

All Our Kids Early Childhood Networks

Briefing Paper

Helping Illinois Children and Families Receive the Best Start in Life

The Importance of the Early Years of Life

Research shows that virtually every aspect of a young child's development is affected by his early experiences. Genetics, the environment, and especially the child's earliest relationships have a profound effect on a child's physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and social development.

During the first five years of life, children grow and learn at a faster rate than at any other time in their lives. This period of rapid growth is an opportunity to support optimal development and to intervene to offset challenges associated with genetic, environmental and/or social factors. Addressing a child's needs during the early years enhances a child's ability to learn, to develop healthy relationships, and to be a contributing member of their community. According to several long-term studies, outcomes for children can be improved through carefully planned prevention and intervention strategies.

A Framework for Change

Communities everywhere face a host of problems that threaten the healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of their children. Research indicates that these problems are interrelated at a variety of levels and in complex ways.

When problems are interrelated, solutions must be as well. Services that help families must be integrated and multi-dimensional. They must be coordinated to address many problems at once rather than one problem at a time. Unfortunately, the services offered Illinois families are often fragmented, one-dimensional, and sporadic.

The Birth to Five Effort in Illinois

The Illinois Department of Human Services, in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education, has undertaken an innovative approach to developing a community-based system of care for young children and their families. The All Our Kids (AOK) Early Childhood Networks are community collaborations committed to developing a high-quality, well-coordinated, easily accessible system of local services that promotes the positive growth and development of all children under age five. The purpose of the networks is to ensure that all families are receiving the services they need to get the best possible start in life, including prenatal care, well baby check-ups, parenting education, speech and physical therapy, mental health, or home visits.

Because many families are unaware of services they are eligible for or have difficulty getting the type of care they desire, the networks serve as a "hub" for information sharing and coordination of

local resources. The networks are not charged with developing new services or programs. Instead, the networks offer a unique opportunity to build a system of prevention services that can maximize the use of existing resources.

The networks identify barriers and gaps in early childhood services in their community and share that information with the state-level Birth to Five Project, creating a two-way communication mechanism between local communities and state planners. The networks also provide an opportunity to launch successful and innovative models of service delivery that may prove applicable for statewide replication.

The Development of the Networks

The AOK Networks grew out of the Birth to Three (now the Birth to Five) Project, a statewide effort to develop a comprehensive, coordinated, high-quality system of preventive services for expecting parents and families with children under age three throughout Illinois. Initially funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and now supported by the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, the Birth to Five Project is a multi-year, multidisciplinary effort designed to address the most significant challenges facing the early childhood field.

During the planning process for the Project, families and community representatives illustrated that too many Illinois families with young children either do not know about services available in their community or cannot find anyone to provide the particular service they need. To address these and other issues at the local level, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) have provided funding for the All Our Kids Early Childhood Networks in a total of twelve (currently ten) communities across the state.

Adams County
Cicero (Cook County)
Greater Westside of Chicago
Kane County
McLean County

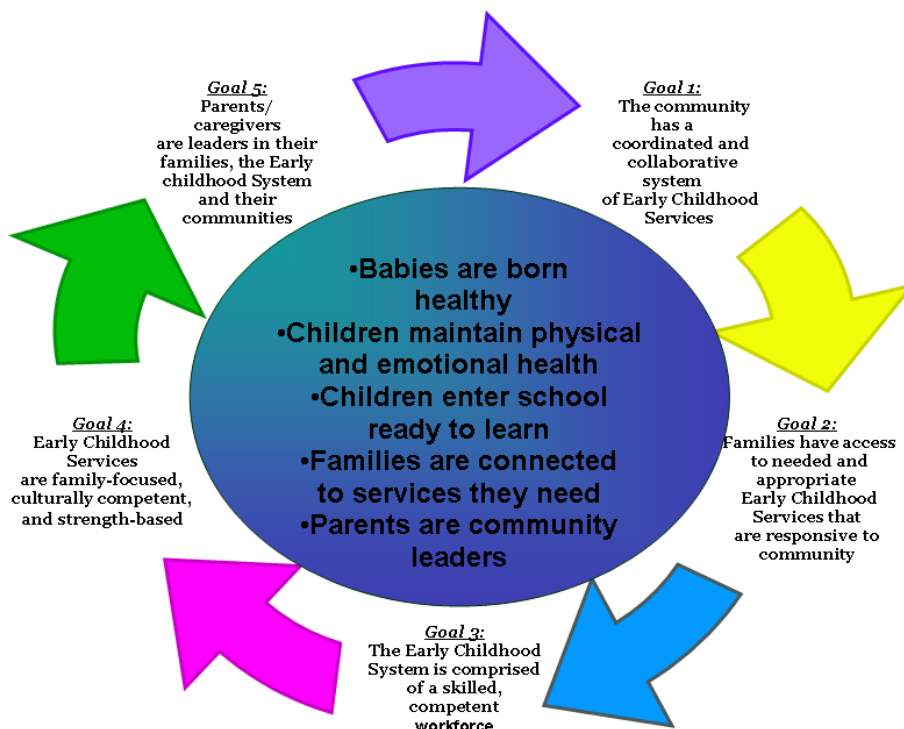
St. Clair County
Stephenson County
Tazewell County
Wabash/Edwards County
Will County



