Connecting families involved in child protective services to early learning programs and family supports in Washington

For families with young children, high quality early learning services can enhance healthy child development and support their ability to keep their children safe. In Washington, however, fewer than half of eligible families involved with child protection were reaching these programs. With pro-bono technical assistance from the GPL, the state sought to overcome these barriers and connect more families to early learning programs.

The Challenge:

A mandate to strengthen early learning

Washington's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) aimed to better connect families involved with child protective services (CPS) to early learning programs and family supports in order to prevent instances of child abuse and neglect and support healthy child development. Newly created in July 2018, DCYF brought the state's child protective services and early childhood development functions under a single roof with a goal of proactively supporting families, rather than waiting to get involved after child abuse or neglect had already occurred.

The new DCYF had a mandate to offer early learning and/or family support programs to the 23,500 families with children under five who become involved with CPS each year[1] — an effort in line with evidence that suggests these services can help families prevent maltreatment, reduce entry into foster care, and improve wellbeing.[2] Despite this vision, DCYF had not yet figured out what practice changes were needed to improve the way the agency served families with young children.

> "Better connecting our child-welfare-involved families to early care and education is not only foundational to the creation of our new agency, it's critical to improve outcomes for children and strengthen families so they flourish."
>
> – Vickie Ybarra, Director of Office of Innovation, Alignment and Accountability, Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families

Barriers to supporting families with young children

As the new agency launched, field staff reported many child protection caseworkers were struggling to consistently identify and connect eligible families to programs in its early learning service array. These programs – including family home visiting, early intervention, Head Start/Early Head Start, high quality childcare, infant/toddler mental health services, and the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program – advance healthy child development and can link families with other beneficial supports. Additionally, agency research indicated that Black families had been underrepresented in Washington's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program and home visiting services.[3]

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[1] Based on estimate of unduplicated children in SFY2019 for DCYF FFPSA candidacy groups: CPS Family Assessment Response, CPS Investigation, and CPS Family Voluntary Services. Children ages 0-5 make up roughly 45% of all cases.

[2] 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.*

[3] Cummings, K., Graham, J. C., Veele, S., & Ybarra, V. (2021). Using Data in DCYF to Advance Racial Equity. Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families – Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability, Figure 8, PDF page 25. www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/reports/OIAAEquityData2021.pdf

Families typically had to proactively ask for services, contact the provider, and navigate the enrollment process on their own in order to get connected to early learning services. As a result, many eligible families were missing the opportunity to benefit from these services because they did not know about them, did not understand the potential benefits, or because the family did not have the bandwidth to persistently follow up and make sure they got enrolled.

With help from the Government Performance Lab (GPL), DCYF worked with families, providers, and its caseworkers to uncover barriers that impeded child protection workers from helping families access early learning services. Across the referral process, five challenges emerged:
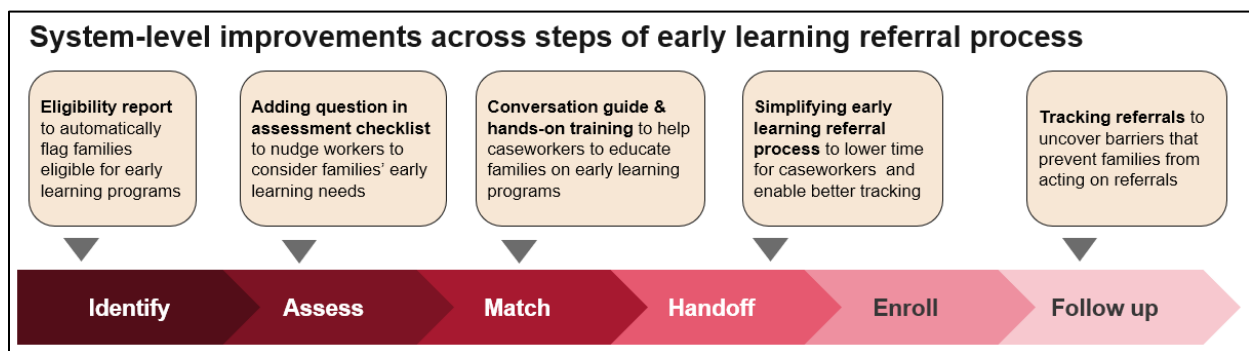
- ***Inconsistent identification of families eligible for early learning***: Given a lack of awareness of early learning programs, as well as many competing priorities for their time, many caseworkers simply did not consider families for early learning services. Among those who did, caseworkers did not have access to consistent resources to know when and where early learning services were available. Many staff thought they should only offer early learning services if the caseworker identified a developmental delay or if the family actively requested early learning resources. DCYF leadership and state policymakers, however, expected a much broader interpretation of the referral policy and wanted all child protective services-involved families with children under five to be offered early learning services.

