

FAMILY SUPPORT: Fostering Leadership and Partnerships to Improve Access

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Overview

The family plays a critical role in the healthy development and school readiness of young children. Many families face considerable challenges that have negative impacts on their children. Family support programs play an important role in helping families to meet their needs and thereby improve the environment in which children grow and learn.

Factors that impact a family's ability to provide the best environment for young children include family income, parents' education level, and emotional status, strength of social networks, general family health, and father involvement. Family support services include:

- *Material supports* such as the earned income tax credit, TANF, family leave, income supports and child care support; and
- *Instrumental supports* such as parenting education, job training, healthcare, mental health services and help accessing other social services.

The Maternal and Child Health Bureau launched the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative to improve systems of care for young children by building leadership, conducting collaborative strategic planning, and implementing a plan within each state. Family support is one of five key service sectors of the initiative along with healthcare, mental health/socio-emotional development, early care and education (ECE), and parenting education. While filling the gaps in available family services is an important goal, the real opportunity for states through the SECCS initiative planning process is to develop the policy environment needed to expand the ability of local communities to build coordinated platforms of service provision. Currently, a broad array of programs and services address family support issues. SECCS can help to identify and coordinate disconnected family support services and help to integrate family support into other key service sectors.

Platforms that currently provide services from a single sector include healthcare providers, early care and education providers, and providers of care for mental health and behavioral problems. Family Resource Centers (FRCs) grew out of past public and private sector support efforts, and already provide comprehensive services to address the complex needs of families. Home visiting programs may provide services in multiple sectors or focus on a single sector.

The diverse agencies involved each promote common goals, but no one agency has consistently taken ownership of advancing the goals of coordinated family support. The SECCS initiative planning process can build bridges between the diverse agencies promoting unified leadership for this broad sector, and providing the cross-sector integration needed to best support healthy development and school readiness.

Framing the Issue of Family Support

The goal of family support is to help parents acquire skills, social supports and community linkages. These are needed to nurture and support the healthy development and life-long success of children.

The principles that underlie effective family support programs include:

- Appreciate that children develop in a family, community and society;
- Appreciate that child development impacts a child's entire life;
- Focus on promoting wellness and the prevention of problems;
- Extend support to all families;
- Complement and network with existing service sectors;
- Work as equal partners with families and communities;
- Respect diversity.



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The most effective family support strategies start early, are comprehensive, and work at many levels including the individual, family, community and policy levels. Family support services must be tailored to the values and cultures of families. In addition, the messages of family support should be reinforced in multiple settings. The SECCS initiative grants are an opportunity for states to encourage effective family support through integrative platforms including FRCs, home visiting programs, and linking single service platforms like healthcare and ECE providers.

Financing Family Support Services

Limited and categorical (non-flexible) funding streams from several different sources make financing family support difficult. Particularly difficult is building the comprehensive and integrated approaches that best meet the needs of families. One funding source is rarely enough to offer comprehensive services to different families within a community. Therefore, agencies are challenged to coordinate different funding streams to offer comprehensive programming. Common funding sources include local, state and federal departments of health, mental health, education, social services; Medicaid/SCHIP; health plans; private foundations; non-profit organizations; and designated tax levies.

Improving Family Support through SECCS

The SECCS initiative is designed to promote collaborative state planning with high-level representation across five service sectors. The strategic plan developed will reflect outcomes common to all sectors, and require active partnerships and leadership in the following areas.

Improving pathways to services- Existing service delivery platforms are a perfect place to start building cross-sector coordination. Early care and education providers, pediatric healthcare providers, and family support providers regularly see young children and their parents, and typically have developed trusting relationships with them. Different levels of integration between these platforms include sharing contact information, referring clients, and co-locating services. Oftentimes, the problems children and families face are complicated and interwoven. Bridging communication and logistical barriers between platforms will require strong leadership and can enhance service provision.

Developing standards and policies- The family-friendly principles of many support providers/ programs aid in effectively providing services to families. SECCS grantees can provide the leadership to prompt legislative or administrative action in their state leading to the implementation of these principles broadly across all sectors. Such actions could also require multi-sector approaches to meeting family needs. In addition, partnerships could be formed to create licensure or other professional standards for family support practitioners.

Best practice and community building- Best practices for family support exist in some states and localities. Because of the differences between communities, adapting common family support principles and best practice models will be key but challenging. Planning under the umbrella of states' SECCS process could result in partnerships making technical assistance available to help communities adapt principles and best practices.

Advancing innovative financing mechanisms- The SECCS initiative promotes the leadership and collaborative planning that is required to address funding gaps and the lack of flexibility in funding. Strong leadership and effective partnerships may result in methods to secure dedicated funding sources for family support; greater flexibility in existing categorical funding; greater leveraged dollars from federal, state or private sources; maximized use of existing funds; and the early involvement of local foundations.

Conclusion

Family support involves many types of assistance, is provided through different platforms, and can be integrated into the planning of all SECCS components. Family support faces financing, coordination, and quality assurance challenges. Improving family support requires greater attention to pathways to services. Bridging strategies between providers and greater use of integrative platforms will improve these pathways.

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