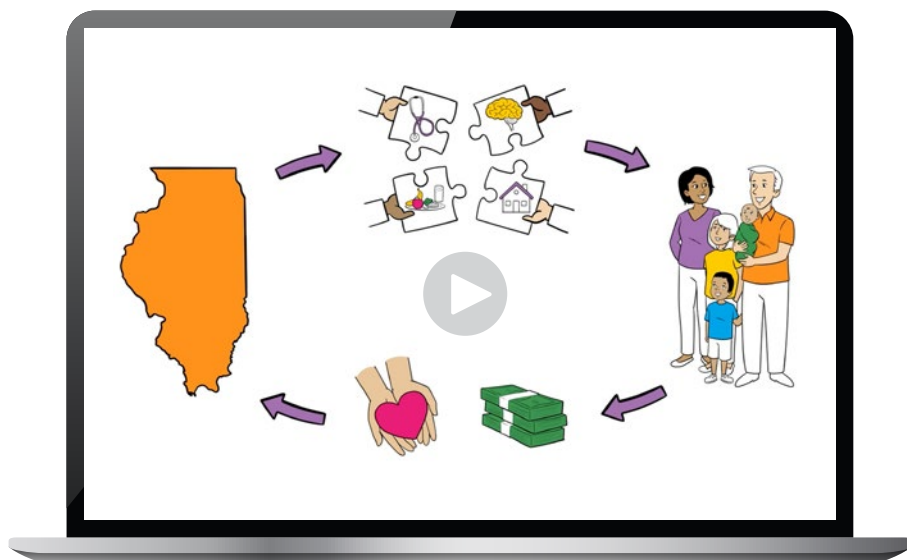


Understanding Early Childhood Community Collaborations

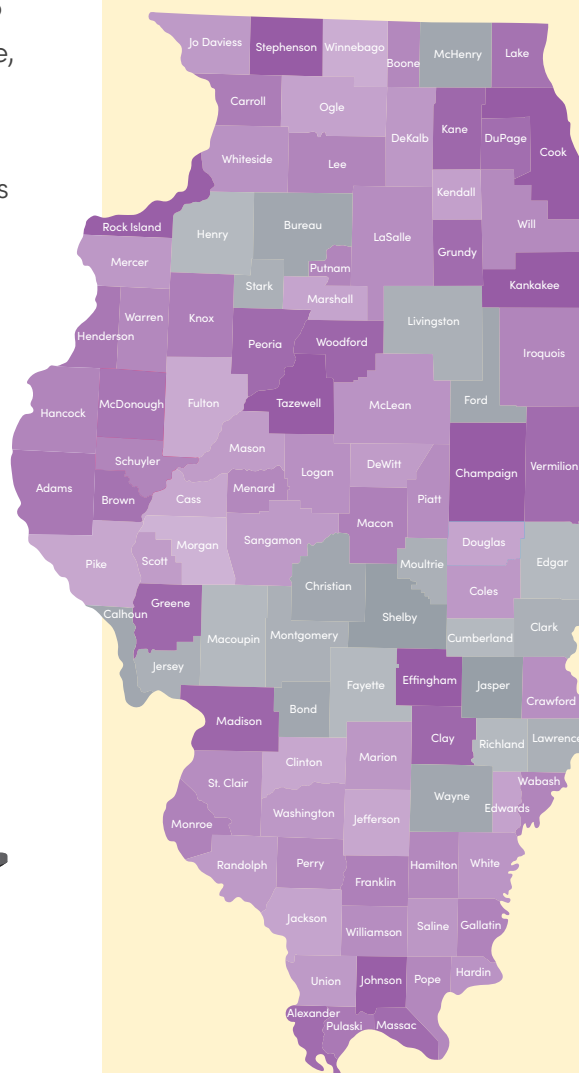
Early Childhood Community Collaborations bring together local, diverse, interested and invested individuals, including families, to advance equitable outcomes by creating a supportive, equitable, connected local early childhood system for young children and their families. Community collaborations recognize that in order for children to thrive, families must be supported and communities must be invested in.



[Click here to find out more about Illinois Early Childhood Collaborations](#)

With more than 90 collaborations working

in communities across the state, these groups provide direct connection and existing, trusted relationships with service providers and families throughout Illinois.



80 counties in Illinois have at least one collaboration.

What Are Early Childhood Collaborations?



Through relationship-building, early childhood community collaborations serve as trusted hubs that help families navigate the early childhood system, provide connections to critical resources, and inform policies and program improvements. Their work is adaptive, ongoing, responsive to community needs, and evolves to ensure children have the support they need to thrive. Collaborations also explore how parts of the early childhood system function together to promote positive results for families and communities.

Key elements of a successful collaboration include:

- **A shared vision, goals, and definitions of success** that guide the work and keep everyone focused on common outcomes
- **A jointly developed structure** which has roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes to ensure all voices are heard and valued, and preferably includes families as part of the leadership structure
- **Shared decision-making and power**, balancing input from all partners, including families, who are crucial in shaping the work
- **Shared responsibility and accountability** for both process and outcomes, ensuring that everyone is invested in the success of the effort
- **Equitable sharing of resources, risks, and rewards** to ensure that all partners benefit and contribute fairly and are supportive of one another
- **Ongoing measurement of impact and outcomes**, with a focus on making adjustments as needed to improve results, reduce duplication of efforts, and ensure that the work is truly making a difference¹

Why Are Early Childhood Collaborations Important?



