

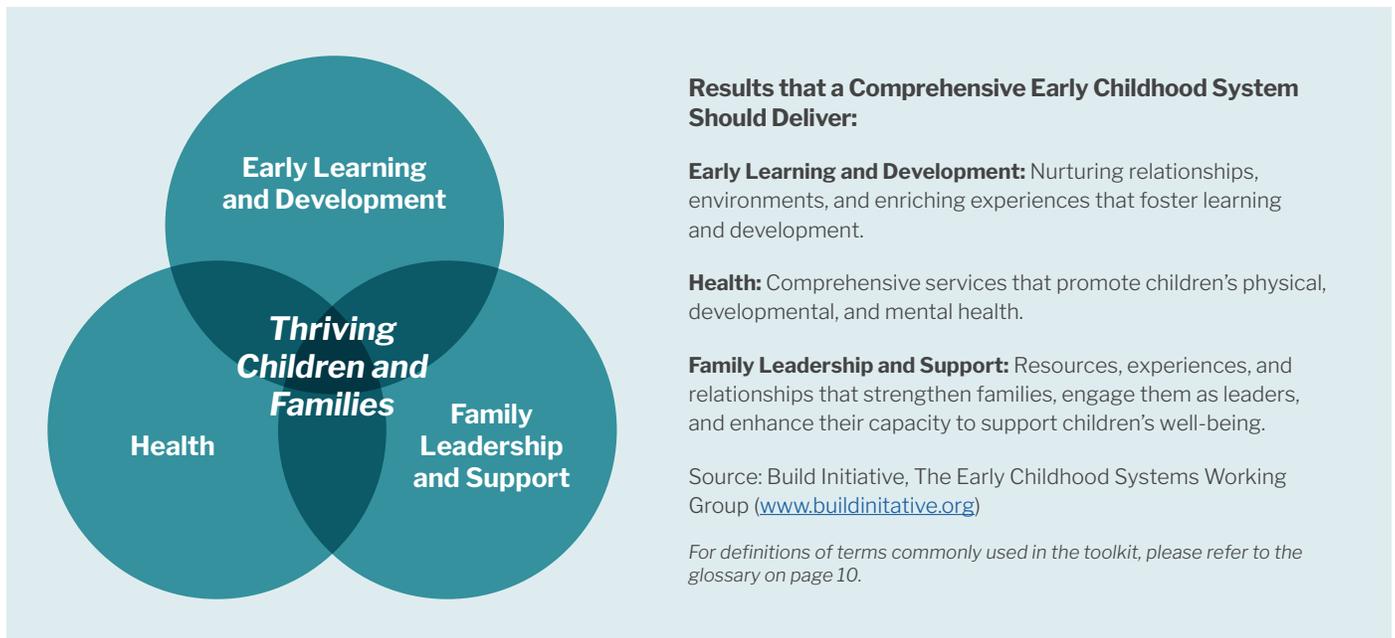
Defining the Early Childhood System

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>)

Defining a Well-Functioning Early Childhood System

The EC-LINC Outcomes and Metrics initiative identified five 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.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 0 Foundations | Partners from multiple sectors in the community are building an aligned early childhood system to improve child and family well-being. |
| 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 | The community makes early childhood a priority and acts 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

Foundations

This section of the Toolkit is designed primarily for communities in the early stages of early childhood system-building. These communities need to put in place some foundational elements before they will be ready to make substantial progress on the other measures. Some more established system-building initiatives may also benefit from using these measures if they are struggling to keep partners engaged or have done their work thus far without substantial involvement from some key partners. The first measure in this category provides system leaders with a tool they can use to assess the extent to which the three core early childhood sectors have come together to form an early childhood system. The second measure enables system leaders to assess whether the foundational elements of a well-functioning, equitable system are in place, including an effective backbone agency, a common vision, and aligned activities.

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.

Defining System Performance Measures

This toolkit offers a set of performance measures that can be used to assess a community's progress building an early childhood system and how effectively it is achieving the key contributions of an early childhood system. The measures for each area were selected based on four core criteria: 1) they are relevant to all early childhood systems; 2) they measure system functioning rather than child or family outcomes; 3) taken together, each set of measures captures the major elements of the corresponding contribution (for example, the five measures related to coordination get at all of the essential elements needed for a system to be effective in promoting coordination); and 4) it

is possible to generate data, without excessive cost or time burdens, that would enable communities to implement the measure.

There are 20 system performance measures in total. They are not meant to be exhaustive, measuring every aspect of system performance. Moreover, it is unlikely that any community would want or need to use all of these measures at once. Rather, the measures lay out a menu from which communities can choose the items that are important for them to pay attention to, given their current strengths, challenges, and priorities. The purpose of using the measures is to learn and to prompt actions to improve.

0 Foundations

Partners from multiple sectors in the community are building an aligned early childhood system to improve child and family well-being.

