

“Everybody Benefits”:

Family Child Care Providers' Perspectives on Partnering with Early Head Start





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Abstract

Methodology: This study aims to answer the following questions: **what are licensed family child care providers' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of partnering with an agency to deliver Early Head Start services? In addition, what recommendations do they have regarding establishing and maintaining a successful partnership?**

To gather data, All Our Kin staff conducted semi-structured phone interviews with eleven licensed family child care providers in New Haven, West Haven, Hamden, and Waterbury, Connecticut. The majority of participants contract with All Our Kin to deliver Early Head Start services, but three providers affiliated with TEAM, Inc. were also included in order to ensure that perspectives on Early Head Start expanded beyond one single agency and locale. Participants' years as licensed family child care providers range from two to fourteen years, and their years of experience contracting with Early Head Start range from two to seven years.

Results: Qualitative data gathered from interviews found that family child care providers believe that benefits of partnership with Early Head Start include: increased quality of care to children and families, stabilized income and strengthened business viability, and ongoing supervision, coaching, and support from agency staff as well as other EHS providers. Challenges identified include: maintaining a sense of autonomy within their business, familiarizing themselves with the Head Start Program Performance Standards and meeting and documenting their compliance with these standards, and maintaining a healthy work/life balance. Family child care providers emphasized that in order for a partnership between an agency and a provider to be successful, there must be mutual trust, genuine respect, a thorough understanding of what both family child care and Early Head Start entails, and a concern for dismantling hierarchies and partnering as equals to deliver EHS services to children and families. Additional recommendations regarding successfully implementing a family child care model Early Head Start program are also outlined.





Overview

ALL OUR KIN

All Our Kin opened its doors in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1999 as a response to the ramifications of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act on low-income families, especially single mothers of very young children who struggled to find both decent work and affordable high-quality child care in their neighborhoods. Since then, All Our Kin has expanded from its original location to also serve the communities of Bridgeport, Stamford, Norwalk, and most recently, the Bronx, New York.

All Our Kin's programming includes assisting family child care (FCC) providers to meet state licensing requirements, organizing family child care networks¹ which offer opportunities for further professional growth and foster community amongst providers, helping navigate the accreditation process set forth by the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), offering free workshops and educational opportunities, and coordinating an annual conference. Currently, All Our Kin reaches over 654 family child care educators (including providers, assistants, and substitutes) in Connecticut and New York each year with the capacity to educate almost 4,000 children and their families.



EARLY HEAD START

Since 2011, All Our Kin has partnered with United Way of Greater New Haven and contracted with licensed family child care providers to offer Early Head Start (EHS) services to the greater New Haven community. EHS is a federally-funded program that provides free or low-cost child care and wraparound services to eligible families with infants and toddlers. EHS was established in 1994 as an expansion of Head Start, which has been serving low-income four and five-year-olds since President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law in 1965. Qualification criteria include: a household income that is at or below the federal poverty guideline, families experiencing homelessness, and children who are in the foster system. Additionally, at least ten percent must have a diagnosed disability.² Early Head Start serves 154,352 children across the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The state of Connecticut has 1,172 funded Early Head Start slots across 17 Early Head Start programs.³

All Our Kin's EHS program currently serves 46 children and their families in New Haven, West Haven, and Hamden, Connecticut. Their staff of eight partners with 11 family child care providers to deliver comprehensive Early Head Start services. Children enrolled in EHS receive ongoing support for their health and wellbeing as well as their social, behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive development. In addition to high-quality, full-time child care services, families receive assistance in obtaining physical, mental, and oral health services for their children as well as housing, food, and income referrals. Family child care providers receive regular supportive visits from health and educational coaches, access to quality enhancement funds and materials for their child care environment, and professional development opportunities.



