

Introduction

EC-LINC (Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities), sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, brings together early childhood system representatives from across the country collaborate to share expertise and develop recommendations to accelerate the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems. The EC-LINC Outcomes and Metrics workgroup is one of several EC-LINC collaborative workgroups created to further the aims of the EC-LINC initiative. The Outcomes and Metrics workgroup culminated its work in 2018 with the publication of the initial edition of this Toolkit. In 2020, work began to align the Toolkit with the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) logic model for Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS), in partnership with the National Institute for Children’s Health Quality (NICHQ). Several EC-LINC communities, as well as grantees from the ECCS Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN), supported the 2021 revisions and additions.

The EC-LINC communities created the Outcomes & Metrics work group in 2015 in order to develop measures that could help them, and other interested communities, better understand how their work in developing local early childhood systems was affecting the current status and future prospects of young children and their families. Early on, the group divided the work into two parts. The first part involved identifying a short set of desired early childhood outcomes and a companion list of indicators that can be used to measure progress on these outcomes. This work is briefly summarized in the Appendix on page 86. The second part of the project, which is the focus of this toolkit, developed ways to measure the functioning of the early childhood system that supports children and families. (A brief description of early childhood systems appears on page 4.)

The group began with a simple question: why should a community have an early childhood system? That is, what additional contribution might the system provide, over and above the contributions of individual service sectors such as pediatrics or early care and education? This led the group to develop four statements that capture the contributions that an early childhood system provides. These statements have been summarized under the labels Foundations, Reach, Coordination, Commitment, and Equity (see page 5 for further detail). The group then asked in what ways we might measure how well the system is doing in each of these areas and, in the process, promote analysis and discussion that can lead to improvements in system performance. In response, the work group developed the system performance measures described in this toolkit.

Purpose of the Toolkit

The purpose of the Early Childhood System Performance Measure Toolkit is to provide:

1. a framework that identifies the key contributions of a well-functioning early childhood system;
2. a set of performance measures to assess those key contributions, either directly or by proxy;
3. new tools, when needed and possible, that enable system stakeholders to measure system performance in areas that have historically not had tools for measurement;
4. guidance for early childhood system stakeholders on how they can implement the performance measures; and,
5. an ongoing research agenda to continue to improve existing system performance measures or tools or to develop tools, where lacking.

The toolkit also offers a sample action planning template to help communities turn their results into actions that will support quality improvement.

In 2020, NICHQ’s Coordinating Center for the ECCS CoIIN sought to better support communities in focusing on the performance of their early childhood systems, and they noted that many elements of the ECCS logic model developed by HRSA were addressed in this toolkit. They engaged CSSP first to map those connections, and then to do some additional work in areas of interest to ECCS CoIIN that were not fully addressed in the original toolkit. As a result, CSSP, in partnership with interested representatives of both ECCS CoIIN awardees and EC-LINC communities, developed two new measures (*0.1 Core Sector Engagement* and *0.2 Infrastructure for System-Building*) and modified two additional measures (*2.4 Using Data* and *4.2 Advancing Equity*).

Developing system performance measures has been a challenging undertaking. There are existing sources of routinely collected data for a few of the performance measures. For other measures, however, data may be difficult to access, particularly those that seek to measure connection to services or the reach of certain services. And for most measures, there was no existing source of data, so new tools to support self-assessment were created and piloted.

The data access challenges and the novelty of some of the self-assessment tools means that different measures have had different levels of field testing. The group believes, however, that there is value in sharing the tools and inviting others to use those that meet their needs. In addition, it is important to note that the Toolkit is not offering the field validated instruments that support comparison of results across locations. Rather, these tools give system stakeholders a structured way to assess what they are doing well and where they could do better. As long as they are used consistently within a system, the hope is that they will prove to be useful aids in self-assessment and quality improvement.

Who should use this toolkit?

The target users of the toolkit are early childhood system conveners or leaders who seek to improve the functioning of their early childhood system and need tools to establish a baseline and ongoing way to measure progress. These conveners or leaders may be representatives of agencies in a system coordination or funding role, representatives of service-providing agencies within the system, parents or other early childhood advocates, and/or elected officials.

What is the level of effort?

Level of effort and “readiness” of a system for using the toolkit will depend on the measure(s) of interest and system resources. The framework allows for a broad assessment of a community’s early childhood system performance, but both practical considerations and evaluation interests will determine which measure, or measures, to implement. Some measures require the collection of population-level or agency-level data that may be readily available, while others require engaging with a broad range of stakeholders, and either fielding a survey or hosting convenings to complete an assessment tool collaboratively.

What if we are just starting out?

Users whose early childhood system building efforts are at an earlier stage may find it useful to begin with the [Early Learning Community Action Guide](#) from CSSP and the National League of Cities. The Action Guide and its accompanying Progress Rating Tool are designed to support communities working to become Early Learning Communities where young children and their families have all the support they need to thrive.

