

## Introduction

Over the past several decades, research has clearly demonstrated the importance of early care and education. Studies have shown that early intervention contributes to young children's cognitive development, language development, social-emotional development, general well-being, and long-range success. High-quality early childhood services not only benefit the children and families served, but also have far reaching economic benefits for society as a whole (Heckman 2004). Equally compelling as research on early intervention is brain development research.

Neuroscientists and developmental psychologists have concluded that responsive, predictable relationships are essential for healthy brain development (Thompson 2008). A focus on the quality of relationships permeates high quality early care and education services. Every relationship matters—between the early childhood educators and children, between children, and between early childhood educators and family members. Although experts agree about the potential benefits of high quality early care and education, many young children do not have access to such services. In order for all young children and their families to have access, a coherent system is needed with knowledgeable, skillful educators who are deeply committed to their profession.

Research that confirms the impact of early childhood experiences in general and relationships in particular is complemented by the efforts of countless dedicated early childhood educators who have been building a profession without the support of a coherent system of preparation. Their work has led to a vision of best practices. Effective early childhood educators have shown time and again that meeting

the developmental needs of young children and their families requires a comprehensive approach. Above all, because emotionally secure relationships foster learning, early childhood educators have to be open to entering into nurturing relationships with young children and positively guiding children's development. This work can be emotionally challenging, yet personally meaningful, for early childhood educators know they can make a positive difference in the lives of young children and their families. However, the differences many early childhood educators make often go unnoticed, and many others lack the professional preparation necessary to make a difference.

Seeking to bring attention to the significant contributions of early childhood educators and to foster the continuing growth of the profession, the California Department of Education/Child Development Division (CDE/CDD) and First 5 California joined together to develop California's Early Childhood Educator (ECE) Competencies. The competencies stemmed from earlier work supported by First 5 California and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. That study on early childhood educator competencies was conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Berkeley. The resulting report, titled "Early Childhood Educator Competencies: A Literature Review of Current Best Practices, and a Public Input Process on Next Steps for California", gives an overview of early childhood educator competencies created by other states and summarizes input from the early care and education field in California (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment 2008; hereafter identified as the Research Report 2008).

The ECE Competencies presented herein are grounded in the California Department of Education's (CDE) California Early

Learning and Development System. At the center of this system are the California Preschool Learning Foundations and the Infant/Toddler Learning and Development Foundations. The foundations identify and describe the knowledge and skills that young children typically develop when provided with developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate learning experiences. Other components of the Early Learning and Development System include preschool and infant toddler curriculum frameworks, the Desired Results assessment system, program guidelines, and professional development, all of which are aligned to the learning foundations.

As an integral part of the Early Learning and Development System, the ECE Competencies are aligned with the system's other components. For example, the knowledge of child development and learning specified in the Competencies reflects the content of the preschool learning and the infant/toddler learning and development foundations. Similarly, the practices described in the "Learning Environments and Curriculum" Competency Area are consistent with strategies presented in the preschool and infant/toddler curriculum frameworks. And the Observation, Screening, Assessment, and Documentation Competency Area parallels content presented in the curriculum frameworks, the Desired Results assessment system, and the program guidelines.

#### Purpose

The ECE Competencies serve several inter-related purposes. First, they provide coherent structure and content for efforts to foster the professional development of California's early childhood workforce. Secondly, they inform the course of study that early childhood educators follow as they pursue study in institutions of higher education. Thirdly, they provide

guidance in the definition of ECE credentials and certifications. And fourthly, they comprehensively describe the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that early childhood educators need to support young children's learning and development across program types.

#### Intended Audience

This document focuses on the birth through five years age range<sup>1</sup>. Early childhood educators include everyone responsible for the care and education of young children from birth through age five. Examples include teachers, family child care providers, assistant teachers, program directors, education coordinators, and curriculum specialists.<sup>2</sup> In addition to early childhood educators, this document has been developed for individuals responsible for ECE professional development, such as higher education faculty, training organizations and consultants, and human resource departments of large agencies that operate early care and education services.

