



Alliance for
Early Success

*Advancing State Policies
for Young Children*

Birth
Through
Eight

**State Policy
Framework**



NOVEMBER 2015

The Birth Through Eight State Policy Framework (Framework) is a roadmap to guide state policy to improve young children’s health, family, and learning outcomes. The Framework is not an exhaustive list of options, rather it lays out best bet policies in the areas of health, family support, and learning. Leaders can choose which ones to pursue based on their states’ political, social, and economic realities at any given point in time. The Alliance for Early Success (Alliance) uses the Framework to guide all our partnerships and investments. We believe we are “better and stronger together” and see the Framework as a unifying tool to help anyone interested in smart state policies make decisions and take actions that have the best possible chance of promoting success for vulnerable young children and their families.

The Framework is not an exhaustive list of options, rather a tool that lays out best bet policies in and across the areas of health, family support, and learning.

The Alliance developed and published an initial Framework in 2013 with input from more than 150 experts representing early childhood and K-12 advocates and leaders, researchers, communication professionals, policymakers, and foundation leaders. This 2015 revision reflects input from a high level Advisory Group as well as additional experts in health and family support. Policy options are updated to reflect the latest research and best practice evidence. The most significant change is the inclusion of cross-cutting policy choices that address multiple issues.

The policy options described below address a range of issues and require different levels of investment, but every one of them draws upon what we know from science—that in order to thrive, children and adults need nurturing, supportive relationships, experiences and settings that foster development and learning, decent living conditions that come with economic stability, and protection from harm and toxic stress. Taken together, these policies can be used by states to ensure a seamless system of care, supports and services for children birth through age 8 and their families.

ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR EARLY SUCCESS

The Alliance is a catalyst for bringing state, national and funding partners together to improve state policies for children, starting at birth and continuing through age eight, with a priority on children most at-risk for poor outcomes. As an alliance of partners, we advance advocacy and state policies that lead to improved health, family, and learning outcomes. We create and enhance partnerships by convening leaders across states and sectors in new and innovative ways, with the goal of achieving results faster and better than anyone could do alone.

For more information about the Framework and the Alliance, please visit our website at www.earlysuccess.org or email us at: info@earlysuccess.org.

BIRTH THROUGH EIGHT STATE POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Birth Through Eight State Policy Framework is a tool, or road map, that anyone can use to guide policy in ways that have the best possible chance to improve outcomes for vulnerable children in health, family support, and learning. The Framework rests on 5 principles.

1

The best outcomes result from starting early.

Decades of science show that development of the brain and other critical biological systems is most rapid and sensitive in the first years of life. “Early childhood” in the context of this Framework spans birth through age 8, a continuum that lays the foundation for later success.

2

Vulnerable populations have the most to gain.

All children benefit from strong families and positive early experiences; by the same token, all children are vulnerable to early adversity and sustained toxic stress (the kind of stress that results from neglect, abuse, or severe household dysfunction). Such adverse experiences have been shown to impede healthy development, and place children at the greatest risk for poor outcomes. But many more children face uphill odds. Those whose families are disadvantaged by poverty, homelessness, or low levels of education are more likely than their more advantaged peers to fall behind on a range of developmental measures, but they also stand to make the greatest gains from high-quality interventions. While all children benefit from smart policies, the Framework places a priority on children at risk for poor outcomes, with an approach that builds on family, cultural, linguistic and community strengths.

3

Evidence and best practices inform the policy choices.

Policy options included in the Framework are based on the best available research and innovative effective practice. These will change as more evidence emerges about what works to improve outcomes for vulnerable populations.

4

Implementing the policy choices requires smart funding.

Success in improving vulnerable children’s life chances hinges on the efficient and effective use of public and private funds, including smart decisions about the level and allocation of resources.

5

Continuous improvement and accountability for results lead to better outcomes.

The policies in the Framework are necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve good outcomes for children. Their success or failure depends on what happens in the shift from policy to program, and on how they are implemented in communities. Accountability measures, combined with a culture of continuous improvement, promote a culture of innovation and inquiry and increase the likelihood of achieving desired results.

