

Vermont's Early Childhood FRAMEWORK

*Our Commitment to Realizing the Promise of
Every Vermont Child*



VERMONT'S EARLY CHILDHOOD FRAMEWORK

Message from Governor Shumlin

Thank you for your commitment to Vermont's youngest children. As Vermonters, we have a shared responsibility to provide a good start for all our children, and we all reap the benefits. We know that the first years of life matter because early experiences literally build the architecture of the maturing brain. The brain science is definitive: 75% of a child's brain is wired by the age of three. When children get off to a good start through access to healthcare, high-quality early learning opportunities, and support from their families and communities, they have a stronger foundation for future development. This level of support through the early grades helps ensure that students continue to build a foundation to succeed in school and beyond.

When children and families thrive, Vermont thrives. Many caring and dedicated Vermonters have helped build our early childhood system over the past decades. From Dr. Dynasaur and the Early Education Initiative Grant Program to the expansion of high quality learning opportunities for our youngest children around the state, we have much to celebrate. But despite our efforts, too many Vermont families struggle to find affordable, high-quality early care and education. Too many Vermont children are not able to access valuable community resources. Too many Vermont students are not gaining the skills they need to graduate and compete in the 21st century workforce. We have developed this Framework to break through these barriers and help our children succeed.

Vermont is fortunate to have strong leaders in our schools, in state government, and in our businesses and communities who understand the vital importance of providing a sturdy foundation early in life. Our philanthropic community also continues to demonstrate its commitment to our children. The entire spectrum of partners —including educators, families, service providers, administrators, schools boards, and advocates – have come together to make our children a clear priority for our state. This Framework, which lays out our shared goals, sets us on an exciting course. It is my great hope that you will join me as we work in a collaborative, focused and innovative way to realize the promise of every Vermont child because they are the promise for Vermont's future.



Peter Shumlin
Governor

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Executive Summary

This Early Childhood Framework represents Vermont's commitment to ensure that our young children grow up happy, healthy and ready for a lifetime of learning. It recognizes that we will be better able to achieve the goals established in this Framework by **sharing the responsibility** and working together. It also acknowledges that **we all benefit** when all our children and families are thriving. Lastly, the Framework is a **call to action**. It prompts each of us to identify what we can do to realize the promise of every Vermont child.

Six **goals** are the heart of the Framework:

- Goal 1: A Healthy Start for All Children
- Goal 2: Families and Communities Play a Leading Role
- Goal 3: High-Quality Opportunities for All Children
- Goal 4: Invest Now for Our Future
- Goal 5: Know We're Making a Difference
- Goal 6: An Innovative and Connected System

When determining exactly how we are going to achieve these goals, it is helpful to have guidelines to help us chart our course. The following twelve **principles** are woven into the goals and will inform the Framework's Action Plan:

- Think about the whole child
- Consider all children
- Focus on quality
- Build on what we know is working
- Take the long view
- Hold ourselves accountable
- Involve communities and families as equal partners
- Strengthen connections between education, human services and health
- Invest early
- Promote families' economic security
- Emphasize prevention
- Keep collaboration at the heart of our work together

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Introduction

Overview

Vermont's Early Childhood Framework builds on years of exceptional work across the state to foster children's healthy development, support families and build thriving communities. It places a strong value on sharing the responsibility for ensuring that our young children grow up happy, healthy and ready for a lifetime of learning. It also recognizes that we all benefit when all our children and their families are thriving. Lastly, the Framework is a call to action. It builds on Vermont's vision and commitment to realizing the promise of every child.

The Framework is the result of a nine-month process following Governor Shumlin's announcement in January 2013 of a Governor's Early Childhood Summit. Through a partnership between the Governor's office, the Vermont Agency of Human Services and the Vermont Agency of Education, a Summit Planning Committee was convened, comprised of seventeen government, community and business leaders. This committee oversaw the planning process and the development of the Framework. This effort generated input from over 700 Vermonters through a series of regional topic sessions, on-line input, a focus group with parents, and a Summit Family Advisory Committee made up of thirteen parents from around the state.

