



ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION
IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

**Enhancing and Developing Community Platforms
to Promote the Developmental Health of Young Children**

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CollN, 2021

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The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a five year effort (August 1, 2016 through July 31, 2021) to strengthen systems to improve population level early childhood developmental health and family well-being in 28 communities across 12 states. The aspirational aim of this program was to increase age-appropriate developmental skills among three-year-old children and reduce developmental disparities. The goals that were prioritized in order to move towards the aspirational aim included:

- ▶ Create a Common Agenda/Shared Vision and Strategies
- ▶ Develop Shared Data Systems
- ▶ Promote Aligned and Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- ▶ Provide Backbone Support and Mechanisms for Continuous Communication Between State and Community
- ▶ Disseminate EC Development/Systems Information
- ▶ Integrate Early Developmental Promotion, Screening, Referral, Linkage, and Developmental Processes across and within sectors and communities
- ▶ Build Care Coordination Capacity
- ▶ Support Continuous Learning and Improvement Efforts
- ▶ Develop and Maintain Partnerships and Networks
- ▶ Family Leadership
- ▶ Build Public Will
- ▶ Advance Policies and Mobilize Funding to Sustain System Improvements

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a nationwide initiative to improve outcomes in population-based children's developmental health and family well-being, funded by the Health Resources & Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB).



Overview of ECCS CoIIN

An expanding body of scientific evidence points to the critical importance of early childhood experiences (prenatal through age three) in setting the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that an increasing proportion of young children and families are falling behind: that inequities related to race, place, and income for the youngest children and their families are all too common and too often translate into lifelong disadvantages in health, education, economic success, and general well-being. As a result, in communities and states across the country, there is a growing movement to develop coordinated, effective, and high-quality systems to support all parents and give all young children an optimal start. ECCS CoIIN is one of these systems-building initiatives.

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Introduction

The research is clear: Equipping parents with the appropriate tools and knowledge to understand development and advocate for their children's developmental health is essential to promoting optimal well-being of children. Yet, the current system of health and support services too often expects families to know developmental milestones and understand how to navigate the services from which they and their children may benefit. To successfully reach families in the community to share developmental health information and the availability of services that support development, it is important to provide accessible ways for them to engage or participate. The ECCS CoIIN community teams successfully implemented innovative ways to reach families who might not have otherwise been contacted. This brief presents different **community platforms**, defined as vehicles created and driven by the ECCS CoIIN community teams that allow for creating and maintaining connections toward a common goal of promoting optimal development of young children.

These community platforms also help push a community toward a “tipping point” of understanding of child development within a community. An experiment led by Damon Centola [found that if 25 percent of a community holds a belief, the belief will be adopted more broadly across the population](#). Getting to this point is key for uptake and sustainability of community-wide behaviors such as parents promoting key skills for development with their children, being aware of developmental milestones, and the importance of developmental screenings. In this brief, community platforms include physical locations where developmental activities were held and materials were distributed, strategies or ways events were delivered, and utilization of parents to engage other parents and caregivers.

Physical Locations and Places

Some ECCS CoIIN teams took the approach of going to where families are naturally in their community. By engaging families where they are, teams ensured developmental and health information and family engagement is equitable, inclusive, accessible, and culturally relevant (i.e., respecting and meeting the social, cultural, and linguistic norms and needs of families). They held family-oriented events and provided developmental information and materials in locations where families often congregate.

Examples of some innovative locations include:

- **Provided an “Early Literacy Corner” with children’s books** and resources for families around children’s development. The two Early Literacy Corners were based in low income neighborhoods, one in a community center and the other in a popular barber shop. (Oklahoma)
- **Partnered with a state park to hold a StoryWalk**, where a book is displayed page by page throughout a park so families can walk and read together and participate in developmental activities that relate to the story. (Louisiana-Morehouse)
- **Set up [Vroom](#) corners in the Walmart Vision Center and apartments** that serve families receiving Section 8 housing. (Louisiana)
- **Created two community centers based in housing developments**, where families were in most need of supports. Case managers and counselors provided an array of resources, including supporting developmental health. (Florida – Liberty City)



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Strategies

In addition to physical locations, most ECCS CoIIN teams used virtual platforms to reach families, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing protocols. Examples of some innovative strategies include:

