Birth to Three Best Practices: 

Playgroups

Playgroups are widely used as part of early childhood services across multiple settings. In this project, a playgroup is defined as a structured, intentional opportunity for parents and/or caregivers and their young children to engage, learn and play to support the optimal development of the child and the social emotional needs of the family and increase social connectedness.

Because of the variability in playgroup structures, hosting organizations and populations served, it has been difficult to establish best practices, identify measurable outcomes and develop a comprehensive framework for evaluating their impact. While there have been studies of some specific playgroup curricula, not much of that information has been synthesized or shared with the field to guide practice. As a result, the effectiveness and the role of playgroups in the overall continuum of care for young children and their families is less documented than that of more standardized programs and services, and there are few resources available to guide playgroup hosts and facilitators.

This project addresses these gaps by establishing a set of best practices, developing resources to support quality improvement and laying the groundwork to demonstrate the effectiveness of playgroups in helping families support their children’s development, meet social-emotional needs and build social connections.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

- Literature Review – Collective Impact prepared a broad literature review of playgroup services to identify: existing best practice models; use of evidence-based curricula; protocols for intake, referrals and coordination/integration of services; the role of playgroups in the continuum of services for young children; financing; and existing evaluation frameworks.

- Survey of Current Practices in Participating Communities – Collective Impact conducted a review of playgroup characteristics in participating communities to determine current practices and to identify opportunities for developing common service definitions and frameworks, including an analysis of the cost of playgroup services.

ACTION TAKEN

- Develop Recommended Best Practice and Evaluation Frameworks – Partner communities built upon the literature scan and survey results to develop a best practice framework, including protocols for service coordination, and an evaluation framework, including common outcome measures, indicators and measurement tools, with particular attention to understanding the demographic characteristics and service needs of populations served in different playgroup settings.

- Design and Implementation of “Plan, Do, Study, Act” Cycles – Participating communities each selected aspects of the best practice and evaluation frameworks to further refine through a “Plan, Do, Study, Act” (PDSA) cycle, which continues into 2017.

FINDINGS

The literature review found emerging evidence that playgroups can promote positive outcomes for children as well as for their parents and caregivers. Studies support that playgroups promote parents’ social connections, nurture child development and increase early identification of developmental delays. Playgroups are inclusive, non-stigmatizing settings where parents can access early intervention and other needed supports, and connect with other parents and with their communities. Playgroups also provide a supportive environment for children, including those with disabilities or other challenges, to build school-readiness skills. Due to the collaborative nature of the agencies providing playgroup services, such services provide familial and societal benefits that outweigh any fiscal output in service delivery.

About EC-LINC

Early Childhood-LINC is a learning and innovation network for communities – a network of communities that have come together with CSSP to demonstrate effective approaches to developing local early childhood systems. Together, the participating communities tackle tough problems, test new solutions and accelerate progress toward ensuring that all young children and their families thrive.

About the Research to Action Projects

With support from an anonymous donor, small groups of EC-LINC member communities worked together in 2016 on four “Research to Action” projects designed to advance the field of early childhood systems through actionable research.

EC-LINC member communities worked collaboratively to develop proposals that would allow them to address a topic of interest to both the EC-LINC network and a wider audience of early childhood systems builders. Grantees then undertook research that provides new insight into a question or potential strategy of interest, implement or test their findings within their local context and communicate and share lessons learned from the overall experience to both the EC-LINC network and other relevant stakeholders.
The research shows that there are several key elements vital to creating a safe and secure space for parents and children to achieve effective and positive outcomes. The facilitator must be culturally competent and approach families from a strengths-based, family-centered viewpoint; and must engage in ongoing professional development. The venue must be child-centered and contain sufficient, high quality resources and adequate space for activities. The playgroup session itself should include parent-child play, parent discussions, outdoor and indoor play, music, group story and free play. The research demonstrates that most playgroups operate on a once-per-week basis; however, children who have more intensive developmental needs benefit from higher dosing.

The participants learned that programs seeking to implement playgroups should involve the community to assess needs and capacity. Then they should use that information to encourage funding buy-in from national and local legislators, local social service agencies, communities and charitable foundations.

The group also learned that additional quantitative research on the effectiveness of playgroups is needed. The existing research provides substantial guidance in shaping playgroup practice to achieve a variety of developmental goals and significantly improve outcomes for children, families and communities, but the group is interested in furthering the knowledge base.

Finally, the participants found that the two-generational approach of playgroups, focusing on needs of the parent or caregiver as well as the child, was key. For some communities, the Strengthening Families framework has been used to guide strategies and programming as a two-generational approach for building upon the protective factors that support the entire family, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

**PRODUCTS**

The partners developed a common definition, mission and vision statements and core values for playgroups, an evaluation framework and a best practices framework. All are included in an at-a-glance report provided by Collective Impact, LLC and in the final project report. These materials are posted at [http://www.cssp.org/young-children-their-families/ec-linc-network/research-to-action-project-summaries](http://www.cssp.org/young-children-their-families/ec-linc-network/research-to-action-project-summaries). The literature review and a summary of the survey of current practices are also available.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS**

In the continuum of services that are available to families, playgroups fill an essential gap that resides between child-centered programs and parent-centered programs. However, little guidance has been available for playgroups to reflect on and improve their practice, or to evaluate their effectiveness. The materials developed through this project, and the continuing work by project partners, will be useful for providers of playgroups and can contribute to the emerging evidence about the critical role of playgroups as part of an early childhood continuum of care.

**NEXT STEPS**

Project partners have committed to identifying additional support to continue this important work, including developing survey and other measurement tools and moving forward in establishing playgroups as a best practice in the continuum of care for serving young children and their families. All partners agreed to continue efforts related to the R2A project by “testing” the best practice and evaluation frameworks over the coming year.

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