Definition of "Early Childhood"

The Framework defines "early childhood" as birth through third grade. It also emphasizes the importance of good health care for pregnant women and young families. It promotes seamless transitions from early childhood to elementary school. The Framework lays the groundwork for a collaborative approach to building a comprehensive and integrated early childhood system that promotes healthy child development and family stability.¹ It articulates common goals and begins to create a common language across disciplines.

The Framework's Key Elements

The Framework creates a new, unified approach to improving child outcomes by:

- Establishing goals that reflect new ways of thinking about the role of funding, families, communities, the delivery of services and access to community resources;
- Asking us to hold ourselves accountable to each other in new ways;
- Focusing our work as partners to more effectively support children and their families.

¹ See the "Definitions" section at the end of the document for the definition of an early childhood system.

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The Framework's Practical Applications

The Framework will:

- Establish shared accountability for the well-being of all children, regardless of family income, cultural background, town of residence, or special needs;
- Guide all efforts to strengthen and expand policies, programs and initiatives designed to ensure young children's healthy development and to support families with young children;
- Guide future planning and decision-making regarding early childhood policy, programming and financing; and
- Inform the Framework's statewide Action Plan.

The Framework and the Accompanying Action Plan

The Framework shows Vermonters where we want to go as a state and lays out principles to guide us. The accompanying Action Plan will be our road map. It will help us implement the goals in the Framework by identifying how we are going to achieve our goals and how we are going to measure success. In order to remain a living, relevant document to guide our work together, the Action Plan will be re-visited annually by state and community leaders.



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The Framework and Action Plan envision a role for everyone who has a stake in our children's well-being. Achieving our goals will require the involvement of diverse partners and resources beyond state government. With the development of this Framework and the accompanying Action Plan, Vermonters will have two concise guiding documents that can be used by everyone who shares the vision of realizing the promise of every Vermont child and wants to be a part of making that vision a reality.

Goals

The following six goals build on what is working well for Vermont's young children and their families and address where we are falling short:

- Goal 1: A Healthy Start for All Children
- Goal 2: Families and Communities Play a Leading Role
- Goal 3: High-Quality Opportunities for All Children
- Goal 4: Invest Now for Our Future
- Goal 5: Know We're Making a Difference
- Goal 6: An Innovative and Connected System

These goals are intended to keep everyone who is committed to the healthy development of Vermont's young children headed in the same direction. They are also meant to inform and shape—not replace—individual agency or organizational plans. They were developed to create alignment throughout the early childhood system. Most importantly, these goals will help us get to our final destination: a state where all children—regardless of where they live, family income, cultural background or special needs—have the opportunity to realize their full potential.

In order to build on the excellent work that has been done to foster the well-being of Vermont's children, the process for developing these goals included the following steps:

- A crosswalk of over thirty planning documents dating back at least a decade, which highlighted areas of agreement, areas where there is a lack of alignment, and gaps in our thinking;
- Ten pre-Summit focus sessions, a parent focus group, responses to a parent survey, on-line input and feedback collected during a public comment period following distribution of the first draft of the Framework;
- Analysis provided by the Summit Planning Committee and the Race To The Top-Early Learning Challenge Drafting Team.

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Goal 1: A Healthy Start for All Children

Comprehensive prenatal care, including dental care, health screenings, nutrition, health education and referral to community resources, improves infant health and is vital for Vermont's children to get a healthy start. In addition, high-quality health care for young children is important to building a strong foundation. The Vermont Department of Health adopted the American Academy of Pediatrics' *Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision for Infants, Children and Adolescents* as our guideline for health promotion, preventive care, counseling (safety, nutrition, psycho-social), screenings (e.g., growth/development), and immunizations.

The following principles are integral to our efforts to ensure a healthy start for all children:

- High-quality care provided by medical homes² should be incorporated in a more intentional way into Vermont's early childhood system.
- Early care and education programs, as well as elementary schools, are essential partners with medical homes to ensure a healthy start for Vermont's children.
- Schools are a focal point from which to identify children with unique challenges, to increase student access to health and dental services and to coordinate these efforts in order to avoid duplication and reduce stress on children and families.