#### Context for Developing ECE Competencies in California

A growing recognition of the need for a systematic effort to improve the quality of early care and education has taken hold in California. The CDE has invested in the creation of an early learning and development system, the legislature has initiated an effort to establish a quality rating system, higher education is aligning undergraduate curriculum in early care and education, statewide training is being conducted by several organizations and networks, combined with incentives for education and retention. These educational and professional

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<sup>1</sup> In this document, children in the birth through 5 years age range are referred to as young children.

<sup>2</sup> An early childhood educator often has multiple roles. For example, a family child care provider may be a teacher and program director.

development efforts draw from the same research base and share an overall vision of quality. But all of the efforts are hampered by the complexity and fragmented nature of California's current early care and education system. Lynn Karoly and others (2007) sum up the challenges that the current system presents:

- Minimal regulations
- Lack of a clear accountability system with expectations for quality and outcomes
- No financial incentive to achieve higher quality
- A funding system that makes it difficult for providers to use all funds available to them
- Lack of a well-designed, coordinated plan to prepare early childhood educators
- A complex system that makes it difficult for families to navigate, for policymakers and the public to understand, and for providers to administer

Karoly (2009) goes on to state RAND's recommendation that, in response, California take the following actions:

- Ensure high-quality programs are available for the children who need it most
- Measure and monitor quality and provide higher reimbursements to providers who achieve higher quality
- Create a well-designed, coordinated plan to prepare early childhood educators
- Advance toward a more efficient and coordinated system.

The ECE Competencies represent a step in creating a well-designed, coordinated plan to prepare early childhood educators. Through the work of expert advisors and the

synthesis of input from stakeholders in early care and education and ECE professionals, the resulting competencies specify a common reference point for the various institutions, organizations, and networks involved in the preparation and continuing professional development of California's early childhood educators.

#### ECE Competencies for Teaching and Caregiving

The work of early childhood educators requires simultaneous attention to teaching and caregiving. At all times, early childhood educators have to be intentional in meeting young children's needs for nurturance. During the birth-through-5 age period, children are developing a basic sense of emotional security, forming relationships, and learning social skills. Young children, particularly infants and toddlers, also depend on early childhood educators for physical care. Indeed, children's physical survival depends on attentive care. The responsiveness of the early childhood educator to the social, emotional, and physical needs of young children has a profound influence on their development and learning.

Just as important as caring for young children is being intentional in supporting their learning. To be effective, an early childhood educator has to be knowledgeable about child development, become skillful at observing and assessing learning, and plan experiences and environments that support children's exploration and play and guide their learning. Every aspect of early care and education programs for young children affects learning. Intentional early childhood educators are mindful about the daily schedule, the materials made available to children, the adaptations necessary for individual children, the indoor and outdoor play environments, and engagement of families in supporting children's learning.

The CDE publication *Infant/Toddler Learning and Development Program Guidelines (2006)* highlights how teaching and caring often occur together:

Every moment in which an adult provides care to a young infant is a moment rich with learning. Above all, young infants learn how people respond to their communication and behavior. For example, when an adult responds to a young infant who is crying because of hunger, the infant not only experiences the satisfaction of being fed but also learns that his crying will bring a response from an adult. (P. 5)

In recognition of the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in teaching and caring, the competencies describe both of these aspects of early childhood educators' work.

#### Relationship of the Competencies to Other ECE Resources

A major concern is the alignment of the ECE Competencies to significant initiatives and resources in the early care and education field. As stated above, the competencies are aligned to the CDE's learning foundations, curriculum frameworks, and Desired Results resources: Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) and Desired Results for Children and Families—Parent Survey. Additionally, the ECE Competencies are aligned to the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R), and the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R), each informed by research and policy. Likewise, the competencies reflect an effort to maintain consistency with the California Community Colleges' Early Childhood Curriculum Alignment Project (CAP), California State University Baccalaureate Pathways in Early Care and Education (BPECE), and the Classroom Assessment and

Scoring System (CLASS). In essence, the alignment process focused first on the consistency between the content of the competencies and that of the early learning and development system and other significant resources. In addition to consistency of content, the concepts and practices from all of the above resources were integrated into the Performance Areas, Topics, and Competency Levels of the ECE Competencies.