4

CROSS-CUTTING POLICIES

AT THE INTERSECTION OF **HEALTH**, **FAMILY SUPPORT**, AND **LEARNING**

The realities of daily life for young children and families do not always lend themselves to neat categories. Policies that cut across health, family support and learning address the multiple factors that affect outcomes, and often have the best chance of success. The Framework therefore begins with a group of cross-cutting policy options.

Outcome: Children thrive in families and communities that support their healthy development.



BEST BET POLICIES TO PROMOTE CHILD AND FAMILY OUTCOMES:

Foster healthy environments.

- Invest in places that build social capital, such as schools, libraries, community centers, and parks.
- Invest in safe, affordable housing.
- Support health and affordable food options in high-poverty neighborhoods.
- Incentivize economic development that brings living-wage jobs into neighborhoods where lack of opportunity brings all of the problems associated with unemployment and concentrated poverty.

Focus on prevention.

- Direct funding to programs addressing adverse early experiences and sources of toxic stress.
- Invest in family engagement strategies that value parents as experts in their children's development.
- Promote comprehensive screening and early detection of developmental delays and link to referral, care coordination, and intervention.
- Expand access to voluntary, effective home visiting programs and services for new and expectant parents that model relationship building, engage parents in their child's learning, and refer for additional supports as needed.
- Adopt policies that support flexible work schedules for parents.
- Support paid family leave and work exemptions that foster nurturing relationships and responsive caregiving, build parental resilience, and provide security for children.

- Invest in strategies that address the behavioral and mental health of children and the adults who care for them.
- Co-locate or coordinate services.
- Reduce barriers to participation in public benefit programs (e.g., TANF, Head Start, child care subsidy, SNAP and WIC, Medicaid/CHIP, and the EITC) with universal on-line applications and aligned eligibility and enrollment policies.
- Employ navigators, centralize referral resources, and invest in hub strategies that integrate supports for parents and children in settings where families are.
- Connect education and job training opportunities for parents with access to high quality early learning for their children.
- Connect learning environments to health and family support networks.
- Coordinate income support programs to minimize “cliff effects” that occur when a small increase in wages leads to a substantial decrease in benefits.

Promote accountability and continuous improvement.

- Develop a comprehensive, linked data system to inform planning, document progress, and ultimately improve the health, development, learning, and success of children and their parents.
- Centralize and track screening, referral, diagnosis, and treatment.
- Support training for parents, service providers, and policymakers to help them accurately interpret and use data.

HEALTH

Large, long-term studies show powerful links between adverse childhood experiences and poor health and mental health outcomes, both during childhood and later in life. These policies address the health of young children and of the adults who care for them, because early success depends on both.

Outcome: Children are born healthy, stay healthy, and are surrounded by healthy adults.



BEST BET POLICIES TO PROMOTE HEALTH:

Ensure access to affordable, physical, oral, and mental health insurance coverage for children and parents.

- Expand outreach
- Simplify enrollment
- Eliminate barriers to retention
- Address health care shortages—both of providers who accept Medicaid/CHIP, and of providers who offer specialized care (e.g., dental care, mental health, developmental specialists).

Prioritize prevention strategies.

- Promote timely use of prenatal and pediatric health care
- Require universal newborn screening for hearing and metabolic disorders, and vision screening between ages one and five
- Screen for developmental disabilities and delays according to the schedule recommended by American Academy of Pediatrics
- Increase access to comprehensive health (medical) homes that identify and respond to the physical, social, and emotional determinants of health
- Prioritize funding for prevention programs, including those delivered outside of traditional medical settings
- Increase participation of families, child care providers, schools, and communities in federal nutrition programs

Improve the quality of health care.

- Implement health care data systems to track and improve referral and follow-up services
- Maximize screening, diagnosis and treatment of maternal depression and early childhood behavioral health issues using new opportunities under the Affordable Care Act
- Improve coordination between IDEA Part B and C, primary care, and public health programs

FAMILY SUPPORT

Parents and extended family members are their children's first and best teachers. These policies give families the knowledge, skills, stability, and basic resources they need to enhance their children's development and learning, while respecting families' home languages and cultures.

