

# BUILDING COMMUNITY SYSTEMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: Early Childhood Education

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JANUARY 2004

## Overview

The Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) launched the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative to improve systems of care for young children. Early Care and Education (ECE) is one of five critical components in the initiative because early experiences set the foundation for future learning. ECE's importance continues to grow as parents of young children spend more time in the workforce. About 41 percent of children under age five spend 35 or more hours per week in non-parental care.

The notion of child care as a passive process has changed in response to research on the role of early experience in life-long learning. It is no longer meaningful to distinguish between ECE settings that emphasize nurturing and those that promote learning. All ECE settings have a role in promoting development, safety, nurturing and dependable relationships, and interactions that promote learning. ECE settings should provide safe and healthy learning environment that can support cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development; information to parents about positive parenting practices; and linkage between parents, ECE, pediatric care, and other community resources.

## Importance of ECE Quality and Access

Access to quality ECE is important for the SECCS Initiative because:

### *ECE experiences matter.*

- Brain development is an ongoing process; learning begins at birth, not at school entry.
- Early learning builds not only the “know what” but the “know how.”
- Learning is more than building cognitive intelligence through skills in reading, writing, math, and logical reasoning. It also includes building “emotional intelligence” (e.g., getting along) through social experiences.
- Experiences in ECE affect the emotional, social, and regulatory development of all children.
- ECE shows both short- and long-term benefits for low-income children.

### *Quality of the care arrangement affects outcomes.*

Positive developmental outcomes are associated with program features, including the expertise of staff; the quality and continuity of the parent-provider relationship; the quality of the relationship between provider and child; the level of child-focused communication between care and home; and the curriculum and learning environment to which the child is exposed.

### *Disparities exist in early experiences and in ECE quality and access.*

- Rates of daily reading—important for early literacy and the parent-child relationship—are lower for non-white and lower-income families.
- On average, children from low-income families begin school with worse cognitive skills than children from middle- and upper-income families.
- Low-income children are less likely than middle- and upper-income children to have access to preschool programs.
- Parents of children with special health needs or behavioral problems often face few ECE options and difficulties keeping the child in their ECE setting.

## Importance of ECE as a Platform for Promoting Young Children's Health and Development

Parents often develop important and trusting relationships with ECE providers. Helping parents adapt to their child's developmental needs is most effective when based on a trusting relationship.



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Parents also rely upon ECE providers to pass on knowledge, skills, and values to children. Not all care arrangements have the same infrastructure and capacity. However, in general, early care and education providers have the potential to:

- Serve as platforms for direct services to families;
- Serve as community-based partners in an early childhood systems-building effort;
- Provide linkage and coordination to the pediatric health-care provider and other resources; and
- Serve as an entry point within a community developmental surveillance system.

## What Roles Can ECE Providers Play?

Potential roles for ECE in a more comprehensive, family-oriented service system include:

### **Improving quality.**

The quality of ECE can be improved by increasing the positive early learning potential of the interactions and activities of children in care; improving the safety of care; and improving the cultural and linguistic competency of providers.

### **Promoting development and positive parenting.**

ECE providers' familiarity with the family and good relationships can enable providers to advise and refer families to community resources. ECE providers can share information with parents about health, development, and parenting practices; help identify possible developmental problems and family functioning issues; and coordinate care with pediatricians.

### **Improving health, safety, and inclusion of CSHCN.**

Enhancing the knowledge and skills of ECE providers facilitate the inclusion of CSHCN in ECE. Increasing communication between health care professionals and ECE providers is critical.

- *Inclusion of children with special health care needs (CSHCN)* into ECE centers, as well as family-based settings, provides CSHCN with the best learning environment possible, and also provides learning opportunities for the other children in the care arrangement.
- Healthy Child Care America (HCCA) is an MCH initiative to *improve health and safety* within ECE. Existing training materials and technical assistance can inform parents, pediatricians, and child care providers about inclusion. (<http://www.healthychildcare.org>)
- *Health/mental health consultants to ECE providers* can train ECE providers on how to deal with behavioral problems; model behavior management; and refer other children to community resources or to the pediatric provider for further evaluation and care. These consultants can also address specific provider concerns about inclusion in general and particular situations.

## Strategies for the SECCS Initiative

- Strengthen systems of professional training for ECE providers;

- Inform parents about the importance of quality ECE and what attributes to look for;
- Strengthen training of ECE providers about child development and new roles in counseling, referring, and communicating with pediatric providers;
- Increase pediatric provider awareness of how ECE providers can help to identify parent concerns, prioritize pediatric counseling, and make referrals;
- Craft strategies and target resources to all ECE settings, including kinship, family day care, centers, and preschools.

## Conclusion

States can improve early childhood services by expanding the ECE role in parenting education and helping to identify developmental concerns that should be assessed by pediatric providers. With adequate training and support, ECE providers are an important platform for educating parents about development and connecting families with needed services.

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This brief has been adapted from the full report entitled *Building Community Systems for Young Children*.

This series of reports supports the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative, which provides grants to states for improving early childhood services and systems. The series was edited by Neal Halfon, Thomas Rice, and Maira Inkelas. The National Center for Infant and Early Childhood Health Policy is a partnership of the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities; The Women's and Children's Health Policy Center of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; and the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs. It is funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration, MCHB under a cooperative agreement.

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