> **Created the virtual “Talk Story”** (a common term used in Hawaii that allows for connection in a familiar and informal way) for caregivers of all kinds (e.g., foster parents, adopted parents, parents of children with special health needs, extended family as primary caregivers, pregnant moms, etc.). Continued to create additional Talk Stories co-facilitated by interested early childhood partners and parents from the first group. Used social media to support marketing and recruitment. (Hawaii)

> **Held Books, Balls & Blocks (BBB) events virtually** (Delaware)

Other innovative ways communities reached families included:

> **Held community-wide baby showers and birthday celebrations for community members** with babies and young children to meet each other and connect with organizations across the state to receive information and resources about early childhood and development. Sessions were held **at different times** to accommodate the needs of families. These child-centered events focused on fun, friendly, skill-building activities that support developmental milestones. All participating children received a free gift that supported learning at home, and families had opportunities for future involvement. At the baby showers, families received gifts, supplies and resources to safely welcome a new baby into the home. (Mat-Su, Alaska; New Castle, Delaware)

> **Provided mobile childcare during events** for families with young children. This allowed families to join who may not otherwise be able to participate due to lack of childcare. The community partnered with the Department of Early Education and Care to identify licensed early educators and funded it collaboratively with existing community partners. (Chelsea, Massachusetts)

> **Held a drive-through community event** during COVID-19. ECCS CoIIN partners provided bags filled with books, early learning supplies, [“Talk, Read, and Sing Together Every Day”](#) rack cards, and health information. Nurses from the Nurse-Family Partnership/Reach Up Program and representatives from the Hispanic Services Council completed the Ages & Stages Questionnaire® on site. (Tampa, Florida)

> **Created mom-friendly bags with Vroom cards.** Baby Bags and Vroom Cards were given to Read Aloud Delaware to be distributed in their reading materials in Sussex County. (Sussex, Delaware, Utah)



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Families as Ambassadors

Research also has shown that some families feel most comfortable, are most responsive to, and establish trust with people from their own community and set of experiences. Across the 12 states and 28 local communities working in the ECCS CoIIN to improve systems that support developmental health promotion, most recognized that authentically engaging parents and other family members had great potential for more opportunities to share developmental knowledge, to create more responsive and effective services, and to increase positive and equitable outcomes for children. As such, some of the ECCS CoIIN teams intentionally utilized families to establish trust with other families, resulting in wide-reaching impacts.

The ECCS CoIIN teams focused on hiring parents and family members who are raising young children and are trusted members of the community. The family members empowered other families with knowledge about development, facilitated access to resources for children and families, provided developmental screening for young children, and became more familiar with the care system in their community. They acted as the curator of resources and supports and shared this knowledge with families including both information and emotional support. They facilitated decision making, creating links between resources, providing practical assistance, and identifying and developing community supports to help families move forward and feel empowered and valued in strengthening their bonding and attachment with their young child.

One state, New Jersey, identified a family leader at the state level. This leader mentored family members at the community level to support them in building leadership skills and learning about child development to then go into the community, connect with families, and share their knowledge about the importance of child development. New Jersey has also focused on engaging fathers, given that most family leaders tend to be mothers. With two men (a father and a grandfather) as family leaders, they were able to engage with fathers and highlight how they can be involved in their children's development. For example, they posted a fatherhood video on social media of a dad reading to his children.

In Indiana, Parent Cafés were held in person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Parent Cafés are parent-led meetups where participants discuss challenges and successes around raising children. The Parent Cafés were relaunched as virtual events during COVID-19. The approach in Indiana supports the model of parents facilitating the Cafés to connect more effectively with the parent participants.

Reflections

To ensure that families receive and understand messages around their child's development and know how to receive developmental services, it is important to meet them where they are. Building innovative platforms at the community level that families can trust raises parents' awareness about their children's developmental milestones and how they can better engage with their children from a very young age. Leveraging partnerships across organizations and sectors to offer these opportunities increases alignment across services and initiatives within the community, while supporting sustainability.

Utilization of community platforms is necessary to achieve population reach and authentic engagement. ECCS CoIIN teams found that implicit bias, access to opportunities, and power dynamics influence how families engage with others around developmental issues and strongly believe the inclusion of innovative places, strategies and support for families as connectors assist to meaningfully address these influences.

This case study is one of six developed through the ECCS CoIIN initiative. This series of six case studies identify key accelerators of early childhood system building, highlighting what was learned from the ECCS CoIIN Initiative and sharing bright spots of states and communities. All six case studies can be found at <https://www.nichq.org/project/early-childhood-comprehensive-systems-collaborative-improvement-and-innovation-network-eccs>

