



Making Connections: The Partnership Newsletter

Issue 4

Effective Strategies for Supporting Families with Children with Special Needs in Early Head Start-Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnerships

*Head Start Program Performance Standard §1302.60:
Full participation in program services and activities (for
children with disabilities)*

Designing and implementing strategies for engaging and supporting the families of eligible children under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a critical component of building an exceptional Early Head Start-Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnership program. This article features two different partnership approaches. The first story describes the journey for one parent who, thanks to the EHS-CC Partnership grant, could partner with a family child care (FCC) provider to offer high-quality services to meet the physical needs of her son. Having systems in place for early detection, referral, and if necessary accommodations, sets the stage for success. All the key players—including family members, health and behavioral specialists, and the EHS-CC Partnership child care center staff or FCC partners who care for the children—must be involved to make the greatest impact. The second story highlights how one EHS-CC Partnership grantee in Washington State established a comprehensive and coordinated system of care to meet the individual needs of children and their families.

Neiko's Story

Eboni Dallas, a single working mother living in Tampa, Florida, has nothing but praise for the Eckerd EHS-CC Partnership program and for **Aleta Ford**, the family child care (FCC) partner, who together have given her new hope and gave her son, **Neiko**, a new lease on life.

Almost two years ago, Neiko was born without a right hip and with very short thigh bones, a nonhereditary birth defect known as *proximal femoral focal deficiency*. He has had excellent medical care and physical therapy from the beginning. While the rest of his body, including his brain, is developing typically, Neiko's lower body mobility and stability is significantly impacted.



When her son turned 6 months old, Ms. Dallas began the search for a high-quality child care provider. She was relieved and extremely grateful to find Ms. Ford's FCC home in Hillsborough County. Ms. Ford, who had been searching for a way to help children in this low-income area, had been invited by Carlita Miller, EHS Director with Eckerd Youth Alternatives, to join their new EHS-CC Partnership.

Ms. Ford spoke with Ms. Miller about possible accommodations she could make in her FCC environment to address Neiko's physical needs. Upon receiving the EHS-CC Partnership grant, Eckerd Youth Alternatives immediately sent out their Quality Assurance team to assess Ms. Ford's environment. Next, they called in a consultant from a national education retailer who worked with Ms. Ford. Together, they chose the most appropriate furniture, toys, learning materials, and outside play equipment to meet the needs of all five children in her care, including Neiko.

Ms. Dallas says, "I am grateful for the support that the EHS-CC Partnership program provides to Ms. Ford so that she can be a high-quality provider. Having a child with disabilities is not easy. I was comforted by the fact that Eckerd (the EHS-CC Partnership grantee) stepped in quickly to transform Ms. Ford's family child care to accommodate my child and all the other children. It has given me peace of heart and peace of mind."

Once the equipment was in place and the environment was set, Ms. Ford began learning how to most effectively use the new equipment and how to integrate these opportunities throughout the day. Neiko's mom noticed rapid improvement in Neiko's mobility and a sharp increase in his confidence and abilities. The new child-size furniture at the FCC program gave him the comfort level he needed to tackle the previous challenge of dealing with the adult-size furniture. The new outdoor ramp allowed Neiko to maneuver around on the play equipment and engage with the other children. Ms. Dallas noticed improvement in Neiko's social, emotional, and intellectual development. Now that the environment has been adapted to meet Neiko's needs, his physical therapist is able to do all of his therapy at Ms. Ford's FCC. This is a huge help to the family; Ms. Dallas can now work the entire day, and Neiko gets the therapy he needs while at his FCC.

The EHS-CC Partnership offered Ms. Ford the pathway to high-quality teaching that she had been seeking. Within the first year of the grant, she obtained her CDA, her Director's Credential, and in her first attempt earned a four-star rating in Florida's quality rating and improvement system. She is on target to complete her two-year degree in early childhood education from Hillsborough Community College in 2017. In addition, Ms. Ford took classes in positive behavior through the University of South Florida. Subsequently, the University of South Florida approached her to become a Positive Behavior Site, which would include coaching from the university's positive behavioral specialists.

Ms. Ford says that she is most excited about the positive behavior component, as it "ties in nicely with the tenets of parent and family engagement in Early Head Start. I see my role as a parenting partner. Sharing my knowledge about positive behavior with the parents helps to bring a critical level of consistency to the positive behavior message for the children. This is a skill I have learned through the generosity of the EHS-CC Partnership that I can offer to benefit the children and their families."

Ms. Dallas was inspired by Ms. Ford's dedication to learning and her commitment to high-quality services. When she first brought Neiko to Ms. Ford's FCC, Ms. Dallas was unemployed. She is currently a disability case manager and is planning to enroll in nursing school next year, so that she is properly prepared to care for her son and to help others. Ms. Dallas' experience with the EHS-CC Partnership provided the stability, support, and incentive she needed to imagine and explore her own career path.

Supporting Families of Children with Challenges

Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) is the largest EHS-CC Partnership grantee in Washington State, serving 160 children through 14 child care center partners in the state's two largest counties. They are one of nine regional educational agencies serving school districts and state-approved private schools in Washington, so they have a great deal of experience working with issues of inclusion and supporting social-emotional and behavioral challenges of children in schools, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and community-based initiatives.

Their many years of experience have informed PSESD's individualized, family-focused approach to services for children in their EHS-CC Partnership programs. As a result, PSESD has established a multidisciplinary team of mental health coordinators, disability coordinators, and nurse consultants who provide the essential individualized support to families of children with special needs, challenging behaviors, or both. This diverse team of specialists, in collaboration with PSESD content area coordinators and managers, also provides the appropriate training and technical assistance to the EHS-CC Partnership child care center staff. Topics covered include skill building, knowledge and tools to help identify points of concern in the children's development, and techniques for working collaboratively with the families to improve outcomes for the children.

The process begins with the nurse consultant making an initial review of the child and their health documents within 45 days of enrollment into Early Head Start. Based on the results of this assessment, the nurse consultant works with the family to establish a schedule of routine checks. This early identification and referral service establishes key areas of individualized support that the broader team of PSESD specialists then provides to the families and to the child care partners through tailored training and technical assistance specific to the needs of the children in their programs.

The PSESD team has developed a specific, easy-to-understand program manual for child care partners to use that outlines the purpose, guidance, and procedure for accessing a variety of support services, including:

- Inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental delays
- Supporting social-emotional and behavioral needs
- Triage support procedure to help coordinate requests for extra supports for children and families

The combination of resources weaves together a comprehensive set of services that supports both the families and the child care partner staff to more fully meet the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive developmental needs of the diverse spectrum of children in their EHS-CC Partnership programs.

According to Donna Andrews, RN, Program Manager, Infant-Toddler Services at PSESD, "The in-house, individualized T/TA services that the PSESD multidisciplinary team offers to families and child care partners are complemented by a smooth referral/transition process engaging the appropriate specialized community service providers—such as speech therapists—in an integrated manner in the EHS-CC Partnership programs to best serve the children and their families."