Partnering

with Family Child Care Providers

Family child care—paid child care that takes place in the home of a regulated or licensed provider—is one of the most common child care arrangements nationwide, particularly for infants and toddlers, children of color, and children from low-income families. According to a recent report by Child Trends, of the 3,896,000 child care settings in the United States, 3,767,000 are homes.⁴ Families choose family child care for a variety of reasons, including:

- **Culture and language.** Many families want to use a child care provider who shares their language and culture. Family child care providers live and work in the same communities as the families they serve, so parents and caregivers may trust their provider and be able to communicate with him or her more effectively about their needs and their child's development.
- **Geographic accessibility.** Transportation is a key barrier to accessing child care, particularly when parents and caregivers rely on public transportation, and/or when a child care arrangement is not close to either the family's home or place of work. When families can find family child care options within their neighborhood, dropping off multiple young children is less stressful and less time-consuming.
- **Flexibility.** Unpredictable job schedules, evening and night shifts, and employer demands to be on-call at a moment's notice can make it nearly impossible for working parents to coordinate child care. Family child care providers may be more likely to accommodate non-traditional child care needs by having extended or even overnight hours.
- **Family-like environment.** Many parents feel more comfortable placing their young children in family child care programs because they believe that their children will thrive within a small group in a warm, familial, home setting.

In spite of all they have to offer, FCC providers encounter few opportunities to provide EHS services within their home-based programs. Very few EHS-CCP grantees choose to partner with family childcare educators in providing Early Head Start services. As of 2016, only 4% of grantees throughout the country were implementing Head Start services within a FCC model,⁵ a surprising fact given that family child care providers make up 97% of the child care market.⁶





Which Characteristics

Predict a Successful Partnership with Early Head Start?

Studies have shown that several provider characteristics are associated with high family child care quality.⁷ These include:

- Educational levels
- Specialized training in early childhood
- Child Development Associate (CDA) credential
- Identification of family child care as providers' chosen occupation
- Intention to remain in the field
- Participation in professional organizations
- Contacts with other family child care providers
- Beliefs about child rearing
- Mental health

Many of these qualities are built into the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), the federally-mandated guidelines which all grantees must meet to stay in compliance with program requirements.

- **Educational levels** in EHS are ensured through family child care provider qualification requirements, which state that provider must have previous early child care experience, be enrolled in a Family Child Care CDA program or state equivalent, or an associate or baccalaureate degree in child development or early childhood education. The credential must be acquired within eighteen months of the time they begin contracting with EHS.⁸
- **Specialized training in early childhood** is offered by educational coaches,⁹ who support family child care providers on an ongoing basis and through biweekly program visits as well as a minimum of 15 clock hours of professional development per year.⁹ One of the educational coach's additional responsibilities is supporting the family child care provider in **developing relationships with other child care professionals.**¹⁰



- **Mental health supports** mandated by the HSPSS include making mental health and wellness information available to staff and providing regularly scheduled opportunities to learn about mental health, wellness, and health education.¹¹

The regulations set forth by the HSPSS support family child care providers in meeting many of the characteristics associated with high family child care quality. In addition, our study found that family child care providers believe that their success as an EHS partner is bolstered by:

- Previous experience as a teacher, caregiver, or child care provider
- Personal characteristics of being very organized, self-directed, motivated to learn, and a love for children
- Positive relationship with agency staff based on mutual trust, shared goals for children and families, open and clear communication
- Ongoing help and support of EHS team creates a sense of "family" within program, providers and staff work together as a community and team, confidence that support will be provided where it is needed.

"I think that all of my support areas are filled. If I have a problem, I call [my educational coach] or the nurse...even on the personal side, we have support from the agency."

⁹This position is referred to as "child development specialists" in the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Benefits

of Early Head Start + Family Child Care Partnerships

All participants stated that partnership with Early Head Start had positively impacted their professional practice as family child care providers. The specific benefits included:

Offering an improved quality of care to children and families

- The **professional development opportunities** built into EHS partnership—including team-wide full-day learning engagements, support obtaining the CDA credential, opportunity to enroll in child development-related community college classes, and assistance pursuing the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) accreditation—all contribute to increasing providers' sense of knowledge, efficacy, and professionalism in their careers.
- The HSPSS require that **health and safety standards** be regularly monitored by licensed or certified health services staff who regularly visit the family child care programs. Participants stated that their nurse consultant is a great resource for questions regarding children's health and play an integral role in improving the safety of the physical environment. In addition, through Early Head Start providers are able to refer children and families to the supportive services of an EHS-contracted nutrition consultant, mental health consultant, and disabilities consultant.

“One of my EHS families faced a challenging situation and I reached out to the Family Advocate, she took care of the situation. She helps me with a lot of things— attendance, a stable and safe family environment. They do a lot to make sure these kids...have what they need, and are connected to services in the community.”

