

Early Learning – Child Welfare Navigator Pilot Program

Research tells us that high quality early learning services, especially those with a wrap-around component, can be effective in supporting families to prevent both maltreatment and entry into foster care.¹ This understanding is in the foundation of the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). It is reflected in our founding legislation, HB 1661 (2017), that calls on DCYF to restructure and better align services “to assure children most at risk of experiencing adversity are provided high-quality early learning experiences.” In support of this work, over the past year three Child Welfare-Early Learning Engagement Navigators have assisted child welfare-involved families to engage in early learning services in eight child welfare offices around the state.

DCYF structured this pilot to test different approaches to operationally link our early learning and child welfare functions, with the explicit goal of preparing children for school success and preventing subsequent maltreatment. This pilot plays a key role in helping DCYF integrate child welfare and early learning functions, and is a key recommendation coming out a two-year collaboration between DCYF and the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL).

What Need Do the Navigators Address?

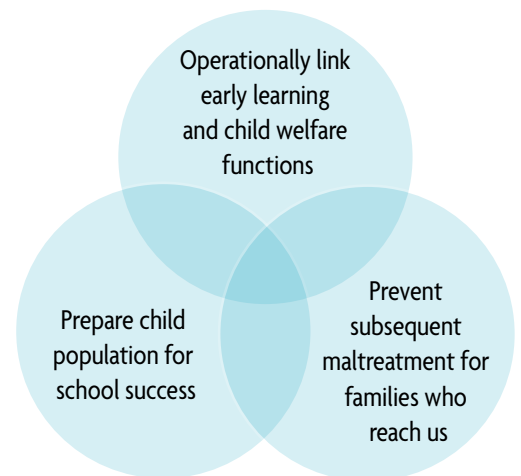
For a child welfare-involved family to get connected to early learning services, the family typically has to proactively ask for services, contact the provider, and navigate the enrollment process on their own. This means that many eligible families miss the opportunity to benefit from early learning services because they do not know about them, do not understand the potential benefits, or because the family does not have the bandwidth to persistently follow up and make sure they are enrolled.

In the first year of the partnership with GPL, DCYF tested solutions to enable caseworkers to make these connections. While DCYF did see modest increases in early learning service referrals, we found as long as caseworkers’ primary accountability is ensuring the physical safety of children, making referrals to these services often is often crowded out by competing priorities.



“In restructuring early learning and child welfare services, the Legislature seeks to build on the success of Washington’s early learning efforts to assure children most at risk of experiencing adversity are provided high quality early learning experiences.”

- House Bill 1661 (2017), Section 1.3



Pilot process and operational changes to improve linkages for families

Regularly collect and use data to drive adjustment and decisions

1. Klein, S., 2016. Benefits of Early Care and Education for Children in the Child Welfare System. A Research-to-Practice Brief. OPRE Report 2016-68. US Department of Health and Human Services.



What Do the Navigators Do?

The navigators—who have expertise in both the child welfare and early learning systems—address this service referral gap by working alongside caseworkers to ensure interested child welfare families successfully start in services. Specifically, the navigator proactively identifies and reaches out to eligible families, assesses early learning needs, and then matches them with a service in their community with a focus on services with a wrap-around component (e.g., Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, Head Start, and Home Visiting). The navigator then supports the family to complete any enrollment paperwork and follows up with the family and the provider to make sure families successfully start services.

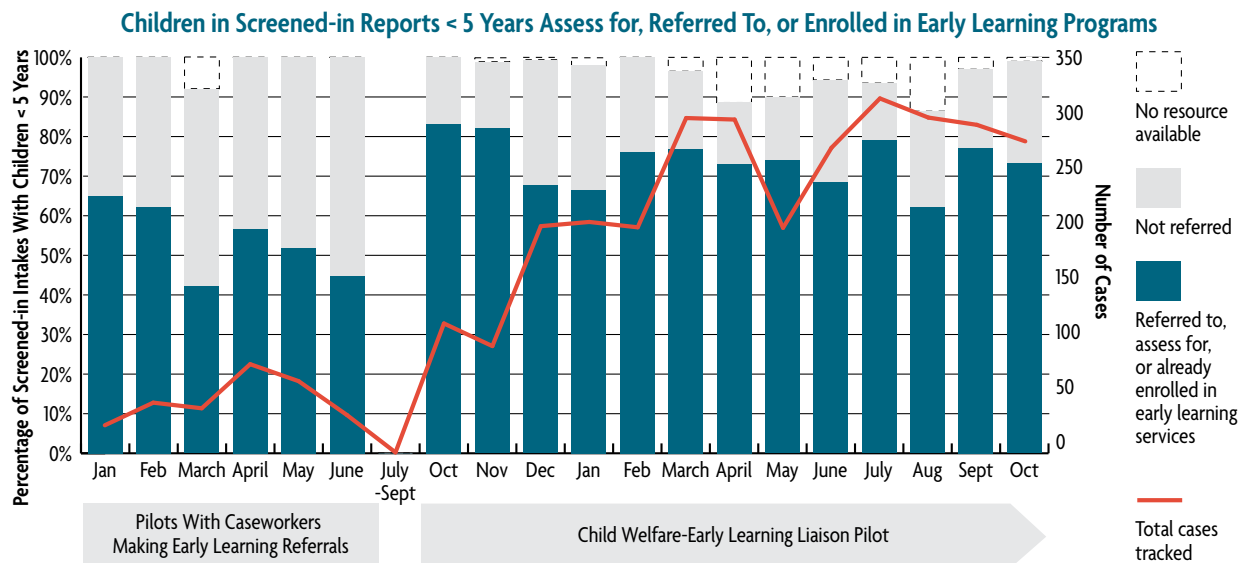
Target Population

This DCYF pilot focuses on two groups of children and families, with a goal of preventing deeper involvement (and re-involvement) in the child welfare system. The target population is families with young children (not yet enrolled in kindergarten) who are involved in the front end of DCYF's child welfare system (Child Protective Services, Family Assessment Response, and Family Voluntary Services), as well as those on Trial Return Home. DCYF estimates that every year there are approximately 25,000 children in our system who may be eligible for referrals to high-quality early learning.²

Effect

Over the past year, DCYF has piloted the navigator position in eight offices across the state, producing an approximate 65% increase in the proportion of children referred to, assessed for, or already enrolled in early learning services.³ This is compared to earlier months when caseworkers alone were responsible for making referrals. Although enrollment in services has been more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, we estimate that among cases where navigators made or attempted a referral, approximately 45% of families started services.

DCYF intends to evaluate this service over time, to monitor referrals and enrollment, and evaluate the impact this prevention project may have on preventing entry and re-entry into foster care.



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- Based on estimate of unduplicated children in SFY2019 for DCYF FFPSA candidacy groups: CPS FAR, CPS Investigation, CPS Family Voluntary Services, and Trial Return Home. Children ages 0-5 make up roughly 45% of all cases. For more information, go to www.dcyf.wa.gov/practice/practice-improvement/ffpsa/prevention.
- Source: Graphs include anyone < 5 yrs. noted as "victim," "identified child," or "household member" on screened-in intakes in pilot offices: King South-east, King South-west, Yakima, Sunnyside, Toppenish, Shelton, Aberdeen, South Bend, and Long Beach. Chart produced from referrals tracked by navigators; includes data for all pilot sites through Oct. 23, 2020. No data captured between July and September due to staff turnover, lag in hiring new GPL lead.

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