Discussion Guide
Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges with Early Childhood Partnerships

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely challenging for everyone, and specifically in our world of early childhood for families, children, and early childhood program staff. Most centers have closed for safety/shelter-in-place mandates. Some are only open on an emergency basis to serve children of essential workers, with staff who are fearful or unable to work and lacking equipment and supplies needed to ensure health and safety.

We all share the mission of educating and supporting young children and their families, which requires creativity and new ways of working while maintaining social distancing and safety during this challenging time. Early childhood programs can support each other during this time of isolation.

Local Approach and Questions
Steps to Sharing Ideas and Strategies with Your Early Childhood Counterparts in Your Community

Step One. Decide who your early childhood program partners are and who you want to contact.

Step Two. Decide how you will contact them. You can contact each partner individually or set up an online meeting or conference call with a group of partners/potential partners using Zoom, conference calling or another platform.

Step Three. Decide what your purposes are for the discussion and what topics or questions will frame the discussion(s). What do you want to get out of the meeting(s)? What might your partners get out of them? Consider things such as each partner gaining new and innovative strategies for:
- Educating and supporting staff, children, and families during the pandemic that each can apply to their programs.
- Planning for re-opening.
- Revising disaster preparedness plans considering this pandemic so all are better prepared in the future.
- Building relationships so program leaders do not feel so isolated.

Step Four. Plan the time to call or email to schedule the discussion(s). Make the calls and/or send the emails.

Step Five. Execute the meetings. In addition to the strategy discussions, decide together how you will record and follow up on the discussions, whether you will meet again, and, if so, when, and how often.

Potential Questions to Initiate Discussion
- What strategies are you using to support staff?
- What strategies are you using to support families?
- How are you educating children and helping parents support them? (resources, delivery methods, frequency, etc.)
- How are you funding your programming?
- What kinds of documentation and reporting are you doing?
- What successes have you had?
- What challenges are you facing and how are you addressing them?
- What community resources have been most helpful?
- What are your plans for re-opening?
- Have you revised your disaster/emergency preparedness plans and if so, how? Are you willing to share them?
**Partnership Tools to Assist in Initiating Conversations**

The following tools can be found on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website. While they were developed targeting Head Start and Early Head Start - Child Care Partnerships, they are useful for *all* early childhood partnerships.

- **Partnership Basics: Strategies for Creating Successful Partnerships.**
- **Shaping the Partnership: An Assessment Checklist.**
  [https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/quilt_shaping_partnership_assessment_0.pdf](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/quilt_shaping_partnership_assessment_0.pdf)
- **Foundations for Fostering Partnerships**
- **Ensuring Collaborative Partnerships (strategies for meetings, decision making and resolving conflict)**

**Local Program Strategy Examples**

In coming together in communities to discuss partnerships to support young children and families during the pandemic, these strategy examples may be helpful for discussion:

- **Maintaining regular contact with all families and continuing support to children** and families via virtual communications and other creative outreach that limits exposure and risk, such as phone calls, video chats, texts, emails, or other mediums. During these contacts, staff offer support, ask parents how they are doing, connect with children, and tell them they are missed. Staff offer a listening ear for caregivers who want to talk about parenting challenges, behavioral health issues, and other challenges.
- **Providing food, diapers, wipes, and formula** to children and families; partnering with food pantries to distribute food to adults as well as children; partnering with local diaper banks to distribute diapers for siblings.
- **Providing backpacks containing books and toys for learning.**
- **Supporting child development virtually.** Posting videos from teachers/home visitors online or using direct video messaging, including reading to children. Reassuring children with simple, consistent messages; doing a familiar greeting, song, or finger play.
- **Advocating for technology resources for families**, including paying for additional cell minutes, tablets, etc.
- **Connecting families to community supports** to help relieve their stress and burdens; providing parents and caregivers with needed information and resources; providing families with telephone numbers to local domestic violence shelters, child protective services, and local community mental health centers that have moved to telehealth appointments.
- **Helping families stay connected virtually** so that social distancing doesn’t mean social isolation by helping them take advantage of free video platforms so they can stay in touch.
- **Encouraging parents to establish routines at home** by providing some examples of what a daily schedule might look like. Teachers and home visitors can help parents make a visual daily schedule for children using pictures or simple drawings.
- **Supporting parent-child relationships** by reminding parents that their main job is to take care of themselves and to keep their children as safe and secure. Offer easy, low stress activities to do with children. Conduct parent cafes or parenting curricula groups via video so parents can connect with each other.
- **Pushing out positive messages to parents** on social media and texting platforms. Refer to: Using Social Media to Engage Families and Social Media Essentials for Getting Head Start Programs Connected.
- **Providing mental health tele-therapy and phone counseling**, mental health consultation with staff, and strategies to support staff wellness. If a staff person or family needs immediate behavioral health services, consider using the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) National Helpline and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.
Federal Funder Flexibilities and Supports
Highlights on flexibilities from federal funders are outlined below and may be useful to early childhood providers in discussions about how they can collaborate to provide programming and resources to support young children and families in communities across Tennessee.

