

Insights

Developing Multi-Sector Partnerships in Early Childhood

Too Many Missed Opportunities

[A single mom from Alabama with four children](#) lacks the resources needed to correct the cause of lead poisoning in her home. Her 3-year old's lead levels spike, requiring intensive bi-weekly treatments at a hospital that is more than four hours away. Her at-risk 5-year-old goes more than five months before she is tested and diagnosed.

[A mother in Maine who tries and cannot get treatment](#) for her opioid addiction is separated from her child. That child is placed in a crowded foster-care system, without her number one protective factor, while her mother continues to search for ways to get help.

[A baby boy is born into a neighborhood](#) riddled with drug use and gang violence. During his early years when his brain was most vulnerable, he suffered significant trauma and lost or was separated from both his parents. If not for the incredible passion of his grandfather, his story may have ended similarly to where it began.

Each of these stories illustrates missed opportunities. If the mother in Alabama had been provided with more timely diagnosis and supports. If the court system for the mother in Maine coordinated with substance abuse treatment and healthcare. If the boy's family and community had access to the supports they needed, such as transportation, employment, housing, and substance abuse and mental health treatment. These stories, and so many others, have too many "what ifs."

Cross-sector partnerships can make a difference

These stories are the stories of countless families across the country. Families whose health suffers because they cannot access the supports they need. Supports that do exist and are led by passionate people across many different sectors—health, education, housing, employment, local government, community organizations, etc. Supports that are currently just too difficult for families to navigate because these different sectors often work in isolation.

This is why cross-sector partnerships can make a big difference for families. By building these partnerships, children’s health stakeholders can make it easier for families to find what they need to support the health and overall well-being of their family.

As an expert in change management, NICHQ has coached multiple state, community, and national teams to build and sustain these partnerships. Most recently, we partnered with StriveTogether—an organization that, like NICHQ, is committed to improving outcomes for children—to leverage our joint experience working with partners from multiple sectors, including health, education, etc., to uncover new and innovative ways to enhance partnerships between early childhood systems and sectors. Our organizations’ discoveries can help future initiatives develop the sustainable partnerships needed to make sure there are fewer “what if” moments for families.

These strategies were tested in an exploratory partnership between NICHQ and StriveTogether, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. NICHQ and StriveTogether are also partnering on the [Prenatal – 3 Impact and Improvement Network](#).

Five strategies for partnership-building

Do your prep work before you launch

All partner organizations should take time to connect and learn about each other before jumping into the work. During this prep time, staff from each organization should review their partner(s)’s mission and approach and identify opportunities where their work aligns. One way to facilitate early shared learning is to allot time at the outset of the project for each organization to present on their work. They can then outline their organizational structure and staffing, service delivery model, specific expertise and noteworthy results, leaving time at the end for questions and conversations.

Learn in action, not just in theory

While prep time helps your team understand one another and develop a vision for partnership, you also need to see your partner(s)’s work in action. Observing each other’s work in real-time provides needed context to decide how best to partner with one another—it shows where your approach is complementary, helps you identify the strengths you can each tap into, reflect on your own work, and consider opportunities for individual or mutual improvement. Real-time observations also help you consider whether there are additional future partnership opportunities that you may have previously overlooked.

Build relationships grounded in trust

Like many organizations working in early childhood, NICHQ and StriveTogether have a similar mission while leveraging unique approaches. Since these similarities can set the stage for competition, it’s critical to make an early commitment to focus on cooperation grounded in trust and respect. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating cycles of silos.

Communication is key to building a trusting relationship between organizations. Bi-weekly video conferences among key staff, in-person meetings, and monthly conference calls between organizations' chief executives can help ensure trust and buy-in from all members on your team. Additionally, be sure to establish expectations and processes up front about internal communications, roles and responsibilities. A regular communication schedule, a list of key staff and their roles, and guidelines regarding note-taking and next steps set the foundation for a strong partnership.

Scrap your assumptions

Whether you have worked with your partner organization before, met them at a past conference, or only know them tangentially, you'll likely have preconceived notions about their work and approach. Getting the most out of your new partnership means being willing to overhaul those assumptions. When you're open about your partner's potential, you become more open to the overall potential of your partnership and can accomplish things you may never have expected.

Leverage conveners at the community level

There is a strong community interest in building partnerships between health and education sectors—we heard this first hand from constituent interviews. However, there is also a misconception in each sector about the willingness and availability of the alternative sector. National organizations, such as NICHQ and StriveTogether, can help dispel this misconception. By convening community partners around a shared aim, these organizations can build trust and establish expectations for communication and coordination, ultimately accelerating improvement and advancing child health and educational outcomes.

Interested in learning more about building partnerships and effective collaboration? Our free 30-minute online course, [Essentials of Collaboration](#), uses a Boston-based case study to illuminate the impact of successful collaboration and provides evaluation techniques to make sure your collaboration effort succeeds from start to finish. [Take the course and continue your learning.](#)