#### Relationship of Competencies to Other Professional Standards

As part of developing the ECE Competencies, California's K-12 professional teaching standards (Commission on Teacher Credentialing 2009), the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) accreditation standards (NAEYC 2007), the California Infant-Family and Early Childhood Mental Health Training Guidelines, and the Early Start Personnel Project materials were carefully reviewed to ensure that the ECE Competencies are consistent with state and national standards. In addition, although distinct from a code of ethics, the ECE Competencies are closely related to ethical considerations. Being a competent early childhood educator requires an understanding of ethical conduct and a disposition to act ethically. As the NAEYC code of ethics (NAEYC 2005 rev.) is the most commonly used one in the early care and education field, it is explicitly referred to in this document. The concept of ethics is embedded throughout the competency areas, in particular Professional Development, Leadership, and Administration and Supervision.

#### The Development of the ECE Competencies

##### Expert Advisory Panel

The CDE/CDD and First 5 California selected WestEd to coordinate the development of the ECE Competencies. Work began with the selection of a panel of expert advisors, who

initiated and guided the development process throughout the two-year project. The panel consists of professionals from institutions of higher education, the California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, and ZERO TO THREE. Panelists included leaders of the CAP and the BPECE. Collectively, the expert panelists possessed expertise in critically important content areas, particularly social-emotional development, language and literacy development, early childhood second-language acquisition, cultural diversity, education of young children with disabilities or other special needs, family engagement, leadership and professionalism, and developmentally appropriate practice for children from birth through five years of age. Listed in alphabetical order, the expert panel members were:

- Rhonda Brown, Commission on Teacher Credentialing
- Nancy k. Brown, Statewide Director of Curriculum Alignment Project, Retired Early Childhood Education Faculty, Cabrillo College
- Joya Chavarin, Career Advocate, BANANAS, WestEd
- Deborah Chen, Professor, Department of Special Education, California State University, Northridge
- Darlene Jackson, Associate Dean of Human Development and Child Development Centers, Sierra College
- Marianne Jones, Professor, Department of Child, Family, and Consumer Sciences, California State University, Fresno
- Claire G. Knox, Chair and Professor, Child Development, California State University, Humboldt
- Florence Nelson, Senior Policy Analyst, ZERO TO THREE Western Office

- James Rodriguez, Associate Professor, Child and Adolescent Studies, California State University, Fullerton
- Marcy Whitebook, Director, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

The panel of expert advisors worked closely with CDE/CDD and First 5 California through participation in two in-person work group meetings each year of the two-year project. Several conference call meetings were held with the entire group, as well as subgroup-committee in-person and phone meetings related to specific competency areas.

One of the panel's first steps was to develop a preliminary outline of the competencies document, which was then used to draft sample competencies. The outline became a foundation for subsequent project work. Through several iterations, content was fleshed out by panel members and underwent numerous revisions. The expert panel also formed subgroups, each with the responsibility for developing a specific competency area. In ongoing cycles of engagement and continuous improvement with experts and practitioners in the field through stakeholder meetings, focus groups, and public website input, each draft reflected analyses, input, and feedback gathered prior to its completion.

#### Stakeholder and Focus Group Process

Preliminary drafts of sample competency areas were first presented to the early care and education field at a stakeholder meeting in February 2009. Stakeholders were also asked to weigh in on several pivotal questions, including the following:

- How should the competency areas be organized, for example, by performance areas?
- What types of content should be represented in the competencies, e.g., knowledge, skills, and dispositions?
- What competency areas should comprise the document?
- How many competency levels should be defined?
- How should the competency levels be identified and defined?

Stakeholder meeting participants included representatives from statewide early childhood organizations, community college faculty and instructors, program directors, trainers, preschool and infant/toddler teachers, Head Start education coordinators and other staff, and early interventionists. Feedback from the meeting was shared with CDE/CDD, First 5 California, and the panel of expert advisors and used to prepare drafts of sample competencies for broader input from the field. A complete draft of the ECE Competencies was presented to key statewide organizations in a subsequent one-day stakeholder meeting in November 2009.

