

Children & Youth: Intervention, Prevention, and Mental Health Supports

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The sooner families, infants and kids are identified and connected with needed supports, the better their outcomes, as proven by decades of early intervention and brain development research.

Early intervention

- Intervening early in childhood can alter the life course trajectory in a positive direction. Substance abuse and other problem behaviors that manifest during adolescence have their roots in the developmental changes that occur earlier in life.
- While early intervention can be effective at any age, it is compelling when applied early in a person's life, when development is most easily shaped.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, include things like physical and emotional abuse, neglect, caregiver behavioral health challenges and household violence.
- Many Alaska children are exposed to trauma early, with 1 in 3 (32%) reported to child welfare before their 7th birthday, according to the Alaska Longitudinal Child Abuse and Neglect (ALCAN Link, 2020) study.
- Our current system does not usually intervene until children are at least school age (often late elementary) and can miss critical opportunities for optimally effective early intervention.
- Precise and targeted prevention occurring before birth and throughout childhood is needed to reduce or lessen the impact of adverse childhood events that result in trauma.

Infant Learning Program

The State Early Intervention/Infant Learning Program provides early intervention services statewide to over 1,600 children annually, age birth to three, who have a developmental delay.

Services may include: developmental screening and evaluation; individualized family service plans to outline goals for the family and their child; child development information; home visits; physical, occupational or speech therapy; specialized equipment; and/or referrals to other needed services.



Foster Care

- Multiple factors contribute to Alaska's high rate of children in foster care. Partners and evidence point to the need for a robust continuum of care for children and families that prioritizes prevention and family stabilization and improves supports and services for children and youth in foster care.
- Youth transitioning out of foster care with no permanent placement home identified are at higher risk of homelessness, substance use, and victimization for human and sex trafficking. Extended support for older foster youth transitioning to adulthood is necessary. Extension of flexible housing, vocational and transportation supports, together with increased service coordination will help stabilize older foster youth and improve long term outcomes.

Role of Medicaid

- Medicaid provides early and preventative support for children and families, reducing reliance on costly institutional care through community-based services.
- Alaska's 1115 Behavioral Health Medicaid Waiver expands access to behavioral health and substance use services for at-risk youth, fostering better long-term outcomes.
- Medicaid Waiver programs offer home and community-based supports for children with disabilities, helping them stay in their homes and communities while reducing the likelihood of crisis or institutionalization.

Key Points

- Understanding the importance and benefit of prevention and intervention programs for youth, children, and families is critical when making policy and funding decisions.
- Intervening early in childhood can alter the life course trajectory in a positive direction.
- Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are highly correlated with mental illness and substance use disorders later in life.
- While early intervention can be effective at any age, it is especially impactful when applied early in a person's life, when development is most easily shaped.
- Young Alaskans transitioning from foster care without necessary supports are at a higher risk of victimization.

Intervention & Prevention Fast Facts

- A child is 220% more likely to be reported to child welfare if a mother reports 4 or more pre-birth household dysfunction ACEs (ALCAN Link, 2020)
- 50% of Alaskan children in foster care are aged five years or younger when removed from their birth family (OCS 5-year Trends, 2017-2021)
- Alaska's foster care rate is 150% the national average (Alaska Kids Count, 2022)
- 39.8% of grandparents living with grandchildren under 18 in Alaska are responsible for their grandchildren's care. (2020 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau).
- 55% of children exiting the child welfare system are reunified with their parents (OCS 5-year Trends, 2017-2021)