

Insights

Building an Early Childhood Community Coalition



The early years of life set the course for a child's

future, laying the groundwork for them to grow and thrive, engage in healthy relationships, and succeed at work and school. Improving health and development for all children during those formative years can advance individual and social outcomes for the next generation.

Supporting children in those early years is complicated though, because their development is affected by so many different conditions. Safe housing, adequate nutrition, opportunities to witness and develop healthy relationships, and access to early education—these are just some of the many social determinants of health that influence a child's ability to thrive.

“No one person or program can address all of these different determinants,” says Colleen Murphy, MAIECD, MSMOB, an expert in organizational behavior and NICHQ project director for the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network ([ECCS CoIIN](#)). “Improvement depends on bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders from multiple sectors, all aligned with a shared goal to improve outcomes in children's developmental health.”

This is exactly what's happening in Chelsea, Massachusetts, one of the place-based communities for the ECCS CoIIN. They're leveraging a [collective impact](#) approach at the community level to build an early childhood coalition. Their Chelsea [Early Childhood Network](#) brings together stakeholders from across their community with a collective goal to support growth and development for children during the first five years of life, and facilitate family success.

"It's been less than two years since we've started, and we've already connected with 50 different agencies and organizations working with children and families," says Amy Izen, M.S., CCC-SLP, a certified speech language pathologist, who coordinates the Chelsea Early Childhood Network and is the community team lead for ECCS CoIIN. "Our partners are diverse—from pediatric medical departments and local health clinics, to schools, restaurants, and early education and care (daycare) centers. There's a common energy toward improving outcomes for our community's youngest children."

The Early Childhood Network's collective approach has already proven to be a catalyst for improvement in their community. It's helped them align messages about the importance of early childhood development and promote existing tools and resource. For example, they developed an online [early childhood resource guide](#) that compiles the different resources and services Chelsea families can tap, including the local public schools, Head Start, outdoor clubs, and public library programs. The network also led a community-wide event, the Week of the Young Child, that encouraged families to participate in different events across the city to learn about early childhood development.

Moreover, along with raising awareness and engagement, the network has helped Chelsea collect more robust early childhood data.

Insights from the State Team

"It's been exciting partnering with Chelsea to support their Collective Impact work, whether that's by providing access to two-generation data, guidance in developing their family advisory council, or helping connect them with new network partners," says Eve Wilder, MPH, who coordinates the MA Department of Public Health's ECCS work. "At the state level, we're learning from Chelsea's innovative approaches to strengthening early childhood systems and are considering how the outcomes of their work can inform early childhood policy and program design."

"We're gathering data to support the health of all of children in our community ages birth-to-5," says Izen. "How many children are due to be born each month? How many achieve their developmental milestones? How many go to school? By capturing this data from a varied array of sources, we're able to more accurately and comprehensively understand where we are now and where we are going."

The early successes from Chelsea's work illustrate the significant potential of developing community coalitions focused on early childhood improvement. Interested in learning how to launch one in your community? Keep reading for three strategies to get started.

Reach out to a diverse range of potential partners

Much of the Chelsea coalition's success stems from their ability to attract stakeholders who represent and contribute to different sectors in the Chelsea community. Simply put, the coalition's reach amplifies their impact. Building this diverse coalition means being strategic, explains Izen, identifying the gaps in membership and making a point to reach out to non-clinical or traditional partners. There's a wide range of community partners—such as restaurants, grocery stores and barbershops—that can help enhance early childhood systems because they're connected with the day-to-day lives of the families in their communities.

For example, Izen is currently working with a local restaurant, El Potro, to create placemats with activities that promote developmental learning and are designed for parents and children to do together. All activities align with [Boston Basics](#), an evidence-based tool to increase developmental promotion activities between parents and children. Mealtime will not only become an opportunity for growth and learning, but the mats can be distributed to other community sites to help raise awareness about early development and the supportive activities families can do together.

It's also critical to *not overlook family partners*, stresses Izen. Your coalition won't be complete without them.

“While partnering with NICHQ, we've come to realize how important it is to have families actively involved in this work. Their voices should inform what we do because they are the ones any changes or improvement will most affect. We've not only included families as partners on the coalition, but we're developing a Family Advisory Committee, which will formalize their role as leaders in this work.”

Engagement is not 'one size fits all'

Organizations and individuals all have different goals and needs, which means not everyone will be able to contribute in the same way. Being flexible and providing multiple paths for engagement can help you expand your coalition, says Izen. Consider starting with three different options:

1. **E-newsletter.** Every quarter, all subscribers to the Chelsea Early Childhood Network receive an email with updates. The newsletters include information about upcoming events that support early childhood, directions on attending meetings, and recent data findings. Readers can learn about the coalition, which might spark further involvement, and they can help spread the word about events and new resources.
2. **Bi-monthly meetings.** More active coalition members can attend bi-monthly meetings, voicing their opinion and sharing updates about their work. Keeping these meetings open to all subscribers ensures that everyone can have a voice and contribute.
3. **Steering committee.** A central steering committee that meets regularly provides direction for the coalition. Izen recommends asking leaders from different sectors (including family partners) to be on the committee, so that it represents the diverse coalition.

Remember, says Izen, “to be patient as you build membership. It's okay to start small, even if it is just one or two partners. Sometimes innovation just takes time.”

A culture of data-sharing encourages involvement

Izen always shares new data findings with the full network in the quarterly newsletter. Regularly sharing data energizes existing members because it shows the need (the number of children missing their developmental milestones) and the impact of the coalition's work.

Interested in learning more about Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles and quality improvement methods? Take NICHQ's free e-course, [Quality Improvement 101](#).

Data-sharing also encourages new and prospective partners to reach out and ask for more information, Izen adds. For example, when one home visiting professional learned how many babies were born in Chelsea each month, she didn't understand why the birth numbers didn't match her referrals. She emailed the network to find out more, then started attending regular meetings, and even launched a series of small tests of change (a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle) to better understand which hospitals weren't referring families. Now, she's an active coalition member.

"It's been a really exciting year and a half," says Izen. "In the coming months, we'll continue to build our coalition, ignite efforts in our community, and explore new avenues for funding and sustainability."

Chelsea is one of 28 ECCS CoIIN [place-based communities](#). Over the next three years, they'll work to enhance early childhood systems with the ultimate goal of increasing developmental skills among their communities' 3-year-old children by 25 percent. Stay informed about their work by [signing up for NICHQ News](#).