

Defining a Well-Functioning Early Childhood System

The EC-LINC Outcomes and Metrics initiative identified four ways in which a well-functioning early childhood system contributes to improved outcomes for young children and their families. The statements below attempt to capture these system-level contributions as distinct from the contributions of individual service sectors.

A well-functioning early childhood system reaches families with the help they need, improves the coordination of services and supports, promotes a climate of support for early childhood, and increases parent engagement and equity.

1 Reach	Young children and families receive services and supports to meet universal and identified needs.
2 Coordination	Sectors within the system are coordinated to provide seamless services, support quality improvement, and avoid duplication.
3 Commitment	Communities make early childhood a priority and act to support children's health, learning, and well-being.
4 Equity	Parents are partners in creating a responsive and equitable early childhood system.

Rationales For The Identified Contributions

Reach

A strong early childhood system can help ensure that all families get the help they need. Some services and supports in the three system domains of health, education, and family support are intended to be for everyone or be universal (e.g., prenatal care and developmental screenings), while others are for those with identified needs (e.g., connecting mothers who have screened positive for depression to appropriate behavioral health supports). Performance measures within this category provide approaches to measuring reach across early childhood system domains.

Coordination

One of the reasons for developing an early childhood system of care in a community is to make it more likely that different services will be integrated and coordinated with one another and, in the process, improve outcomes for children and families. Performance measures within this contribution category address specific aspects of system coordination; for example, what happens when a family needs help that a service provider cannot deliver, or when a family needs help from multiple providers at the same time? These measures are supported by tools that systems can use to assess their own performance with regard to coordination.

Commitment

More than any individual agency, system stakeholders can collectively raise awareness about the importance of supporting young children and their families. They are also well positioned to engage diverse stakeholders, including businesses and faith institutions, and inspire the advancement of a cross-sector early childhood policy agenda. The three performance measures within this category look at the process and outcomes associated with increasing public understanding of the value of early childhood, engaging leaders, and advancing policy changes aligned with communities' goals and values.

Equity

An early childhood system can make an important contribution to ensuring that all young children and their families have what they need to be successful, recognizing that not everyone starts in the same place, has the same experiences, or has the same needs. A system can also improve services and outcomes when they engage parents in the early childhood system of care and better understand the needs and assets of the individuals they serve. System stakeholders can assess system equity by disaggregating data by race, ethnicity, and income, when possible, to highlight inequities and where families may be underserved. The measures within this category provide an additional opportunity to more directly and comprehensively assess how well the early childhood system is advancing equity and parent engagement.

OUTCOMES AND INDICATORS

HEALTH:

Pregnant women and young children are healthy

- 1.1 **LOW BIRTH WEIGHT:** Percentage of babies born below 2,500 grams or 5.5 pounds
- 1.2 **ASTHMA:** Percentage of children 0-5 hospitalized due to asthma
- 1.3 **OBESITY:** Percentage of children who are overweight or obese

LEARNING:

Children are ready to succeed in school

- 2.1 **READ TO:** Percentage of children read to, had a story told to, or sung to daily
- 2.2 **HIGH QUALITY EARLY CARE:** Percentage of early childhood education programs that are high quality⁵
- 2.3 **KINDERGARTEN READINESS:** Percentage of children assessed as ready for kindergarten

ENVIRONMENT

Children live in safe, stable, and nurturing families and communities

- 3.1.1 **MALTREATMENT REPORTS:** Reported cases of abuse and neglect
- 3.1.2 **SUBSTANTIATED MALTREATMENT:** Substantiated cases of abuse and neglect
- 3.2 **POVERTY:** Percentage of children living in poverty⁶
- 3.3 **CHILD FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES:** Measures of child and family friendly neighborhoods

SYSTEM PERFORMANCE MEASURES

1

REACH: Young children and families receive services and supports to meet universal and identified needs

- 1.1 **EARLY PRENATAL CARE:** Percentage of pregnant women receiving early prenatal care
- 1.2 **MATERNAL DEPRESSION:⁷**
 - 1.2.1 **SCREENING:** Percentage of pregnant and postpartum women screened for depression
 - 1.2.2 **CONNECTION TO SERVICES:** Percentage of pregnant and postpartum women connected to mental health services when indicated*
- 1.3 **CHILD DEVELOPMENT:**
 - 1.3.1 **SCREENING:** Percentage of young children who have received a standardized developmental screening
 - 1.3.2 **CONNECTION TO SERVICES:** Percentage of young children with identified concerns who are connected to services*
 - 1.3.3 **EARLY IDENTIFICATION:** Percentage of children needing selected special education services in kindergarten who were not identified and connected to services prior to kindergarten⁸
- 1.4 **EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION:** Percentage of infants, toddlers, and preschool age children with access to early childhood care and education services*
- 1.5 **HOME VISITING:** Percentage of families with young children with access to home visiting services*

2

COORDINATION: Sectors within the system are coordinated to provide seamless services, support quality improvement, and avoid duplication

- 2.1 **FAMILY ASSESSMENT:** Level at which service providers understand the full range of family strengths and needs
- 2.2 **SYSTEM NAVIGATION:** Level at which the system helps connect families to the services and supports they need
- 2.3 **WORKING TOGETHER:** Level at which the sectors work together when multiple service providers are involved with the same family
- 2.4 **USING DATA:** Level at which system stakeholders use data, both for improved service coordination at the case level and to support planning and quality improvement at the system level
- 2.5 **CAPACITY BUILDING:** Level at which the system supports professional development and organizational capacity building

3

COMMITMENT: Communities make early childhood a priority and act to support children's health, learning, and well-being

- 3.1 **PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING:** Level at which early childhood systems effectively engage in efforts to increase public understanding of the importance of early childhood and the public's role in supporting children and families*
- 3.2 **LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT:** Level at which community leadership is engaged in supporting children and families
- 3.3 **POLICY CHANGE:** Level at which communities identify, advocate for, and achieve policy changes that improve conditions for young children and their families*

4

EQUITY: Parents are partners in creating a responsive and equitable early childhood system

- 4.1 **PARENT ENGAGEMENT:** Level at which parents are engaged as partners and leaders in the early childhood system*
- 4.2 **ADVANCING EQUITY:** Level at which attention is paid to ensuring that the early childhood system meets the needs of all young children and their families*

* Measure is in development (i.e., not piloted) but included due to its importance in measuring system performance.