The Goals of the All Our Kids Early Childhood Networks

Through an ongoing process of community assessment, strategic planning, implementation and evaluation, each network community is working to achieve five basic system goals:

AOK Systems Goals





The Strategies for a Coordinated Birth to Five System of Care

The mission of the AOK Networks is to change and improve the way that early childhood services are designed and delivered to families. It is the vision of the AOK Networks that new and improved systems will result in **babies being born healthy, children staying healthy, children entering school ready to learn, and families being satisfied with the services they receive.**

In order for these benefits to be a reality, the networks are focusing their local efforts on the five strategies outlined below. Based on focus groups and community assessments, it is believed that these are the key strategy areas that will have the greatest impact on child and family outcomes. .

- 1. Public Education and Outreach** – Each network identifies local resources and increases utilization by ensuring that providers and parents are knowledgeable of available community services.
- 2. Early Identification** – Research and experience has shown that the earlier problems are identified, the better the potential outcomes for children. Each network identifies, through periodic and regular screenings, children with developmental delays or those at risk of developmental delays and other health or social problems.
- 3. Access and Capacity** – The Networks identify and address access barriers, fill service gaps, and work to increase the capacity of the local 0-5 system to best meet the needs of all families with young children.
- 4. Coordination of Care** – By fostering regular communication and coordination among service providers, the networks reduce duplication of services, enhance communication between the public and private sectors, and ensure smooth transitions for families with young children.
- 5. Workforce Staffing and Training** – Each network addresses local 0-5 workforce issues by ensuring the availability of adequate professional development and training resources for staff.



The Network Strategic Planning Process

Each network is charged with planning for, developing, and sustaining a comprehensive early childhood system. To do this, networks must mobilize partnerships, assess community needs, develop and implement a strategic plan, and document progress towards the plan. Each of these tasks is ongoing and interrelated.

Mobilizing Partnerships

Network success is contingent upon building and sustaining the involvement of a diverse group of community members to develop and guide the implementation of the system. Each network continuously seeks out active and unique partnerships that support the goals of the network.

Networks convene representatives from both the public and private sectors who represent health, developmental disabilities, education, family support/prevention, child care, social services, mental health, government, the faith community, economic development, law enforcement, and parents. Together, network members create and implement a new vision for how families will access and receive services.

Assessing the Community

In order to address the specific needs of each community, networks periodically assess the health and welfare of families with young children with an ongoing review of the system of care. Each network develops a mechanism to identify service needs and utilization, gaps and duplication in services, and families' satisfaction with the system of care.

Developing and Implementing a Strategic Plan

The specific vision of each network is defined in their local strategic plan. After completing the community assessment, each network develops a strategic plan to address goals based on local priorities. The network periodically amends its strategic plan to reflect both the progress of the network and new priorities that evolve over time.

Measuring Progress

As part of the strategic plan, networks develop benchmarks (i.e. timelines and/or products) to monitor progress toward each goal. The networks report and reflect regularly on their progress in developing all components of the system of care.