Community collaborations are uniquely positioned to understand their local context, guide how resources should be directed to meet community needs, and create an infrastructure that ensures efficient use of these resources.

Community collaborations help by:

- **Engaging families** who could benefit most from services
- **Supporting full enrollment** and staffing in all programs
- **Leading community-driven planning** for early childhood services and accessing funding opportunities
- **Developing a “no wrong door” approach** for families seeking services and supports and
- **Recruiting and engaging community partners** to leverage a broader constituency focused around issues for children and families.²

How Do Early Childhood Collaborations Work?

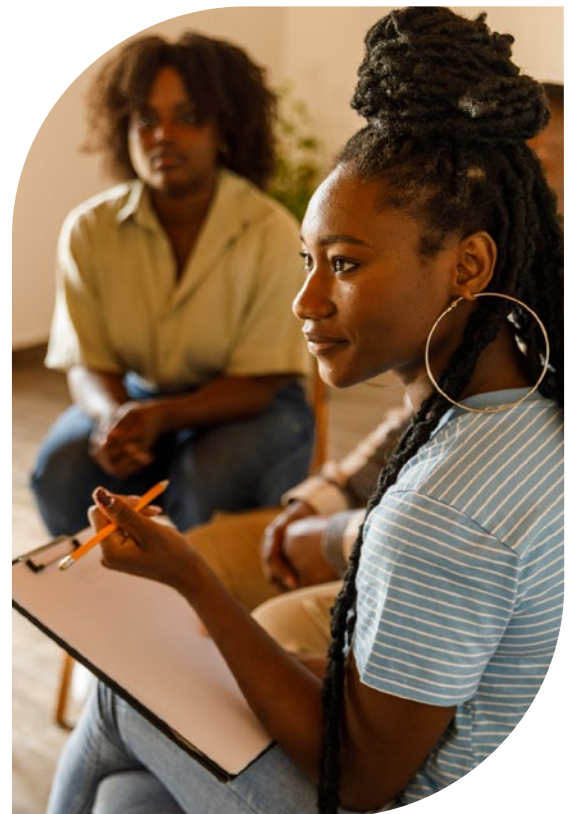


Early childhood community collaborations often use a community systems development approach. Community systems development is a process by which a community takes collective responsibility for its young children by building an aligned, high-quality accessible early learning system that supports success for all children.

When organizations work through structured collaborations, they achieve collective impact rather than isolated programmatic solutions. This systems-building approach allows communities to leverage resources, eliminate service duplication, fill critical gaps, and coordinate intake processes—making navigation easier for the families who most value these resources.

Collaborations have developed and implemented powerful strategies—such as coordinated intake, aligning cross-systems practices, public awareness efforts, and providing targeted support for key groups—that have clearly improved access to quality early learning services:

- **Coordinated intake:** Creating a single point of entry for families to access multiple services
- **Aligned practices:** Making sure various programs work together smoothly
- **Public awareness and access:** Helping families learn about and enroll in available services
- **Supporting priority populations:** Ensuring children with special needs get comprehensive services



By bringing diverse stakeholders to the table and breaking down traditional silos, collaborations ensure priority populations—including children experiencing homelessness, children with disabilities, children of teen parents, and children in families in poverty—can access the comprehensive services they need. Collaborations serve as the essential, hyper-local infrastructure that connects individual programs to community-wide impact.



How Collaborations Can Help the State and How the State Can Help Collaborations

To make early childhood collaborations stronger and build more across Illinois, the state can:	• Provide long-term, sustainable funding • Understand and leverage the community systems development approach to aligning services • Support data infrastructure • Offer professional development opportunities • Align requirements across different funding sources to reduce paperwork • Facilitate coordination between different state agencies
To reinforce the state's efforts to make early childhood services simpler, fairer, and better for families and providers, early childhood collaborations can:	• Provide trusted connection to families and early childhood providers across the state • Share on-the-ground knowledge and insight about local early childhood context • Facilitate access to communities and implement innovative ways to engage communities

¹This has been developed with input from collaboration leaders and members across Illinois and other key sources including:

- Chrislip, David D. *Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook: A Guide for Citizens and Civic Leaders*, Jossey Bass, 2002
- Miller, W. Roger and Jeffrey P. Miller, *Leadership Styles for Success in Collaborative Work*, p.2 Retrieved from Tamarack Institute website, November 5, 2019;
- Mattessich, P., Murray-Close, M. & Monsey, B. R. (2001) *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation
- Ayres, B., Vargas, J., Halperin, R., Sexton, S. (2024). *Chicago Early Childhood Collaborations Current Landscape and Potential Options*. Partner Plan Act, Illinois Action for Children.

²The Importance of Community Collaborations: Recommendations for the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding

³Access Committee- All Families Served Subcommittee Recommendation on Priority Populations, February 2019, [idec.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idec/documents/unsorted-documents/priority-populations-recommendation-final-approved.pdf](https://dec.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idec/documents/unsorted-documents/priority-populations-recommendation-final-approved.pdf)