During the same period the first stakeholder meeting was conducted, early education professionals and organizations throughout California had the opportunity to provide input to guide the development of the competencies through an initial set of five focus groups. The focus groups allowed CDE/CDD, First 5 California, and the panel of expert advisors to obtain input from the intended audience for the ECE Competencies—practitioners and those who responsible for their professional development. The first series of focus group sessions centered on the preliminary outline, sample competencies, and key questions. A subsequent set of five focus groups conducted during the second year of the project allowed the gathering of

input from the field on the draft ECE Competencies. Each focus group included representatives from identified statewide early childhood professional organizations, preschool practitioners, program directors, resource and referral agencies, community colleges, and other identified local representatives.

Once the draft competencies were revised based on feedback from the second stakeholder meeting, the second round of focus groups, and a universal design review, a draft was developed for CDE/CDD to post on its Web site for commentary from the field. All input received was analyzed and considered for inclusion in the final document.

#### Competency Areas

On the outset of the project, CDE/CDE, First 5 California, the WestEd project team, and the expert advisory panel considered the list of competency areas used in the organization of the Research Report (2008). The list, which was based on a review of areas defined by a large number of states, consisted of the following eight areas:

1. Child Development and Learning
2. Child Observation and Assessment
3. Learning Environments and Curriculum
4. Positive Interaction and Guidance
5. Family and Community
6. Health, Safety, and Nutrition
7. Professionalism, Professional Development and Leadership
8. Administration and Management

The Research Report (2008) concluded that California had an opportunity to break new ground by developing competency

areas in culture, diversity, and equity, dual-language development, and special needs and inclusion. The early care and education field in California clearly wanted attention to these additional areas. The Research Report (2008) summarized the field's sentiment in the following way:

Finally, we overwhelmingly heard, in the online survey and at our series of public input meetings, that the development of revised and expanded ECE Competencies was a major opportunity for California to take national leadership in highlighting the central importance of educator competency in the areas of cultural diversity, dual language learning, and the care and education of children with special needs. While we have learned a great deal from reviewing the work of other states, and are confident that much of it is readily adaptable to California, we consistently heard that no other state or organization has addressed the above questions in a way that adequately reflects the diverse needs of California's children and families. The state's ECE field is eager to be of service in articulating standards for early educators in terms of culture, dual language learning, and special needs, in a way that has not been done before. (p. 81)

Thus, the preliminary list of competency areas included three new areas. Through the process of analyzing input from stakeholders and focus groups, the advisory group recommended to expand the eleven areas into twelve by splitting the area of Professionalism, Professional Development and Leadership into two separate competency areas, namely, Professionalism and Leadership. In addition, a decision was

reached to embed professional development into all of the competency areas. Finally, various groups suggested revised wording of the names of some of the competency areas. The resulting list of twelve competency areas presented in this document:

1. Child Development and Learning
2. Cultural Diversity and Equity
3. Relationships, Interactions, and Guidance
4. Family and Community Engagement
5. Dual-Language Development
6. Observation, Screening, Assessment, and Documentation
7. Special Needs and Inclusion
8. Learning Environments and Curriculum
9. Health, Safety, and Nutrition
10. Leadership
11. Professionalism
12. Administration and Supervision

Of course, the content of these competency areas overlap with one another. Rather than presenting specific content in only one competency area, where appropriate this document allows for overlap in content between competency areas. For example, the area of Learning Environments and Curriculum contains some content that also appears under the area of Observation, Assessment, Screening, and Documentation. Likewise, content under Administration and Supervision overlaps with that under Leadership, and content under Culture, Diversity, and Equity overlaps with that under both

Dual-Language Development and Family and Community Engagement.

