable for outcomes.** Emerging early childhood systems must be held accountable for outcomes and results. A greater focus on producing school readiness, rather than narrow categorical outcomes, will help move systems toward greater effectiveness. States and communities will need to monitor and track family and early childhood indicators in multiple domains and at different developmental stages.
- **A complex and changing society requires diverse approaches to service delivery.** The intimate association between culture and child-rearing practices requires attention to cultural preferences and assets. The concept of family-centered care emphasizes addressing parent concerns and needs within their cultural context. This implies service systems that effectively communicate information about child development, counsel parents with an understanding of their parenting preferences, and offer services within acceptable platforms.

SECCS Service Components

The SECCS Initiative was designed to enhance five core service components that can each make specific contributions to healthy development and school readiness:

- (1) Access to health insurance and a medical home;
- (2) Early care and education;
- (3) Mental health and socioemotional development;
- (4) Parenting education; and
- (5) Family support.

Medical Homes and Pediatric Health Care. The concept of a medical home was created to encourage health care practitioners to provide comprehensive and coordinated pediatric care, including acute, chronic, preventive, and developmental services. Addressing the barriers to the provision of appropriate and effective developmental services is a high priority, given the potential to alter young children’s developmental outcomes. Common barriers include inadequate training, reimbursement, and staffing. The medical home can also serve as a bridging platform or hub for more effective connections

between pediatric offices and community programs in the five service sectors.

Mental Health and Socioemotional Development. There is growing recognition of the connection between early socioemotional development and mental health problems. Mental health problems in early childhood can be difficult to recognize, and the resulting impact on social and learning competencies constitute a preventable burden. Unfortunately, many young children at risk for emotional and mental health problems are not identified and go without interventions. SECCS can make socioemotional focused services more available and help to identify and address mental health problems early. SECCS can improve the capacity of the medial home, child care providers, and family support programs to address these needs.

Early Care and Education. Young children spend an increasing amount of time in non-parental care. The traditional distinction between early education and child care has become less relevant since all children need positive learning environments for healthy development. Positive learning experiences in early childhood foster social, emotional, language, and cognitive development. SECCS can build bridges between child care, preschool, health, mental health, parenting education, and family support providers. There are also new opportunities for ECE providers to serve as service delivery platforms for providing parenting information, health promotion materials, and guidance on child development issues.

Parenting Education. Most parents want more information on how they can help their young child learn. Positive developmental interactions between caregiver and child can improve a young child's social competence and capacity to learn. *Parenting education* includes an array of services that enhance the care-giving environment of young children. *Parenting support* is the provision of services to assist parents or primary caregivers in developing and utilizing available psychological and material resources to promote family self-sufficiency.

Family Support. Family support encompasses strategies that enhance family capacity to support and nurture their young children. Common strategies include home visitation, which may support pregnant or new mothers over an extended period of time, and family resource centers that meet the health, education, and social service needs in a “one-stop” service site.

10 Key Strategies

Ten key engagement strategies can help SECCS grantees to “build bridges” for young children.

1. Create a common vision. The SECCS Initiative vision should build consensus and help stakeholders to appreciate their potential contribution to the process and plan. Multiple partnerships require a common vision *within* each sector (i.e.,

MCH) as well as across different sectors. Key messages for internal and external audiences must communicate this common vision in a common language that encourages effective dialogue, collaboration, and commitment.

2. Promote leadership within and across sectors. Strong leaders must be identified and developed within the MCH and other sectors. Strong leadership from state government, service sectors, and the private sector can align services toward a common goal and minimize duplication and competition. Effective leadership requires the ability to communicate a common message across sectors that focuses on shared concerns and opportunities for collaboratively leveraging resources.

3. Build relationships and partnerships within and across service sectors. The SECCS planning process should be collaborative and geared toward fostering greater working partnerships across sectors and agencies. Key stakeholders include:

- State and local programs and agencies that work with young children and their families;
- Advocacy organizations;
- Service providers; and
- Parents.

It is important to recognize both the monetary and non-monetary resources that each stakeholder can contribute. The planning process must engage representatives with the authority to make agency-wide decisions and commit resources.

4. Devise strategies that focus on the assets and needs of the entire family in the context of a community-building approach. Parents' health, education, and available resources can act as either protective or risk factors in their child's development. Services that coordinate the needs of both the child and family are likely to be most effective. Addressing child development in the family context is critical to a successful and sustainable early childhood system.

5. Support family-centered, community-building activities that enhance local capacity to sustain an integrated child and family service system. SECCS should include family-centered, community-building activities that work to increase the knowledge, abilities, skills, and capacity of families and community members. By improving a community's developmental and school readiness assets, the capacity of individuals, families, organizations, and agencies will outlive the initiative.

6. Communicate messages on early childhood to key government and public opinion leaders and the general public. Educational information for the general public can help to build a broad consensus for improving child development and to transform consensus into effective action. Champions in political office or public opinion leaders must play an early and critical role in advocating, planning, and implementing state initiatives. A message of *healthy development and school readiness for all* may command the support of all stakeholders and

form the basis of a communication strategy targeting the general public and specific audiences.

7. Focus SECCS planning on filling gaps in infrastructure and not exclusively on service delivery or expansion. Both filling gaps and better coordination together will facilitate the creation of a comprehensive early childhood service system. Building service pathways across sectors enables families to obtain the full complement of services they need. Improving these pathways begins with mapping programs, entry points, potential touchpoints, and understanding patterns of service use from the user's perspective.

8. Consider financing strategies that enhance sustainability and flexibility. A diverse "portfolio" of funding and resources that exploits leveraging opportunities is needed to sustain comprehensive service delivery. Essential components to sustainable funding include matching the best source of available funding to specific uses (e.g., using contracts and long-term grants for salaries and operations, loans and gifts for capital and one-time expenses) and amending regulations and administrative restrictions to make funding streams more flexible and better able to meet the cross-sector needs of families and communities.

9. Facilitate accountability through results-based planning and the use of data for continuous quality improvement. Results-based accountability is an explicit process for building cross-sector support and consensus regarding outcomes to be achieved. This process identifies end-results, process and interim measures, and strategies that support them. Data collection and analysis are important components of an iterative planning process that identifies what is working, where gaps are occurring, and how improvements can be made.

10. Utilize promising practices to shape integrated systems design. Many states and communities across the U.S. have been working on integrating child and family service systems with proven results. Sharing their knowledge, skills, and tools will help ensure more efficient and effective planning and implementation by others.

Conclusion

SECCS is an opportunity to ensure that all children in the U.S. arrive at school healthy and ready to learn. SECCS builds on the growing national and local momentum for creatively re-engineering service systems to support young children's healthy development and school readiness. Bridging the predictable early childhood hazards can have significant short and long-term health, education, and economic impacts. SECCS challenges states to translate what we know into what we do. States can use the principles and strategies presented here to advance their planning, reach out to new partners, build collaborative strategies, and implement an effective and sustainable early childhood service delivery system.

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