- Providers stated that their **family engagement practices** greatly improved through partnership with EHS. Bi-yearly home visits and family-teacher conferences give providers the opportunity to learn more about the child and family's context, culture, and needs. In addition, providers utilize the support of the Family Advocate to improve attendance, navigate family crises, and help connect families with community resources.
- Providers also felt that **high-quality learning opportunities** for children were greatly increased through partnership with Early Head Start. Quality enhancement funds offered by EHS increase the quality and quantity of materials available to children. In addition, the HSPSS require that providers observe children's growth and development, collect child assessment data, and create individualized lesson plans based on children's areas of strength and growth. All study participants utilize Teaching Strategies GOLD to document child observations and record development throughout the year. They stated that this platform assists them in creating improved individualized and group planning and coming up with new ideas for learning experiences. In addition, it increases a sense of professional efficacy because providers reflect upon children's development and growth during their time in EHS.
- Lastly, partnership with EHS played a significant role in increasing providers' **sense of self-respect and professionalism**. Increase in quality of care through material improvements to their physical learning environment, strengthened knowledge and expertise related to child development and family services, and support ensuring the health and safety of children in their care all contributed to this important shift. Within their communities, being known to partner with a nationally known and respected federal program— Early Head Start—helped shed inaccurate perceptions of family child care as simply “babysitting.”



“You’re a professional—not just a provider anymore—a professional, a teacher.”

Stabilized income and improved business viability

- Providers stated that the **consistency of payment for child care** afforded through partnership with EHS resulted in a decrease of financial strain and stress about whether families would be able to pay, and an increase in quality of foods, environment, and materials available to children. Through Early Head Start, providers are paid monthly at a rate that is higher than Connecticut’s child care subsidy, Care 4 Kids.
- Providers also shared that the **consistency of enrollment** through the Early Head Start waitlist contributes to stabilizing their income. Furthermore, at All Our Kin providers have the support of family services staff who are responsible for recruiting families, ensuring their eligibility for EHS, and enrolling children in child care homes that make sense based on their location, language preferences, and other factors. All Our Kin providers identified this as a benefit to participation.
- Many participants stated that partnership with Early Head Start enabled them to **hire a licensed substitute and/or assistant** for their program, which increases the number of children for whom they can care while meeting ratio regulations.

“When I [joined Early Head Start] I wasn’t making any money and had a hard time finding people who could pay. Knowing that the pay check comes in and you don’t have to run after the parents, it takes that pressure off. When things come up that you need in your program, you’re able to buy them.”

Ongoing coaching and support

- Providers identified the **support of their educational coaches** as a benefit to partnership with Early Head Start, emphasizing how their technical assistance, feedback, and ongoing support make it more possible to meet the rigorous requirements set forth by the HSPPS. They also emphasized how they appreciate having someone with whom they can brainstorm new teaching strategies, discuss child-specific situations, and keep informed of best practices in early childhood education. While program visits are officially conducted on a bi-weekly basis, educational coaches and providers communicate regularly—often including before and after the agency’s office hours.
- Additionally, providers stated that partnership with EHS has enabled them to access emotional and material support regarding their own **wellness and practicing self-care**. In addition to staff providing reminders and suggestions regarding mental health, the EHS contract enables providers to take paid personal and vacation days throughout the year. A mental health consultant is available to meet with providers and provide recommendations regarding stress management and well-being.



Challenges

of Early Head Start + Family Child Care Partnerships

When family child care providers are considering implementing EHS services within their program, it is important to consider more than just the benefits. The expectations set forth by the HSPPS are rigorous. And most opportunities for FCC providers to serve EHS children and families require a partnership or contract with an outside agency, which also comes with its own unique benefits and challenges. All family child care participants interviewed by All Our Kin shared that involvement in Early Head Start creates additional demands on their time, space and energy. Some of the challenges most frequently identified were:

Tension between autonomy and partnership

- One great strength of contracting with family child care providers is the financial and technical support that the partnership includes, helping small businesses to thrive. However, this strength can also be a challenge. Interviewees shared that the transition from running one's own business with full autonomy to running a business with new contractual obligations can be very difficult. Some stated that it can feel like EHS is taking over their business due to the extra requirements and the accountability from an outside agency.
- Having EHS team members—educational coaches, nurses, and others—conduct regular visits within the family child care program is an adjustment to the normal daily flow. Space limitations can make hosting visitors even more stressful for family child care providers who are used to running their businesses alone or with one assistant present.



