



National Center on  
Substance Abuse  
and Child Welfare

## OVERVIEW: IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD OUTCOMES AND SYSTEMS FOR FAMILIES AFFECTED BY PARENTAL SUBSTANCE USE, SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS, AND CO-OCCURRING MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS



The National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare (NCSACW) developed this resource series to strengthen the ability of family-serving agencies to coordinate services, share information, and implement effective and efficient practices. It is designed for child welfare systems, substance use disorder (SUD) and mental health treatment providers, early childhood programs, and other family-serving organizations seeking to improve well-being outcomes for children, parents, and family members. This series equips policymakers and agency leaders with tools to enhance child safety, promote healthy development, and improve long-term outcomes for families affected by parental substance use and mental health challenges. Focusing on the early childhood period and beyond, the resources emphasize the importance of effective cross-system collaboration.



*Look for this icon throughout the series to view brief videos featuring subject matter experts including individuals with personal experience as parents in recovery from SUDs. Learn of the challenges they experienced in obtaining early intervention and other services for their young children—and strategies that professionals can implement to overcome those and other challenges. The NCSACW conducted interviews with the subject matter experts featured in the videos.*

### Resources include:

- [Fact Sheet 1: Early Childhood Practice and Policy for Child Welfare Agencies](#)
- [Fact Sheet 2: Family-Centered Approaches in Early Childhood for Substance Use Disorder Treatment Programs](#)
- [Fact Sheet 3: Cross-System Collaborative Strategies for Early Childhood Service Providers](#)
- [Action Guiding Questions to Strengthen Family-Centered Practice for Families with Children ages 1-6 and Affected by Parental Substance Use and Co-Occurring Mental Health Disorders](#)

The fact sheets and action guiding questions focus on intervention with children and their caregivers in early childhood—a critical period of development for ages 1-6—in the context of both prenatal substance exposure (PSE) and exposure to parental substance use or mental health challenges.

The resources in this series provide research, best practices, and recommendations based on a thorough review of literature and information collected during a convening of subject matter experts in January 2024.

The subject matter experts included federal, Tribal, state, and local implementation experts as well as persons with personal expertise. During the convening of subject matter experts, participants discussed approaches, interventions, programs, and ideas that can best respond to the early childhood needs of families affected by parental substance use and mental health challenges. The most favored recommendations included:

- A family-centered approach that responds to the needs of children *and* their parents
- Ensuring basic needs such as housing, nutrition, and childcare so that parents can focus on their recovery from substance use and mental health disorders and on their children's well-being and development
- Education for service providers on a variety of topics including substance use and mental health disorder recovery and treatment and the potential effects of substance use and mental health disorders on child development
- Use of peer support services to help families navigate service systems and build bridges between families and service systems

The recommendations of the subject matter experts were used to develop the materials in this series, centering on a family-centered approach. Specific recommended strategies include: 1) a drop-in clinic with family navigators and case managers who provides substance use and mental health resources alongside substantial concrete supports; 2) treatment centers for full families, including fathers; 3) individualized treatment interventions; and 4) drop-in peer support. Service systems are encouraged to use the [Action Guiding Questions to Strengthen Family-Centered Practice for Families with Children ages 1-6 and Affected by Parental Substance Use and Co-Occurring Mental Health Disorders](#) in this series as they prepare to implement the recommendations.



**Parent Perspectives:** Click on this [link](#) to view a brief video featuring a subject matter expert share some of her experiences as a parent of a child with special needs.

No single agency can meet all the early childhood needs of children, parents, and family members affected by PSE or parental substance use. Mitigating the effects of PSE in the early childhood period requires robust collaboration, effective linkages to other providers, meaningful engagement of individuals with personal expertise, and commitment to a family-centered approach.

## CONTACT US

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