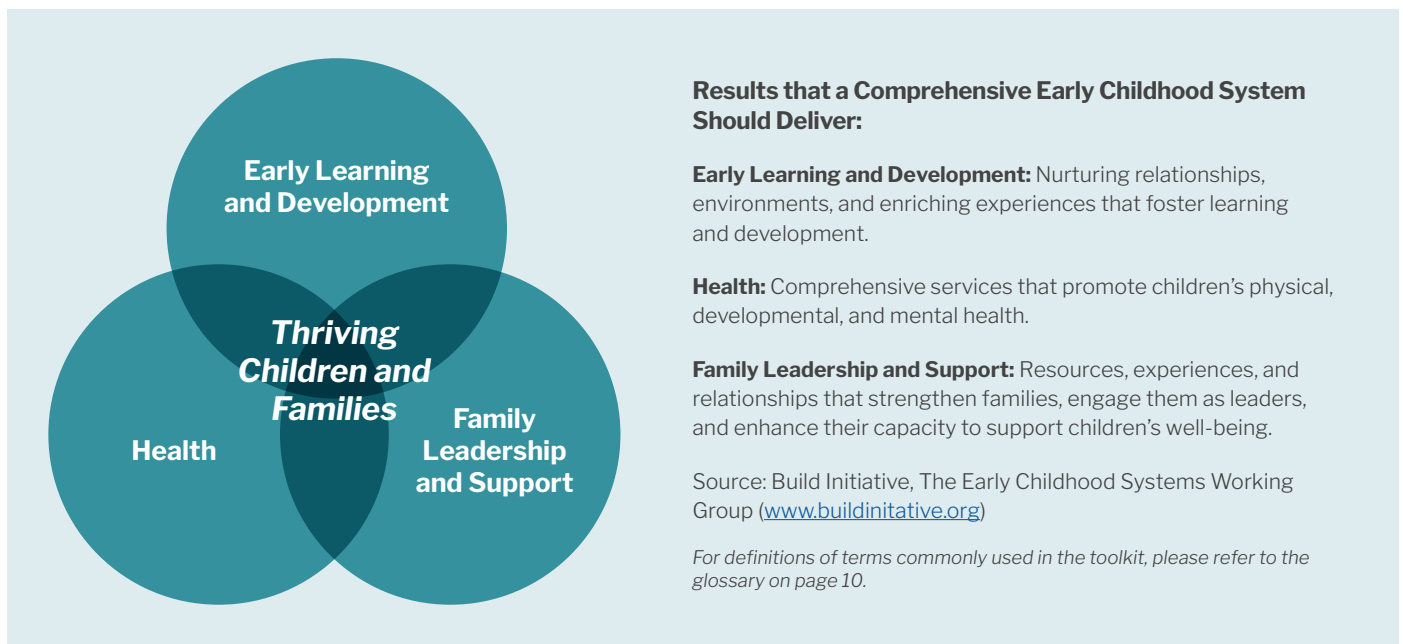
Defining the Early Childhood System

An early childhood system has been defined as the “partnerships between interrelated and interdependent agencies and organizations representing physical and mental health, social services, families and caregivers, and early childhood education to develop seamless systems of care for children from birth to kindergarten entry.”¹ The graphic at the right displays the Build Initiative model of early childhood systems, showing that they are comprised of the three overlapping sectors of early learning and development, health, and family leadership and support, which collectively support thriving children and families.

Systems are complex and the extent to which they have been developed varies from community to community. For example, some early childhood systems may incorporate many service sectors and have achieved a high degree of coordination; others may be smaller, just starting out, and only beginning to promote meaningful engagement across sectors. In some communities, the coordinating body that convenes system partners may be well established and have substantial resources, while in others, this may be a newer role with fewer resources. The coordinating body may be a service

provider or funder. It may have some degree of authority over certain sectors or services within the early childhood system, or it may not. Thus, the specific services and supports in a given system will depend on its size and stage of development, as well as the strength of the coordinating body and what services it provides or funds. A system may incorporate some or all of the following major types of services and supports:

- ▶ Behavioral health (maternal/child)
- ▶ Child welfare/Child protective services
- ▶ Early care and education (Head Start/Early Head Start, Center or family care, Child care subsidy assistance)
- ▶ Early intervention
- ▶ Family resource centers/Parenting education
- ▶ Home visiting/family support services
- ▶ Housing (homeless services, subsidies)
- ▶ Maternal/prenatal health
- ▶ Parenting education and playgroups
- ▶ Pediatrics
- ▶ TANF
- ▶ WIC



¹ Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (<https://mchb.hrsa.gov/earlychildhoodcomprehensivesystems>)