Administration for Children & Families (ACF)
ACF is providing short-term relief for administrative, financial management, and audit requirements for federal grants. Among other exemptions and extension for federal grants, a few of these include allowing programs to:

• Continue to charge salaries and benefits consistent with their policy of paying staff compensation under unexpected or extraordinary circumstances. Programs can amend/create emergency policies in order to put emergency contingencies in place.
• Charge other program-related costs that are reasonable and allowable and needed to resume activities.
• Charge costs related to the cancellation of events, travel, and/or other activities or the pausing and restarting of activities due to the public health emergency.
• Not have to seek prior approval for allowable costs to effectively address the public health emergency response.

For the full text of these allowances, refer to: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/im_acf_oa_2020_01_acf_covid_flexibilities_final_march_30_2020.pdf

Office of Head Start (OHS)
In addition to postponing federal monitoring visits, OHS is providing flexibilities for HS/EHS programs to:

• Pay staff salaries and benefits during the closure (see bullet 4 above). Some staff may be considered essential and may be doing some work from offices. Others may be working from home. Others may not be working. However, all are to be paid and be provided benefits.
• Provide diapers, wipes, and formula to infants and toddlers in EHS programs, including EHS-CC Partnerships.


Office of Child Care (OCC)
OCC has provided flexibilities for States in child care that include the ability to:

• Change eligibility or priority criteria and extend eligibility re-determination.
• Define income and set the income threshold for child care eligibility.
• Waive family co-payment requirements for families that meet criteria they establish.
• Provide continued payments and assistance to child care providers who experience decreased enrollment or closures related to coronavirus to help them stay open or reopen; may pay providers based on a child’s enrollment rather than attendance.
• Use quality dollars to provide immediate assistance to impacted families, including families that do not participate in child care services.
• Prohibits states from terminating child care assistance for families impacted by COVID-19 before the end of their 12-month eligibility period if a family experiences a temporary job loss or change in a training/education activity.

Tennessee Flexibilities and Supports

**TN Department of Human Services (TDHS)**

*For child care.* TDHS is making $10 million available to licensed child care providers impacted by COVID-19 via grants distributed by the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee. These grants can support:

- Lost income resulting from closing due to the COVID-19 emergency, with grant awards based on itemized losses to operating income during the period of closure.
- Response and recovery operations costs as a result of the COVID-19 emergency such as cleaning, utility repair, inspections, and substitute staffing, with grant awards based on actual costs incurred.
- Equipment, materials and supplies that were lost or compromised as a result of the COVID-19 emergency such as area rugs, soft toys like stuffed animals, books, curriculum, learning tools and displays, damaged cabinets and shelving, supplies, and playground surfacing and equipment.
- Consultants and coaches needed specifically related to COVID-19 emergency impacts such as helping children, caregivers, or staff through recovery, grief, anxiety, stress, or trauma.


*For families.* TDHS has made essential financial resources available to families significantly impacted by the COVID-19 emergency. Families can apply online for up to 2 months of emergency cash assistance if they were employed as of March 11, 2020 and have lost employment or at least 50% of their earned income as a result of the pandemic.


**Links to Other Useful Tools and Resources**

OHS resources, tips and strategies include:

- Partnering with Families to Improve Economic Stability During and After COVID-19. [http://hsicc.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/j/A2F10186ABE422C42540EF23F30FEDED/496F5A042358942344D0DD5392A9C75A](http://hsicc.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/j/A2F10186ABE422C42540EF23F30FEDED/496F5A042358942344D0DD5392A9C75A)

OCC has some tools/resources useful in addressing the demands of this pandemic:

- Preparing Child Care Programs for Pandemic Influenza [https://hsicc.cmail19.com/t/j-i-qrlhdjl-l-z/](https://hsicc.cmail19.com/t/j-i-qrlhdjl-l-z/)