- 0.1 Core sector engagement:** Level at which key sectors have come together to build an early childhood system
- 0.2 Infrastructure for System-Building:** Level at the early childhood system has the foundational elements needed to achieve impact

Rationales For The Selected Measures For Reach

The Foundations section offers introductory performance measures for communities in the early stages of early childhood system development. These measures can serve as a checklist of sorts, outlining the conditions a system needs to be well positioned to successfully contribute to Reach, Coordination, Commitment, and Equity. Measure 0.1 *Core Sector Engagement* evaluates to the extent to which the three central sectors (health care, early learning, and family support) are connected and integrated. The assumption behind this measure is that a system that is missing meaningful and substantive connections with any one of these core sectors will struggle to have the same kind of positive impacts that a truly multi-sector system can have. Measure 0.2 *Infrastructure for System-Building* enables leaders to examine their progress laying the foundation for a well-functioning early childhood system, including having a trusted and effective convening or 'backbone' agency, a common vision and strategy, aligned activities, and structural conditions that advance equity.

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 Depression²**
 - 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 kindergarten³
- 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

Rationales For The Selected Measures For Reach

The work group identified five measures of how well an early childhood system is helping to ensure that families have access to the help they need. Measures 1.1 through 1.3 address universal needs: early prenatal care for all pregnant women (1.1); universal screening of new mothers for depression (1.2.1) with follow-up to ensure that mothers identified as needing help are connected with services (1.2.2); and universal developmental screening of young children (1.3.1), again with follow-up to ensure services when needed (1.3.2). Measure 1.3.3 Early Identification provides an alternative way to gauge how well the system is screening and intervening early in a child's development, by examining the proportion of children needing special education in the early grades of elementary school whose needs have been identified and addressed prior to kindergarten entry. The remaining two measures address services needed by many, but not all, families. Measure 1.4 tracks the availability of early childhood care and education. Measure 1.5 is intended to gauge how well a system is identifying the need for family support and, when needed, providing that support (using home visiting programs as a proxy for family support as both the potential demand and service capacity are more quantifiable than for other family support services). Several of these measures, notably 1.4 and 1.5, are still in development and provide early guidance about how communities might examine these issues.

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 to support coordination, planning, and quality improvement at the program and system levels
- 2.5 Capacity Building:** Level at which the system supports professional development and organizational capacity building

Rationales for the Selected Measures for Coordination

The measures for Coordination identify what “integrated and coordinated” systems would look like in practice, providing families

with seamless, high-quality services. The measures describe the kind of practice system stakeholders aspire to. Namely, a coordinated and integrated system understands the full range of a family's strengths and needs (2.1 *Family Assessment*), helps families get to the right place so their needs can be met (2.2 *System Navigation*), and works together when multiple service providers are involved with the same family (2.3 *Working Together*). These system coordination activities are supported by the fourth standard, that system stakeholders share data for improved service coordination at the case level (2.4 *Using Data*). The value of aligning and sharing data also includes support for planning and quality improvement at the system level. The fifth measure under Coordination looks at system performance by analyzing support for skill-building, growth, and continuous improvement (2.5 *Building Capacity*) among the organizations and individuals that make up the early childhood system. The tools developed for these five measures support communities assessing their systems' level of achievement based on a 4-point scale, ranging from low to high levels of coordination. Some communities may be interested in assessing all five of these standards together; other communities will begin with only one or two. These tools also give front-line staff an opportunity to share their successes and challenges and, in the process, provide a reminder of the value of coordination and integration to a well-functioning system.

² In selecting maternal behavioral health with a focus on depression over other mental health conditions, the intent is not to exclude paternal mental health or other serious mental health conditions; rather, the intent is to align the measure to existing practices, which are typically focused on maternal depression screening due to the strong link to child outcomes.

³ While most measures in the toolkit are intentionally framed in positive terms, in this instance we have made an exception; our pilot showed that the measure was more easily understood when framed as the proportion of children the system missed prior to Kindergarten, as opposed as the proportion of children the system identified early, before Kindergarten.

3 Commitment

The community makes early childhood a priority and acts 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 (*in development*)
- 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 (*in development*)

Rationales for the Selected Measures for Commitment

The measures for Commitment identify and assess the effectiveness of the work communities are doing to: build awareness and support for early childhood among the public (*3.1 Public Understanding*); engage leaders from a variety of sectors in supporting early childhood (*3.2 Leadership Engagement*); and formulate and enact a policy agenda that promotes early childhood, in accordance with local values and preferences (*3.3 Policy Change*). The measurement tools are again self-assessments, taking into account both efforts and impact.

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 (*in development*)
- 4.2 Advancing Equity:** Level at which the early childhood system uses anti-racist strategies to advance equity so that every child can reach their full potential.

Rationales for the Selected Measures for Equity

The measures for Equity identify the extent to which the early childhood system is responsive to, and inclusive of, the families it serves and works to ensure equitable outcomes for all children and families. Measure *4.1 Parent Engagement* helps communities gauge their success engaging parents as partners and leaders, both in the early childhood system and in the programs and services within it. Measure *4.2 Advancing Equity* centers around the promotion and achievement of equity and inclusion. The work group supports disaggregation of data by race and other salient factors on all measures, whenever possible, to clarify the extent to which some groups of children and families may have different results and/or different experiences with the system than others. However, we also came to believe that a stand-alone equity measure was needed to focus appropriate attention on equity and to enable early childhood systems to gauge their efforts and progress in this area. CSSP intends to further develop this measure and welcomes partners who would be interested in developing or piloting a fuller assessment of it.