Goal 2: Families and Communities Play a Leading Role

Families and communities must be at the table when decisions are being made about how public and private dollars will be invested in our early childhood system. We must always ask if a proposed idea or program is respectful, family-driven and mindful of families' strengths. It is critical that individuals working with families and communities understand and are sensitive to differences in culture and language. Policies and funding decisions must allow for flexibility and regional approaches.

The following principles must inform all interaction with families:

- Respectful and honest interactions;
- Family-driven process so that each family defines their goals and has ownership of their outcomes, which includes increasing the knowledge of parenting and child development among family members;
- Relationship-based behaviors and actions that are supported by the overall early childhood system;

² A medical home is defined as community-based primary care which provides high-quality, planned, family-centered health promotion and prevention.

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- Community-based focus to help support child and parental resiliency, a sense of belonging, and an appreciation of resources and connections within the community;
- Reciprocity through everyone sharing, giving, receiving and contributing their strengths, gifts, and abilities;
- Equitable process so that family members with similar needs and interests have equal opportunities to access resources;
- Inclusive settings to meet the needs of all children from birth through third grade;
- Sustainable, realistic, efficient and effective approach for family engagement plans and funding;
- Transparency; and
- Data-driven and evaluation-based processes.

Goal 3: High-Quality Opportunities for All Children

When communities have the resources they need to support children's healthy development and family stability, children and families thrive. To achieve this, Vermont's early childhood system must be designed with the diverse needs of all children in all settings in mind, regardless of family income, children's special needs, or town of residence. This requires a holistic view of what children need to thrive; an emphasis on quality, accessibility and affordability; a simultaneous focus on care and learning, especially in the early years; and special attention paid to families' economic security.³

Children do best when they enjoy supportive, responsive relationships with adults and with other children wherever they are. Research tells us that positive, caring relations are essential to promoting children's healthy development and learning. A comprehensive early care, health and education system must ensure that all children, from infancy through third grade, have the option to access high-quality early learning and development programs staffed by supportive, responsive and knowledgeable early childhood educators. A strong foundation enables children to start kindergarten ready to be successful and to experience the joy of lifelong learning.

Several principles should guide development of an aligned, child-centered educational continuum that sustains and expands children's positive outcomes:

- Early childhood settings for children 0-5 meet high program standards, and K-3 programs meet school standards.
- All early learning and development programs from infancy through third grade are responsive to children and families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and inclusive of children with developmental delays and special needs.

³ See the "Definitions" section at the end of this document for a definition of "economic security."

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- Early childhood educators are knowledgeable, use evidence-based practices and are supported through adequate compensation and quality preparation and professional development offered across all sectors of the early childhood field (i.e., infants through third grade).
- Early childhood educators recognize the importance of families as their child's first educator and use practices that affirm families' role.

Part of this goal involves promoting families' economic security. "Research shows that family economic security is a key to creating the conditions that help children be successful in learning, in school and in life."⁴ A family is economically secure when it is able to meet its financial needs in ways that promote the health and well-being of parents and children. Economic security means that families do not fall into poverty when they cannot work. It also means that when workers lose their jobs, they have time to look for another or upgrade their education and skills without suffering severe hardship.

Goal 4: Invest Now for Our Future

Vermont's communities need a sufficient and sustainable level of funding to be able to provide and maintain the critical resources that promote healthy development for children and economic security for families, especially during the first three years of life. We must embrace a structure that supports a shared responsibility among government, private foundations, businesses and local communities. We must intentionally invest in supports and services for young children and their families that build individual resilience and foster the strength of Vermont into the future.

