



Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships Offer Hope During COVID-19 Pandemic & Beyond

By Margie Wallen, Ounce of Prevention Fund

[Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships](#) (Partnerships) are federally-funded, locally-run programs for working families with low incomes that increase access to high-quality early care and learning for infants and toddlers. Comprehensive full workday, full year services are supported with Early Head Start and Child Care subsidy funds and provided in centers and family child care homes that adhere to research-based Head Start standards. Eligible grantees include states, tribes, cities, and community-based organizations.

Partnerships build the quality and capacity of state and local child care systems by applying resources and lessons learned from Early Head Start so that all children in a child care setting, whether or not they are eligible for or have access to Early Head Start, benefit from low teacher-child ratios and class sizes, more highly qualified teachers, strong curriculum, and family engagement activities.

Impact of COVID-19

Thanks to ongoing support from the federal Office of Head Start, Head Start programs – including [Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships](#) – continue to provide vital supports to families with young children, even when many Head Start facilities, like K-12 school buildings, are closed due to state and local orders in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Infants, toddlers and their families with earnings below the federal poverty level are receiving food, diapers, formula, books and toys; counseling services to relieve stress; connections to health and other community services; help accessing unemployment benefits, and virtual educational activities and circle time sessions where parents engage in learning together.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for child care centers and family child care homes because these small businesses, which are dependent on parent tuition and/or subsidy payments, can't pay their employees, rent or mortgage, or utilities, much less the high cost of needed protective gear and cleaning supplies.

A [recent survey by the Bipartisan Policy Center](#) found that even amidst changing work environments child care is still necessary for parents to work. Although 39% of families said they need formal child care during COVID-19, 60% of licensed providers are closed for the foreseeable future. Just 7% of parents said they're still using their previous child care arrangement, while 75% are concerned about their child's potential exposure to the coronavirus. In mid-March, 73% of child care providers responding to an [National Association for the Education of Young Children survey](#) said they couldn't survive a closure of more than a month without government support. These numbers are anticipated to grow even bigger as physical distancing measures [are likely to remain necessary](#) well into the summer.

Policy Implications

To ensure networks of care for young children and supports for families remain intact through the crisis and sustainable beyond, Congress, states and communities must enact measures to keep child care programs financially viable, regardless of whether a center is open, serving families remotely, or temporarily closed and whether the families they serve are still working or newly unemployed.

Policies and investments focused solely on plugging holes do not address the structural problems that have made quality care inaccessible to most young children and their families for decades, especially children of color whose parents earn low wages and reside in historically under-resourced communities. Lessons from Partnerships programs can inform more sustainable solutions.

The challenges faced by Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and their responses to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on children, families, and child care providers, offer both immediate and long-term opportunities to sustain high-quality early care and education programs in communities. The pandemic has exposed both the fragility of the severely under-resourced child care industry and the strengths of the Partnerships model in which child care partners receive funding and support to provide the comprehensive health, mental health, nutrition, family engagement and best education practices required by federal Head Start program standards for quality and comprehensiveness..

Expanding and Protecting High-Quality Early Learning through a Partnership Model

Beginning May 11, the [Educare Learning Network](#), a nationwide network of 24 high-quality early childhood schools serving children from birth to age five, [is introducing an 8-part series](#), about the unique opportunities and features of Partnerships that inform policy and program implementation recommendations for improving our nation's supply of quality child care today and in the future.

Based on our program implementation expertise and ability to leverage the geographic diversity across the states in which we work, the [Educare Learning Network](#) brings a unique voice and on-the-ground perspectives about how Partnerships can improve infant toddler child care on a national scale to address societal inequities and contribute to lasting economic returns.

Currently, [13 Educare organizations in 12 states and the District of Columbia administer Partnership grants](#) with local child care centers and family child care homes, school districts, special education programs, homeless shelters, and other community organizations. The number and type of community partners vary by grantee, as do the number of number of babies served (from 60 to over 600), geographic distances covered, and the role of the Educare organization in the partnership.

Featuring stories from Educare organizations' Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships in Oklahoma City, New Orleans, Miami, Tulsa, Central Maine, Denver, Milwaukee, and the District of Columbia, the series will highlight the impact of COVID-19 on Partnership grantees, their child care partners, and the families they serve, and offer [policy recommendations](#) to maintain our nation's supply of quality child care today and into the future.

Positive Impacts of Partnerships

[Lessons from the Evaluation of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships across the Educare Network](#) was one of the first studies to extract lessons from Partnerships to inform policies and practices to improve birth-to-three systems across early childhood settings. This study found positive impacts for children, families, staff, and communities, and that widely varying state, local and agency contexts are critical in determining the success of a Partnership. A recent report published by the Ounce of Prevention Fund, [Expanding High-Quality Care for Infants & Toddlers: Lessons from Implementation of Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships in States](#), found that Partnerships informed policies in many states that were scaled to improve access to high-quality infant and toddler care.

Positioned at the intersection of child care and Head Start, Partnerships offer a lifeline to families with young children and are proven to strengthen the quality of child care. Federal, state, and local policies that maximize key features of Partnerships, both immediately to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and to shape the future of the broader early care and education system, will:

- Benefit children, families, child care providers, the early education workforce, and communities through timely and significant investments.
- Stabilize and sustain operations of child care centers and family child care homes that keep parents working and educate and nurture their children.
- Expand opportunities for families with infants and toddlers through targeted education, health, nutrition, educational, and economic supports, prioritizing those who are farthest from opportunity and with consideration for equity.
- Maximize opportunities across existing and new funding streams resulting from federal stimulus legislation to shore up the early care and education sector now, and help reinvent service delivery systems to address long-standing structural barriers that prevent families' access to high-quality affordable care.

“Decades of research prove that high-quality early care and education and family engagement help children from underserved communities develop the skills they need to succeed,” says Cynthia D. Jackson, executive director of the Educare Learning Network. “We must ensure that every child and family has an equal opportunity to achieve their dreams and it starts by leveling the playing field from the day we’re born. Our country’s future depends on it.”