

# Funding Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation: Lessons Learned from Arkansas's Project PLAY

## What Is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation?

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is a prevention-based service that pairs a mental health consultant with families and adults who work with infants and young children in the different settings where they learn and grow, such as child care, preschool, and at home. IECMH consultants build adults' capacity to strengthen and support the healthy social and emotional development of children.

## What is Project PLAY?

[Project PLAY](#) (Positive Learning for Arkansas's Youngest) is an IECMHC program that started in Arkansas with 3 pilot sites in 2004 and now serves 10 sites. Project PLAY matches mental health professionals certified as IECMH consultants with early care and education providers. The program provides consultation to programs, teachers, and child-serving systems.

Project PLAY has two key goals:

- Promote the positive social and emotional development of children through changes in the early learning environment
- Improve the social and emotional behaviors of young children in early care and education settings by building the skills of child care providers and family members

Services provided by Project PLAY include:

- Observing classrooms and other environments, teachers, and individual children who are referred through Arkansas's suspension and expulsion prevention system
- Conducting developmental, social, and emotional screening of referred children
- Helping teachers, administrators and families develop plans to support caregivers in building relationships, managing challenging behaviors, and strengthening social and emotional supports in the classroom
- Supporting teachers and families in implementing new strategies and techniques
- Providing referrals for teachers and families to community resources



## How is Project PLAY funded?

Project PLAY receives funding from the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) quality improvement funds administered by the Arkansas Department of Human Services/Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education. A portion of the CCDBG funds that states and tribes use to offer subsidized child care services to eligible families must be used to improve the quality of care, including strategies to improve children's social and emotional health. Project PLAY has also received funding for consultant training and support from Arkansas's Project LAUNCH (a grant program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration).

## What financing lessons can I learn from Project PLAY?

### Lesson 1: Demonstrate success through a pilot project

Starting a new IECMHC program with a pilot in a small number of sites can help you do the following:

- Engage a broad group of stakeholders in a needs assessment and program design process to ensure community buy-in
- Identify ways to design and implement an IECMHC program based on best practice principles tailored to meet the needs of the community
  - In 2010, Project PLAY built on the lessons learned from the pilot sites to develop an expanded IECMHC model that is consistent, replicable, shown to be effective, and tailored to the needs of Arkansas. The program expanded again in 2016 to support the state's new expulsion prevention initiative.
- Gather data and stories to justify expansion
  - Arkansas invested in program evaluation to gather quantitative and qualitative data on teacher-child interactions, child behavior, stakeholder satisfaction, and more.
  - Results from the evaluation demonstrated high rates of teacher satisfaction with IECMHC services, improved classroom climate and teacher-child interactions, and decreased aggressive and disruptive behavior concerns in children identified by the teacher as having challenging behavior
- Build community support and find advocates for continued funding from the sites you are serving

*In Arkansas, we had to start small and demonstrate success before going in for an additional ask. We started with pilot sites and had a strong evaluation component and made a substantial up-front investment in looking at outcomes and impact (at the teacher and child levels). This allowed us to then make a bigger ask and also maintain our funding.*

—Nicole Edge, Ph.D., University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences; Director of Project PLAY



## Lesson 2: Build the IECMHC infrastructure

Consider how you can build capacity throughout your state or tribal community through strategic outreach and partnerships:

- Find out who else is doing similar work with other funds (e.g., in Head Start, within mental health agencies). Consider how you can support one another through training, supervision, and sharing resources.
- Train with future expansion in mind. Open training opportunities to the broader mental health community to prepare the workforce for potential program expansion.
- Consider partnerships to increase the staffing options for your consultation program. If you are unable to hire full-time consultants in every community due to the limited workforce or budget constraints, consider contractual arrangements to share staff with local mental health provider agencies.
  - Project PLAY is staffed primarily through contracts with Community Mental Health Centers and most staff split their time between consultation and clinical work.

## Lesson 3: Share the load—the problem is big enough to go around!

IECMH consultants are part of a community solution to increase caregivers' capacity to support children's social and emotional development. Your program should not duplicate other available services.

Here are some tips for sharing the load:

- Identify others in your community who provide similar services (e.g., technical assistance providers, coaches, mental health professionals), and work together to develop a triage system so you can easily match individuals or programs who need services with the right "helper."
- Partner with and support the work of the other "helpers":
  - Value and recognize the unique expertise of the other helping professionals.
  - Identify opportunities for relationship-building across teams, such as opportunities for shared training and staff development.
  - Provide consultation to other "helpers" on complex cases.

## Lesson 4: Show up!

To build awareness of your program, you should show up to all meetings, workgroups, strategic planning sessions, and anything to do with social and emotional health in your community.

- Bring your data on the impact of IECMHC and a clear message about the need for services.
- Think long-term. Advocacy to include IECMHC in a strategic plan may result in a funding opportunity far down the road.

## Lesson 5: Listen and align

Your funding request should align with the funder's priorities. Be prepared to explain how their priorities match your services.

- Remember that some organizations and agencies can't fund services, but they may be able to fund training, evaluation, or infrastructure.
- Adapt your services to meet funders' priorities:
  - Is the priority in your community quality improvement in child care? Emphasize your readiness to provide programmatic consultation that will raise the quality of care.
  - Is the priority reducing costs in the mental health system, or preventing expulsion? Emphasize the positive impact of child-specific services.
- Consider the pros and cons of adapting services to meet funders' needs. For example, if you increase child-specific work, your program may be less available to provide much-needed programmatic support.

## Further information

For additional resources on funding IECMHC in your state or tribal community, please visit the Center of Excellence's [IECMHC Toolbox](#) sections on [Financing](#) and [Communications](#).