The following principles must guide discussions among government, foundations, businesses, policymakers, communities and parents as to how to invest early childhood dollars most wisely:

- Allow for funding to be available to agencies, schools, service providers and communities in a way that permits them to be responsive to changing needs at the community level;
- Invest in early childhood and school-based programs that achieve desired results and can be replicated in other communities;
- Ensure adequate funding when programs are scaled up so they do not get watered down;
- Be creative about tapping existing federal funding streams for health care, human services and education;

⁴ W.K. Kellogg Foundation, <<http://www.wkcf.org/what-we-support/secure-families.aspx>>, 15 October 2013.

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- Identify new funding sources through diversification and tapping public, private and community resources;
- Be transparent in the early childhood financing arena;
- Remember that businesses and private funders are strong investors in Vermont's future;
- Require program accountability by linking funding to quality and defined results;
- Focus new and existing investments on promotion and prevention;
- Prioritize the services and supports that help children get off to a good start.

Goal 5: Know We're Making a Difference

Children, families, communities and our economy are strengthened when we utilize strategies and create supports based on what research tells us leads to positive child outcomes. Public and private funders should allocate resources based on rigorous evidence of effectiveness. Policy officials, service providers, schools, communities and parents should be accountable to each other and keep children at the center of all decisions.

Program operation and funding design must build in ongoing performance evaluation, flexible policies, and continuous quality improvement from the start. Lastly, good data must inform policy and decision making and support continuous quality improvement. When we use data to make decisions and assess our progress towards stated goals, it is much easier to know if we are hitting the mark or need to change our approach.

Two principles are central to this goal: build on what we know is working and hold ourselves accountable. This means being willing to change course if we don't get the results we were looking for and reconsidering the way we have done things in the past.

Goal 6: An Innovative and Connected System

Vermont's early care, health and education system is designed to optimize children's healthy development and family stability. This is achieved by providing a continuum of high-quality resources that are community based and reflective of each community's assets and needs. This requires having a broad array of flexible and responsive services that are sufficiently resourced to respond to challenges facing children and families. These include employment, housing, transportation, and the basic necessities required to ensure economic security and family stability.

The components of an innovative and connected early childhood system include:

- A highly skilled and stable workforce that shares common knowledge and skills across the education, human services and health sectors;

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- A robust array of services that include necessary supports that reside outside of the traditional early childhood system, such as employment and economic services, transportation, housing, food security and public safety;
- A formal, recognized structure that is statewide but community based and is responsible for bringing families, service providers, policy makers and community members together to design, implement and support the early childhood system in their community and region in a manner that brings services together to maximize resources and assure easy access for families;
- Shared accountability across all programs and services for promoting and assuring the developmental well-being and success of all children and their families;
- Mechanisms that promote cross-sector communication, collaboration and teamwork.

Two principles are integral to this goal: an emphasis on collaboration, and the importance of strengthening connections among the education, human services and health sectors.

Definitions

To ensure that we are pulling in the same direction and working towards the same goals, we need to be able to communicate effectively with one another. This requires having a common, unifying language. Below are definitions of key terms used in the Framework. The pre-Summit topic sessions identified additional, commonly-used terms that also need a shared definition. This will be addressed during the development of the Action Plan.

Early childhood: Birth through third grade, and a focus on healthy pregnancy

Early childhood system: “Multiple players, processes and revenue streams that are organized to accomplish a larger purpose.”⁵ An early childhood system encompasses a wide range of community resources and supports that help ensure children’s healthy development. They include early care, health and education services including but not limited to:

- Early care and education—child care and preschool/pre-k in home- and center-based settings, including Head Start and Head Start;
- Education in our elementary schools (kindergarten through third grade);
- Medical care;
- Dental care;
- Speech, physical and occupational therapy;
- Mental health counseling;

⁵ Doug Easterling, Ph.D. and Liz Arnold, Ph.D., Reclaiming Futures Leadership Institute, Wake Forest School of Medicine, PowerPoint presentation, May 18, 2011.

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- Home visiting;
- Child protective services;
- Resources that promote family's economic security and stability.