Compliance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards

- The regulations outlined in the HSPPS are typically more numerous and rigorous than those of State licensing divisions. It takes a huge amount of effort for family child care providers to be able to meet them all, even with outside support from program staff. Many of the more than 1,000 HSPPS fall directly on the shoulders of the family child care providers. Participants stated that documenting, submitting, and organizing EHS-related paperwork is particularly challenging and requires significant time and energy, as well as office space within their homes.
- Given the amount of extra work required, providers stated that compensation should be at a higher rate to incentivize family child care providers to participate and to make hiring assistants and substitutes^b more financially feasible.

“Care for Kids [does] not require anything—not even 1/10 of what is required by EHS—no [child] observations, paperwork. EHS [is] way more work, so intensive. More [financial] support would encourage more providers to stay with EHS.”

- The education and professional development requirements in the HSPPS are significant. Those who need to complete a CDA after contracting with EHS must find time outside of their work schedule to prioritize this HSPSS, often after working 50 or more hours in an average week to do so. Providers with limited computer skills or non-English language preferences often face additional barriers in documenting observations, navigating online assessment and curriculum tools, finding CDA classes that meet their language preferences, and more. In addition, providers expressed frustration that assistants and substitutes—who in many cases are working in the programs full-time—to do not have access to the same amount of funding for additional professional development as they themselves receive through EHS.



“I see the benefits in the paperwork, it’s just not enough time for everything. In a center-based program you have prep time, a cafeteria for meals, a lot of other things that family day cares don’t have—outside of that, what we offer the children can’t be beat.”

Navigating multiple sets of regulations

- Educators who implement EHS services within a family child care program must become savvy in understanding the differences between State licensing regulations and Head Start Program Performance Standards. The expectations for each of these are not often aligned, and family child care providers must learn the regulations, identify which ones are stricter, and then implement those. Interviewees mentioned that it can be difficult to collaborate with two different sets of regulatory agencies, especially when it comes to hosting many monitoring visits. In addition, the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) involves another set of standards, observations, and activities that providers must comply with to show quality.
- Providers also expressed frustration at how Connecticut’s child care regulations and Head Start Program Performance Standards conflict in regard to number and ages of children a provider may care for with and without an assistant.
- Specific to Connecticut, EHS family child care providers find that it is difficult to utilize both the Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards and the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework.

Maintaining a healthy work/life balance

- Family child care providers face the distinct challenge of having the locations of their home and their business in the same physical space. This creates an urgent need for clearly delineated work/life boundaries. Leaving work behind for the day is more difficult than for educators whose classrooms are located outside of their living space.
- Early Head Start—with its demanding requirements related to paperwork, hours of availability, days of program opening, home visits, professional development and more—creates an even larger burden of work for family child care providers, and, therefore, an even bigger challenge around maintaining a sustainable work/life balance.

“My daycare can overflow into my home life, health— not taking care of myself, not eating properly.”





Recommendations

for Successful Partnerships

Successful partnerships between agencies and family child care partnerships can take a variety of forms, each with their own unique benefits and challenges. Based on their experiences with EHS, family child care providers had several additional insights into what makes a strong, mutually beneficial partnership, as well as what both family child care providers and agencies should consider before delivering EHS services.

Foster a partnership of equals.

- **Providers:** Before and throughout partnership, ask questions of contracting agency about expectations, requirements, and benefits of partnership. Evaluate how your ideas and perspectives will be valued within program decision-making.

“EHS is very present, very there—in your day care, in your business. For some people that can be very overwhelming. It's true, you have to be ready and willing to open up yourself and your business because it's a partnership. [EHS] becomes a part of your business.”

- **Agency:** Be aware of power dynamics at play and seek to implement practices and policies that promote equity and true partnership with family child care providers. Be intentional about using language that contributes to the sense of partnership and being a team.



Thoroughly understand what Early Head Start in family child care involves.