- ***Family needs assessments did not consider learning:*** Caseworkers were not always trained to identify families' or their children's developmental needs. Additionally, DCYF's assessment tools did not explicitly prompt caseworkers to consider whether early learning services might benefit a family.

- ***Difficulty in helping families select the most appropriate services:*** Most caseworkers were not very familiar with the early learning programs, making it difficult for them to explain the services to families. What's more, the early learning services landscape varied a lot by community and had complex eligibility requirements, challenging caseworkers to figure out which services would be most appropriate for each family's unique circumstances and needs. Lastly, if a family did express interest in an early learning service, there was no easy way for them to know whether the program had space available — making it even more difficult to match a family to a provider.

- ***Cumbersome mechanics for connecting families with providers:*** The referral process was burdensome for busy caseworkers. Early learning providers often each had their own referral form, and points of contact for DCYF frequently changed due to providers' high staff turnover rates. Many of Washington's communities have large populations of families for whom English is not their native language, which can mean referrals require explaining the services and supporting families to navigate the enrollment process through an interpreter. In addition, the referral process was not integrated into the agency's CPS case management system. As a result, it was impossible for the agency to monitor the share of eligible families who were referred, and — for caseworkers — it was much more time-intensive to make referrals to early learning services than it was to make referrals to services that were integrated into the case management system.

- ***Inadequate follow-up to encourage service enrollment:*** With no mechanism in place to track when families actually enrolled in services, caseworkers had no way of knowing which families would benefit from additional outreach, encouragement, or a follow-up call to answer questions.

On top of these operational gaps, DCYF simply didn't know how often CPS caseworkers were referring families or how many of these families were successfully enrolling in early learning programs, since no systematic measurement occurred during these crucial referral touchpoints.

The Innovations: With support from the GPL, DCYF sought to revamp its statewide referral protocols in order to better connect families involved with CPS to early learning services. The state also created early learning service navigator positions within pilot DCYF offices; the navigators — who have expertise in both the child welfare and early learning systems — work alongside CPS caseworkers to help interested families successfully start services. As part of these efforts, project partners have:

1. **Integrated early learning referrals into child safety workflows and systems**
    With busy child welfare social workers whose primary focus is on child safety, DCYF had to find a way to make it easier for field staff to consider early learning needs and offer families services when needed. These reforms could be developed out of headquarters and then made available to help staff in local field offices across the state.

System-level improvements across steps of early learning referral process

| **Eligibility report** to automatically flag families eligible for early learning programs | **Adding question in assessment checklist** to nudge workers to consider families' early learning needs | **Conversation guide & hands-on training** to help caseworkers to educate families on early learning programs | **Simplifying early learning referral process** to lower time for caseworkers and enable better tracking | | **Tracking referrals** to uncover barriers that prevent families from acting on referrals |

Identify → **Assess** → **Match** → **Handoff** → **Enroll** → **Follow up**

These systems-level improvements included:

*   ***Automatically flagging families eligible for early learning.*** One challenge DCYF encountered in increasing referrals was that there was no easy way to identify the CPS-involved families with children under the age of five (and therefore eligible for early learning services). To overcome this, DCYF developed a new case management system report in their data reporting system that enables workers to pull a real-time list of all cases with children under five, including both children who are suspected victims of maltreatment, and any other household members under five. This reminds case workers and their supervisors to offer early learning services for cases that they might have previously overlooked (e.g. a case regarding an older child, but who has a younger sibling).

*   ***Nudging case workers to consider families' early learning needs.*** DCYF is introducing questions related to early learning needs into the investigation and differential response assessment checklist for staff. When a family with a child under the age of six has a case file created in the state's case management system, the system will prompt caseworkers to assess the family's early learning needs and to document whether they referred the family to a service.

*   ***Building capacity of CPS caseworkers to educate families on early learning programs through a family conversation guide and hands-on training.*** Caseworkers — who often had only a very basic sense of the available programs — often struggled to explain the benefits to families and answer parent questions. DCYF created

a family conversation guide[4] to help any DCYF worker making referrals to early learning and family support programs to have supportive and productive conversations with parents. The guide offers advice to caseworkers on how to introduce early learning as a concept, provides best practices for navigating a conversation with parents with suggestions for how to respond to common questions or concerns, and includes quick-reference information for each early learning program in the state.

- ***Simplifying the early learning referral process by enabling workers to initiate connections using the state's case management system.*** Previously, CPS staff had to manage different forms, separate information sharing protocols, and frequently changing contact information for each learning service in their community. Referrals were made through emails, phone calls, or fax, and then manually recorded in the state's case management system. DCYF is planning to make it easier for caseworkers by modifying the state's existing case management technology platform so that it can be used to initiate referrals to early learning programs. This will reduce the need for workers to spend time searching for the right referral form and entering duplicate information that already exists in the case management system. This change will also foster improved communication between CPS staff, community providers, and families by ensuring that consistent information is being shared every time a referral is made.