Several sections make up each of the competency areas. The organization of each competency area evolved through the process of defining and then iteratively revising the preliminary outline. The sections are the following:

- **Competency Area.** A competency area organizes knowledge, skills, and dispositions that collectively define an essential component of high quality, effective early care and education practice.
- **Introduction.** The introduction provides a brief overview of the competency area.
- **Key Concepts.** The key concepts are based on theory, research, and practice around which the content of a competency area is organized.
- **Dispositions.** The dispositions focus on the attitudes, values, approaches to learning, and motivational factors that contribute to an individual's overall development in a competency area.
- **Performance Areas.** The performance areas organize the knowledge and skills within a competency area into a small number of categories.
- **Topics.** The topics identify specific knowledge and skills within a performance area.
- **Competency Levels I, II, III, and IV.** A continuum or rubric that describes knowledge, skills, actions and scopes of responsibility for each topic within a performance area.

Introduction

Key Concepts • • •
Dispositions • • •
Performance Areas A. B. C.

Topics	Competency Level I	Competency Level II	Competency Level III	Competency Level IV

The content of each of the above sections was first developed by subgroups of the expert advisory panel, in collaboration with CDE/CDD, First 5 California, and WestEd. Much of the preliminary content underwent substantial revision based on stakeholder and focus group input, and universal design review.

Competency Levels

A key consideration in writing the competencies was the structure and definition of the levels. Input from the field clearly indicated that four levels were preferred. Less clear, however, was whether the levels should be labeled or simply designated by numbers. A careful analysis of the input led to the decision to designate the levels by numbers. Once the decision was reached to have four levels, a rubric was



formulated to distinguish the competency levels from one another.

Several considerations factored into the definition of the rubric. Similar to the input gathered from public meetings in the Research Report (2008), input collected from stakeholders and focus groups in this project indicated that many people in the field preferred competency levels defined by a

combination of stage of career, job category, education, and experience. The expert advisory panel suggested that actions one performs (for example, assist, evaluate, supervise) should be used to define the levels. A related approach was used to describe the functions of one's role and scope of responsibility to define each level. These various considerations resulted in the definitions that appear in Chart 1.

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Chart 1. Rubric that defines competency levels

Competency Level I	Competency Level II <i>Level I, plus:</i>	Competency Level III <i>Level II, plus:</i>	Competency Level IV <i>Level III, plus:</i>
An early childhood educator (ECE) operating at this level possesses and applies fundamental knowledge, usually in the immediate context of the group or classroom.	An ECE operating at this level possesses and applies broad knowledge, usually in the immediate context of the group or classroom.	An ECE operating at this level possesses and applies deep knowledge, usually in the broad context of a program or site, and supervises program staff.	An ECE operating at this level models data-based decision-making that often has an impact on policy and practice across programs or in the early care and education field.
Level I competency is generally described as a supporting or assistive role but may also include initiative or decision-making in straightforward situations or in the immediate context of the group or classroom.	Level II competency is generally described as making decisions that have an impact on the immediate context of the group or classroom and contributing to decisions that influence the broader context of the program or site.	Level III competency is generally described as making decisions, resolving problems, and supporting the culture or community in the broader context of a program or site.	Level IV Competency is generally described as initiating, proposing, recommending, or negotiating policies, advocating for children, families, and early educators within the larger community, and contributing to knowledge and practice in the early care and education field.
<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implements basic procedures and thinks of ways to make them developmentally appropriate and individually meaningful for children, as appropriate</li> <li>• Responds to families or shares stories about the child's day in a manner consistent with program philosophy</li> <li>• Responds to or initiates interactions with children in a manner consistent with program philosophy</li> <li>• Is familiar with program</li> </ul>	<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explains policies to children, classroom staff, or families; adapts policies or practice to meet individual needs, as appropriate</li> <li>• Initiates interactions with families or engages in two-way communication about most aspects of a child's learning and development</li> <li>• Anticipates the needs of children, families, or classroom staff</li> <li>• Addresses questions or concerns from classroom staff; refers complex issues</li> </ul>	<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interprets and evaluates the effectiveness of policies</li> <li>• Develops policies and practices to engage families throughout the program</li> <li>• Determines program elements (e.g., curriculum) and services, in collaboration with program staff and families as appropriate</li> <li>• Resolves questions or concerns from program staff; anticipates challenges impacting the program</li> <li>• Uses current research to inform practice</li> </ul>	<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiates or justifies policies or decisions and applies them to practice in early care and education settings</li> <li>• Collaborates with families and community leaders to identify and address barriers to family engagement in early education settings and in the community</li> <li>• Anticipates or addresses problems based on current trends</li> <li>• Synthesizes scientific research and analyzes its applicability to early education settings and practice</li> <li>• Addresses issues affecting families and the early care and education</li> </ul>