Outcome: Families help their children explore, learn, and grow in safe and nurturing places.



BEST BET POLICIES TO SUPPORT FAMILIES:

Support strategies that foster responsive caregiving.

- Ensure programs draw upon the language and culture of families and their communities.
- Direct supports to the most vulnerable parents: teen parents, foster parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, parents who have experienced abuse and neglect, and parents of children with special needs.
- Promote family support programs that offer activities and materials while creating opportunities for modeling, peer support, and networking among parents.

Align policies and practices that support stable, economically secure families.

- Change the culture of eligibility determination and case management from a focus on rule compliance, to a focus on adult-, child-, and family outcomes.
- Revise eligibility and work requirements for low-income families that disrupt continuity of care for children and work against children's developmental and educational needs.
- Invest in networks of parent navigators/promoters to build social capital and connect families to supports.
- Increase access to public benefits and tax credits that provide income or other supports to help families meet basic needs and maintain stable housing and employment.

LEARNING

Effective early learning occurs in multiple settings from birth through age eight. These policies influence the quality of interactions and environments that children experience, starting at birth and through the early elementary years, because gains are made and sustained from this strong foundation.

Young children learn wherever they are, and the early relationships and environments they experience create a foundation for school success. These policies influence the quality of children's learning experiences, from birth through the early elementary years.

Outcome: Children arrive at Kindergarten with the skills and abilities to meet developmental milestones, read on grade level, and reach achievement goals in K and grades 1, 2, and 3.



BEST BET POLICIES TO PROMOTE LEARNING:

Expand access to high quality early learning programs.

- Expand access to high quality child care, Early/Head Start and full day pre-K in a variety of settings (i.e., homes, centers, and schools).
- Support access to high quality full-day kindergarten and grades 1-3.
- Ensure high-quality programs are accessible for full days, during non-traditional hours, before and after school, and over the summer.
- Encourage play to help develop social, emotional, and executive function skills.
- Implement developmentally and culturally appropriate early learning standards that reflect approaches to learning, social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development; and build foundational skills in literacy, math, science, social studies, and the arts.
- Align curriculum, standards, and assessments starting in pre-K through grade three.

Build a high quality early childhood workforce, birth through grade 3.

- Adopt training and professional development strategies that ensure the workforce is culturally and linguistically diverse and responsive to the needs of children and families being served.
- Establish research-based teacher competencies that address child development; protective factors; social, emotional, and behavior management; and cultural and linguistic appropriateness.
- Support training and coaching for teachers working with special populations including dual language learners and children with disabilities.
- Support home-based care providers in enhancing learning opportunities for children in their care.
- Establish a coordinated professional development system to reflect the principles and indicators of NAEYC's Blueprint for State Early Childhood Professional Development Systems.
- Implement strategies to improve salaries, benefits, and working conditions for early childhood educators, and support compensation parity across early learning programs (child care, Pre-K and K-3 classrooms).
- Ensure program directors and school principals have the capacity to provide instructional leadership that supports effective teaching.
- Promote transition planning from early care, to preschool, to K-12 learning environments.

Set goals and monitor progress.

- Set goals and track outcomes in ways that engage families in their children's learning.
- Ensure child assessment tools are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.
- Require Kindergarten entry assessments to guide instruction.
- Assess the quality of learning environments, teacher-child interaction, teaching strategies, and children's progress, and use the data for continuous improvement.
- Implement early warning system to identify problems, such as chronic absence, to allow for timely intervention.

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HEALTH

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FAMILY SUPPORT

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LEARNING

Outcome: Children arrive at Kindergarten with the skills and abilities to meet developmental milestones, read on grade level, and reach achievement goals.

OUR PRINCIPLES:

THE BEST OUTCOMES RESULT FROM STARTING EARLY • VULNERABLE POPULATIONS HAVE THE MOST TO GAIN •
EVIDENCE AND BEST PRACTICES INFORM THE POLICY CHOICES • IMPLEMENTING THE POLICY CHOICES REQUIRES SMART FUNDING •
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS LEAD TO BETTER OUTCOMES

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