- ***Uncovering emerging barriers that prevent interested families from acting on early learning referrals.*** Automatically tracking referrals through the agency's case management system will enable the department to quickly diagnose and troubleshoot new challenges as they emerge, as well as develop more accurate assessments of service needs in each region and evaluate impacts on child welfare outcomes. DCYF is also developing an enrollment report that tells case workers when interested families have not yet acted on an early learning referral so that they may follow up with the family to provide any additional support that may be helpful.

2. **Created dedicated early learning service navigator positions**
   Despite these improvements, the agency found that as long as caseworkers' primary accountability was ensuring the physical safety of children, early learning was often crowded out by competing priorities. With grant funds from the federal Preschool Development Grant program, the state created a small number of early learning service navigator positions within DCYF pilot offices. The navigators — who have expertise in both child welfare and early learning systems — work alongside CPS caseworkers to help interested families successfully start in services.

   These navigators proactively identify and reach out to eligible families, assess families' early learning needs, and then match them with a service in their community (with a focus on services that have a wrap-around component). They then support families in completing any enrollment paperwork and follow up with the family and the provider to

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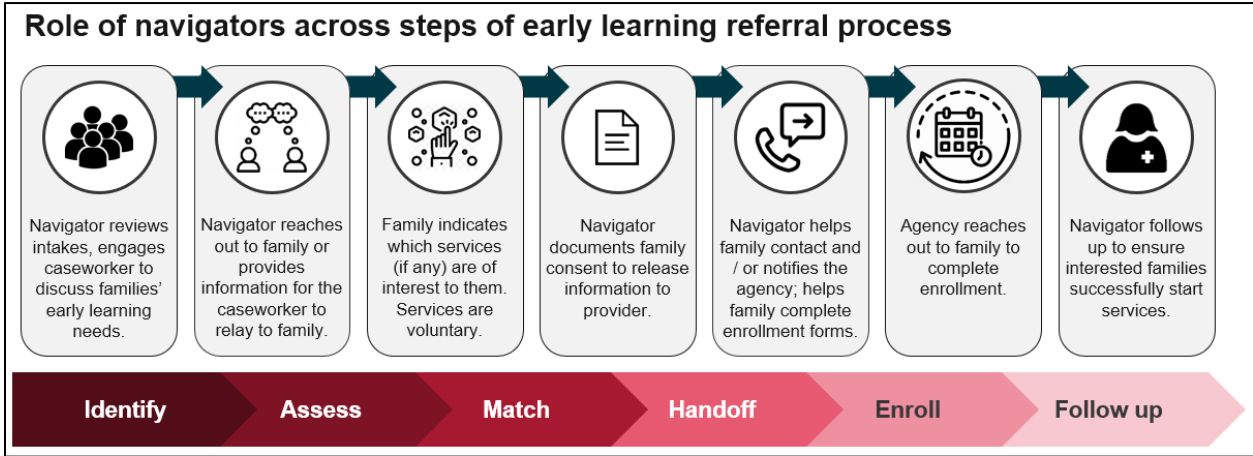| **How do early learning service navigators help families?** |
| --- |
| **Support case workers to make referrals** |
| • *Information-sharer*: Providing caseworker information on service types and availability |
| • *Broker*: Serving as go-between for caseworkers and providers |
| • *Closer*: Caseworker initiates contact with family; navigator completes referral |
| • *Doer*: Caseworker hands off to navigator to engage family on early learning needs |
| **Build and maintain connections with early learning providers** |
| • Meeting with local early learning coalition |
| • Updating early learning resource guide for the community |
| • Engaging providers to track program openings and find contact information |
| **Contribute to community of practice** |
| • Sharing referral strategies and solutions |
| • Interpreting data to uncover trends |