Economic security: “A family is economically secure when it is able to meet its financial needs in ways that promote the health and well-being of parents and children. Economic security means that families don't fall into poverty when they cannot work or work is unstable. It means that when workers lose their jobs, they have time to look for another or upgrade their education and skills without suffering severe hardship. Economic security also means that no child in America is hungry or homeless, and that families have personal savings as well as a strong public safety net to help regain their footing in the economy when they face challenging economic times. There are two fundamental building blocks to family economic security and opportunity—an adequate and stable income alongside savings and other assets that can sustain families.”⁶

Moving along a continuum from coordination to cooperation to collaboration takes time, practice and commitment. “Collaboration is the most intense level of working together. It is a structure and a process for creating change.”⁷

Coordination: “Two or more agencies operate autonomously, yet work together to avoid duplication by sharing information and activities.”⁸

Cooperation: “By sharing information and activities, some service integration between two or more entities occurs, but agencies do not lose autonomy. When we are cooperating, we see our common interests and values. Individual relationships are supported by the organizations they represent. Missions & goals of the individual organizations are reviewed for compatibility. Some project-specific planning is required.”⁹

Collaboration: “A mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more entities to achieve common goals that could not be achieved by working alone. When we truly collaborate, we no longer protect our own possessions or turf, but come

⁶ Boteach, Melissa; Brown, Desmond; Fremstad, Shawn; Moses, Joy; Cauthen, Nancy K., Restoring Shared Prosperity: Strategies to Cut Poverty and Expand Economic Growth, Half in Ten, The Coalition on Human Needs, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, The Center for American Progress Action Fund, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Ford Foundation, 2011, pg. 88.

⁷ Illinois Early Childhood Collaboration, *What Is Early Care and Education Collaboration?*, p. 1.
<<http://ilearlychildhoodcollab.org/>>

⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid.

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together to create something different and larger than either or our former parts. Common, new mission and goals are created. More comprehensive planning is required; many levels of communication are created, since clear information is a keystone of success. Control and risk are shared and mutual. In our collaborative moods, our language changes. We become linked together to accomplish a new thing neither of us thought about before we came together and listened to each other. Power is shared, resources are pooled.”¹⁰

Likewise, shifting resources and attention from treatment to promotion and prevention is a process. It takes time, intentionality and commitment. Many policymakers think about this as a continuum as well, starting with opportunities and community-based services available to all Vermonters to intensive services for children who are struggling day to day.

Promotion: Helping all children, all families and all communities understand the impact of behavior on healthy development and learning. Promotion includes activities that begin with a focus on individual behavior and expand to include a wide range of social and environmental influences.

Prevention: Helping all children and all families build protective factors¹¹ and healthy habits that support them to be their best even under stress. Prevention-focused activities are intended to reduce risks and/or mitigate stress that undermines healthy development child and family strengths.

Early intervention: Helping children and families as soon as possible when particular needs or challenges are recognized. Related activities are geared toward identifying and assessing concerns that may impede healthy development early so that timely and appropriate services and supports are provided to maximize potential.

Treatment: Helping children and families manage emotional, mental or physical health challenges and heal. Services and supports are intended to improve the condition, symptoms and/or disabilities related to an identified diagnosis.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Protective factors are conditions or attributes in individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that, when present, mitigate or eliminate risk in families and communities that, when present, increase the health and well-being of children and families. Protective factors help parents to find resources, supports, or coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress.” U.S. Department for Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, <<https://www.childwelfare.gov/can/factors/protective.cfm>> 10 October 2013.

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Long-term supports: Helping children and families address a complicated or long-lasting disability or condition. This includes on-going services and supports that provide relief, maximize healthy functioning and improve the quality of life.

“Thanks to all who have worked to develop this Framework and ensure that Vermont continues to be a great place to raise a child.”

Peter Shumlin
Governor

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Appendix A

Governor Peter Shumlin wishes to thank the following partners for their commitment to developing this Framework. Their sustained support will be critical to realizing the promise of every Vermont child and creating the comprehensive early childhood system envisioned in this Framework.

Summit Planning Committee

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Foundations

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