<p>philosophy or policies and basic implications for practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refers questions or concerns to appropriate staff</li> <li>• Understands basic developmental theory and rationale that drive our policies and practices</li> <li>• Contributes ideas as a team member</li> </ul>	<p>to appropriate program staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands more complex developmental constructs and rationale for practice;</li> <li>• Guides the team in planning and decision-making, gathering information from classroom staff and inviting participation from families as appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzes program scope, quality, and effectiveness</li> <li>• Collaborates with program staff and families in program planning and decision-making</li> <li>• Builds relationships among program staff, assures a positive work environment, supervises program staff</li> </ul>	<p>field such as affordability, accessibility, and quality of services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds support for ECE programs in the larger community</li> <li>• Addresses issues affecting ECE professionals, workforce development, and workforce compensation</li> </ul>
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When the rubric for the competency levels is applied to Performance Areas within Competency Areas, two points become clear. One, a competency level builds on the level immediately preceding it. In other words, an individual at Competency Level II in a Performance Area is capable of performing all of the actions and responsibilities characteristic of Level I in that Performance Area. And two, an individual may function in a way that corresponds to one level in one Competency Area and to another level in a different Competency Area. For example, an early childhood educator who demonstrates knowledge and skills at Competency Level II may have deep expertise and act as a leader in another specific content area such as dual-language development.

In general, each competency level describes the knowledge and skills needed to perform responsibilities of certain kinds of work effectively. For example, a person may work competently in a role that requires Level II knowledge and skills for many years—perhaps for an entire career. Continuing education would allow that person to deepen knowledge and skills within Level II and also gain knowledge and skills at Level III and Level IV. Such professional development would enhance the person's overall competency, but may not necessarily lead to that person

assuming a role that corresponds to the knowledge and skills of Level III. At the same time, the competency levels give guidance to early childhood educators interested in advancing their careers through education. Taken together, the competency levels form a continuum that defines a path for developing professionals. This continuum of competency levels from I to IV shows steps in knowledge and skill development an early childhood educator would take to grow professionally and become qualified for work roles with ever-increasing scopes of responsibilities.

[A Resource for the Preparation and Continuing Development of Early Childhood Educators](#)

Because the ECE Competencies reflect input and guidance from leaders, program directors, and teachers throughout California, this document offers a resource to the early care and education field that will be used in various ways. The higher education community will use the competencies as a point of reference as it seeks to align college-level courses and create articulation between 2-year and 4-year educational programs. Organizations that offer in-service training in centers and training for family child care providers will use the competencies to guide the range of curriculum content. The competencies also offer a

framework that will guide the development of an early childhood credential and certifications. Likewise, the vision of care and education that the competencies present will contribute to a comprehensive definition of quality. In specifying a broad range of knowledge and skills that contribute to high quality early childhood education, the competencies give focus to the effort to develop and implement a quality rating improvement system in California. Finally, individuals interested in early care and education or already working as early childhood educators will look to the competencies for ideas about the type of education and professional development they should pursue.

In every use of these competencies there is an opportunity to promote the early care and education profession. As the Professionalism Competency Area makes clear, to belong to a professional community means to be committed to ongoing learning. An essential part of being a competent early childhood educator involves continuing to build one's own knowledge, skills, and dispositions and contributing to the professional growth of other members of the community. Early childhood educators in communities of learners throughout California will add the competencies to the increasing number of aligned resources to support their efforts to grow individually and to grow the profession. With a united vision emphasizing the vital importance of the work of early childhood educators, the profession will take a giant step forward toward the goal of providing effective services that create the best outcomes for all young children and their families.

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