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[4] Readers can access the conversation guide at
https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/govlabs/files/wadcyf_early_learning_conversation_guide.pdf
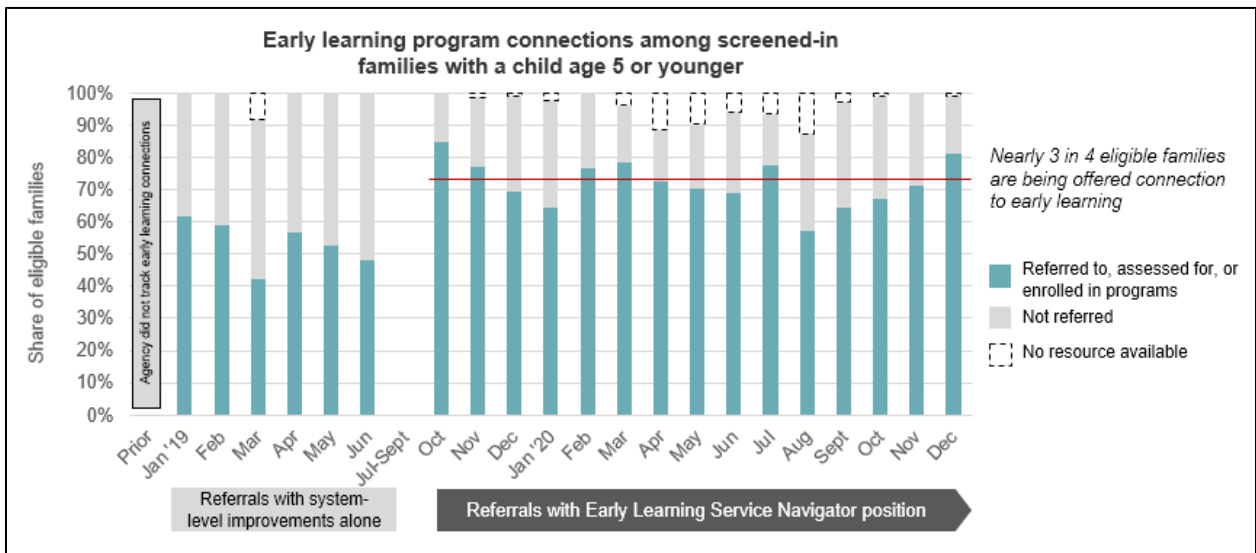
help address barriers to successful participation. The navigators are also responsible for maintaining current contact information with early learning providers, staying abreast of changes in local programming and community resources – including program availability – and serving as DCYF's consistent local point of contact for providers. Duties of the navigator are broken down in the text box below.

Role of navigators across steps of early learning referral process

| Navigator reviews intakes, engages caseworker to discuss families' early learning needs. | Navigator reaches out to family or provides information for the caseworker to relay to family. | Family indicates which services (if any) are of interest to them. Services are voluntary. | Navigator documents family consent to release information to provider. | Navigator helps family contact and / or notifies the agency; helps family complete enrollment forms. | Agency reaches out to family to complete enrollment. | Navigator follows up to ensure interested families successfully start services. |

Identify → **Assess** → **Match** → **Handoff** → **Enroll** → **Follow up**

The Results: In their efforts to connect more families to early learning programs, Washington DCYF has seen promising results. These include:

1. **A large share of families is being offered early learning services – including many families of color**
   In the communities where both system-level changes and navigators have been rolled out, nearly 3 in 4 eligible families are being offered a connection to early learning, are already enrolled in early learning, or were found to not need early learning.[5] This represents an improvement by more than one-third compared to early stages of the pilot when just a subset of the system-level changes had been implemented.

Early learning program connections among screened-in families with a child age 5 or younger

Nearly 3 in 4 eligible families are being offered connection to early learning

Legend:
- Referred to, assessed for, or enrolled in programs
- Not referred
- No resource available

Referrals with system-level improvements alone | Referrals with Early Learning Service Navigator position

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[5] 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 12/31/2020. No data captured between July and Sept.

DCYF has found that by giving its staff the time and tools to explain potential resources to families, families are more likely to express interest in a referral. What's more, while staff had initially been concerned that programs wouldn't have enough space to accommodate more families, DCYF observed that navigators are able to make connections to services even when agencies don't have openings listed, due to their preexisting relationships with programs and persistent follow-up on behalf of interested families.

DCYF has also observed that families of color are being connected to resources at rates at least proportional to their representation in the population of all families coming to DCYF's attention in the regions where the work has begun. Among families for whom race information is available, Black families – who have been underrepresented in Washington's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program and home visiting services – are being offered these voluntary supports 30% more frequently than their peers.

2. **Scaling the navigator position to connect priority families to early learning services statewide**
    The department is pursuing investments to bring the navigator position to scale across the state, with Governor Inslee including a request to add more than 25 positions in his proposed 2021-23 budget. As the initial navigators have onboarded, the department is also exploring ways to further the impact of the positions by testing expansions of navigator support to additional client populations (such as trial return home cases), experimenting with remote support for additional field offices to expand geographic coverage, supporting case staffing discussions around families with complex needs, and building partnerships with community organizations with the potential to supplement navigator functions in high-volume communities.

3. **Applying these proactive coordination strategies to help families better connect to other voluntary supports, such as those expanded with Families First funding**
    As Washington State expands prevention services with federal Families First funds, it will be using many of these proactive coordination strategies to help families better connect to other voluntary supports. For example, DCYF has learned that case workers are more likely to offer supports when they are reminded to consider them for each family and when the referral process can be initiated through existing workflows. As a result, the agency is adding into its case management system prompts and referral tools for these new prevention programs.