

Insights

Cracking the Code on Early Childhood Data



can locally change early childhood outcomes

Early childhood data—three words that can

add stress to any effort to improve early childhood health outcomes. Stress from collecting, analyzing, sharing and reporting it. If we can find ways to mitigate that stress, early childhood data has unparalleled potential. **After all, a functioning data system can help improve the quality of services that support families.** It can help states, communities and advocacy organizations lobby for policy changes and target efforts to support those most in need.

This potential is why we're sharing highlights and lessons-learned from real communities who used real-time data to achieve real results. Their experiences can help demystify the data journey and show how data informs improvements to developmental health and overall well-being.

The highlights are taken from a new resource, [Early Childhood Data in Action: Stories from the Field](#). This collection of case studies, coauthored by NICHQ and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, provides an in-depth look into three communities' data efforts, so that readers can identify strategies to leverage in their state or community.

Keep reading to find out how data helped these communities align stakeholders, identify needs, scale successes, and make critical decisions on resource allocation.

Three ways to leverage data to improve early childhood outcomes

1. Align stakeholders around a common goal

Poverty is one of the biggest risk factors for school readiness. Yet, Indianola, Mississippi—where nearly half of children live below the poverty line—has been able to significantly increase rates of kindergarten readiness. This impressive feat represents the powerful potential data can have for improving such rates, especially in communities with high needs and limited resources.

Indianola succeeded because they brought together a critical group of stakeholders—healthcare, education, government, community, and faith-based organizations—to build better early childhood programs, services and supports. Data was at the heart of their efforts, helping them align early childhood strategies and track performance measures and targets.

Before any of this could happen though, *Indianola had to change the culture of data in their community*. They had to transition from thinking about data as something confusing, stressful and potentially punitive, to thinking about its potential to improve children's lives. Program implementers needed to know that data wouldn't be used to discredit their work; rather it would add value and help them improve. And parents and community stakeholders needed to think of data as supportive, rather than invasive.

Accomplishing this culture shift relied on complete transparency, sharing what data was being collected and clarifying how it was being used to support children's needs. Monthly phone calls where programs shared data; quarterly meetings with a community advisory board; and biannual community events with food, artistic performance and data presentations all helped build transparency and, in turn, trust. Similarly, data transparency also encouraged a culture of respect. Parents, community stakeholders and program leaders now see how each program and service play a critical role in children's health and development.

2. Improve the quality of services and identify needs

At the end of every year, families in California's Ventura County completed surveys about the early childhood programs they used, and the specific services offered in those programs. And

every year, Ventura's survey results were positive. Since the surveys focused only on individual services, rather than the early childhood system, Ventura couldn't see which families were missing out on services and which needs weren't being met.

To better identify needs, they shifted to a common survey for all parents with children in early childhood. The survey gathered data on parenting knowledge, their attitudes and behaviors, and whether their needs were being met. This common survey translated to a comprehensive view of the Ventura early childhood system, rather than one that was siloed and service-based. This has led to the identification of critical, and previously overlooked needs, such as access to oral healthcare and support in developing a healthy diet.

The common survey also helped Ventura capitalize on what was already working and continue to improve. By gathering common survey data, they could map out which services or combination of services were improving outcomes for children and families. Then, they could harvest what made those services successful, and spread lessons learned across programs.

3. Decide how to allocate critical resources

Nearly 40 percent of children ages 0 to 5 in Philadelphia, live in poverty and struggle to access quality pre-kindergarten programs. The city also faces significant racial and ethnic disparities. To maximize limited resources and ensure that supports reach children most in need, Philadelphia invested in an integrated data system. By collecting data from all service agencies across the city, such as mental health and substance abuse, the integrated data system provides a comprehensive view of Philadelphia's early childhood landscape.

For all children ages 0 to 5, Philadelphia can now track early childhood risk factors, including homelessness, lead exposure, and low birthweight. And by looking at where the most at-risk children live and go to school, Philadelphia can make a case for funding and can develop partnerships that support interventions in those neighborhoods.

Philadelphia's success with integrated data has come with important lessons learned. For example, when mapping community data, they recommend looking at neighborhood boundaries as well as zip codes to make even more targeted decisions on interventions. Additionally, developing a legal framework for data security that protects personally identifiable information goes a long way towards achieving public buy-in.

Feeling inspired? [Contact NICHQ](#) to learn more about the types of technical assistance service we offer. And be sure to [read the full case studies](#); they're filled to the brim with ideas and resources you can bring to your state or community.