- **Providers:** Before contracting, assess whether the contracting agency is familiar with family child care as a model, respects the work of family child care providers, and understands the unique benefits of FCC settings. If possible, set up time to discuss the program with family child care providers who are currently providing EHS services within their programs. Gather as much information about the contracting agency and about Early Head Start as possible before signing a contract.
- **Agency:** Reach out to and learn from other agencies who are already implementing EHS through a family child care model. Establish a transparent recruitment, on-boarding, and orientation process that outlines what Early Head Start is and what it involves as well as the myriad requirements of the HSPPS. Ensure expectations and due dates regarding requirements such as home visit reports, lesson plan reviews, and individualized developmental assessments are clear and realistic. It is also helpful to collaborate on an individualized support plan for providers who are new to EHS partnership. With so much for both partners to learn, a clear but flexible timeline for introducing and implementing the HSPPS will keep the agency and the family child care provider from getting too overwhelmed.

“[Providers should] ask questions —leave no stone unturned. Take your time in understanding what's expected. When I came in, I didn't ask any questions. I was just overwhelmed that they even chose me, I signed on the line.”



Additional Recommendations

Prioritize partnership opportunities where strong family child care networks are already in place. It is much easier to build an EHS-FCC program from an agency already offering providers opportunities for professional development. A strong, existing network of family child care providers is one important step in setting up a successful EHS-FCC partnership. When All Our Kin established its Early Head Start program, the agency recruited many providers who had already earned CDAs and were experienced engaging in learning opportunities and accessing supports through the agency. While not impossible, it would be even more difficult to create this type of partnership program from scratch in the absence of existing relationships and supports.

Clarify all sources of funding for the entirety of the grant period. The four to five-year federal funding commitment for EHS-CC partnerships is essential to building a successful and sustainable Early Head Start program. It is challenging to recruit providers into this high-demand program unless they see a long-term pay-off for their businesses. If possible, a similar long-term commitment from the State related to their child care subsidy program is critical for budget planning. In Connecticut, the unexpected closure of the state's child care subsidy program, Care 4 Kids, in 2016-17 was detrimental to families as well as the financial sustainability of All Our Kin's EHS program. In addition, the eligibility requirements for recipients of Care 4 Kids further complicate consistent funding for EHS-CC partnerships with family child care providers. Not all families who are eligible for Early Head Start are eligible for Care 4 Kids subsidies, which results in either limiting partnering agencies' access to supplemental subsidy funding or limiting the number of qualifying families able to enroll. For this type of program to be financially viable long-term, a clear and consistent financial commitment from the state's subsidy system is critical. It is difficult to plan a financially sustainable program when funding is uncertain.

Use Early Head Start as a model for State agencies. Almost every provider interviewed mentioned wishing that Connecticut's Office of Early Childhood more closely emulated the programs and policies outlined by the Office of Head Start. Using the HSPPS as a roadmap for State licensing requirements and for QRIS programs



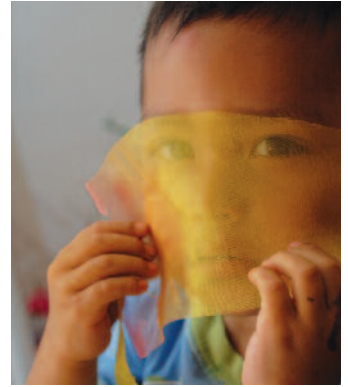
would eliminate confusion and frustration for current EHS providers, elevate certain State family child care regulations, and prepare even more family child care providers to successfully implement EHS services within their programs. The myriad of supportive services offered by Early Head Start programs could serve as a helpful plan for State agencies seeking to better engage, support, and partner with family child care providers as well as the families they serve.



Conclusion

Throughout the eleven interviews, providers repeatedly expressed that partnering with an agency to provide Early Head Start services is a demanding commitment, but one in which the benefits outweigh the challenges. They highlighted the increase in the quality of caregiving and developmental experiences that they can offer children because of quality enhancement funds for child care materials, educational coaching, and professional development experiences afforded by Early Head Start. They emphasized the benefits of the wraparound services offered to families enrolled in Early Head Start, and the differences this support makes in children and families' health and wellbeing. They were also honest about the organizational and interpersonal challenges of partnering with an outside agency to deliver EHS services and to meet the numerous regulations set forth by the HSPSS. Their recommendations to both family child care providers and agencies considering delivering Early Head Start services through this model provide valuable insight into what makes a partnership successful.

“The extra work, having somebody partner with you—it’s worth it. The benefits outweigh the extra work. It brings everybody together to get everyone on the same page for the kids...there’s no comparing running the day care on my own versus with Early Head Start. There’s no comparison.”



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