

Early Matters. Quality Matters. Families Matter.

Children are born with great potential for development and learning . . .

The evidence is clear – experiences during the first few years of life have a profound and lasting impact. During the period from birth to age three, the developing brain forms more than one million new connections per second. These connections form the foundation for all future learning.

Unfortunately, not all children and families have equal access to positive early childhood experiences . . .

Systemic racism, intergenerational poverty, and the chronic underfunding of the early childhood system are the primary factors keeping high-quality early childhood experiences out of reach for many children.

Positive early childhood experiences make a difference . . .

Research shows that brain development is influenced by each young child's environment and experiences. Positive early childhood experiences – especially within high-quality early childhood programming – are essential for child health, learning, and overall well-being.

Political and organizational leaders across public sectors desire for Chattanooga-Hamilton County to be the best city-county for a child to be born and raised . . .

If Chattanooga-Hamilton County is to be a city-county where families, programs, and communities are thriving, now is the time to build a strong local network of early childhood and family supports while advocating for increased resources for the communities and parts of the system that need these resources the most.

For young children, families are the primary source of their earliest learning experiences and their means of connection to all that they need to thrive . . .

Early childhood services can support family stability and strong parent-child connections – the primary context in which children learn, develop, and form secure attachments during their earliest years. When families are connected to the early childhood programs and services they need, it not only benefits children, but also enables families to participate in the workforce and access other services in the community.

To help the Early Matters Chattanooga Coalition (the Coalition) realize this opportunity, the Coalition partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to lead a strategic planning process to strengthen the early childhood system in Chattanooga–Hamilton County. An integral part of this process involved hearing from families, providers, and other stakeholders across the community to understand the current realities of families and providers and create a plan that acknowledges the true needs of the community.



HOW DID WE LISTEN AND LEARN?



A central part of developing the strategic plan for the Coalition was to speak with families, providers, and community leaders to better understand their perspective on challenges and barriers faced in relation to accessing early childhood programs and services across Chattanooga-Hamilton County. Through these conversations, the project team developed community-centered strategies and action steps responsive to the challenges and realities shared by families, providers, and communities.

It is important to note that voluntary participation by families, early childhood directors and providers, and local community leaders was impacted by COVID-19. During the time in which interviews took place (May-June 2020), communities were dealing with closures of child care, schools, the overall economy, as well as the threat of infection, particularly within communities of color, who continue to experience the overlay of racial inequities and higher infection rates. During this same time period, families and communities of Chattanooga-Hamilton County had also been impacted by tornadoes, leaving many homes and communities with severe damage and distress. Coalition members supported SRC in identifying families, providers, and community leaders interested in informing this effort. The project team spoke with more than a dozen families, providers, and community leaders through telephone interviews.¹ All families and providers who chose to participate were given gift cards to thank them for sharing their time and perspectives with us.

¹ Interviewees included two providers, seven local community leaders, and four families.



WHAT DOES THE COMMUNITY WANT?

Safe and affordable early learning options that meet families' needs.

Families noted chief barriers as a lack of availability of child care options that met their needs around safety, quality, affordability, and accessibility. Families also cited that the safety and quality of care of their children can greatly vary, and for families with children with disabilities and developmental or health conditions, finding high-quality care to meet their needs became even more difficult.

“[The] hardest part when I had my kids was finding quality child care that was affordable. [You have to decide:] Do you work and take care of your kids or do you stay home to save the money for child care?”

– Parent interviewee

“Black students spend less time in the classroom due to discipline, which further hinders their access to a quality education.”

– Parent, Photovoice project participant

For the system to address racial and socioeconomic factors related to access, quality, and interactions.

Families shared that racialized policies and practices pervading the early childhood system disadvantage children of color, partly because of the high prevalence of exclusionary discipline and other unjust treatment of children

of color in early childhood programs. Parents also noted that, because of variances in what is available to different communities, early childhood learning opportunities are often segregated by race.

Engagement and connection to needed services and supports.

Disparities in access are worsened by inconsistent messaging and communication with families. Across many interviews, parents, providers, and other leaders shared that there is no consistent and well-known source of information about early childhood in the community and, as a result, families are frequently misinformed or unaware of services available.

“With my experience with the foster care system, I was aware of child care certifications and Tennessee Early Intervention System (TEIS), but my brother, who has children with similar ages, he had no idea of the services and resources available. There needs to be some sort of awareness built for families to know what types of resources are available for them and their children.”

– Parent interviewee

Consistent and adequate support for the early childhood system in Chattanooga–Hamilton County.

While city leadership has demonstrated a financial commitment to the early childhood system, the unique two-mayor structure has created inconsistent resourcing of the early childhood system, which is particularly felt as a lack of resources and opportunities for families outside of the Chattanooga city limits

“[Elected officials] say [access] is important, but don't think they make it a priority. Or if they do provide a program, it doesn't work for families. For example, if a program runs from 9 am–1 pm, when I'm at work, that defeats the purpose if I cannot access it.”

– Parent, Photovoice project participant

NOW WHAT?

Early Matters Chattanooga believes that **early matters**, **quality matters**, and **families matter**. Grounded in these principles for change, Early Matters Chattanooga is looking to strengthen the early childhood system by addressing challenges for families, programs, and the community over the next five years.

PRIORITY AREA 1 – Equity-Focused Systems-Building

Early Matters is focused on coordinating efforts across the city and supporting collaboration and alignment across child- and family-serving sectors. These efforts are grounded in the belief that, for all children and families to thrive, early childhood program and systems leaders across Chattanooga-Hamilton County must work in tandem to meet the diverse needs of children and families. Early Matters recognizes that its role in coordinating efforts is central to equity-focused systems-building. Systems-building strategies for Early Matters include:

1.1 Landscaping, Mapping & Advising on Strategic Initiatives

Ongoing documentation of early childhood efforts, conditions, and lived experiences of young children and their families is critical information to advise policymakers, system leaders, and the broader community on what parts of the system could work better for children and families, including priority populations, equity considerations, and implementation solutions.

1.2 Evaluation, Research & Improvement

Evaluation and continuous improvement of city- and countywide early childhood initiatives are critical to ensuring that all families are able to access the early childhood services and supports they need, elevating the voices of families and communities who have historically lacked access and been marginalized within the early childhood system.

1.3 Increasing Sustainability Through Community Partnerships

Engaging, coordinating, and aligning diverse community partners to develop strong local collaborations that enhance efficiency and equity for families navigating services is very important in creating a strong early childhood system.

PRIORITY AREA 2 – Advocacy

Effective advocacy is a key lever to effect and sustain long-term change and is integral to achieving Early Matters' vision of ensuring children, families, and communities are thriving. For that reason, Early Matters takes on the role of engaging the community in advocacy on behalf of children and families by building political will, cultivating community partnerships, and using this collective voice to advance the message of the importance and urgency of the early years. Advocacy strategies for Early Matters include:

2.1 Building Political Will & Driving Policy Change

Establishing relationships across political lines that support equity-focused early childhood policies in Chattanooga-Hamilton County is critical to ensure that long-term policies will transcend short-term politics.

2.2 Elevating Family & Community Champions

Developing family and community leaders amplifies systems change efforts by centering and increasing the capacity of those most impacted.

2.3 Leveraging Collective Voice to Advance Key Messages

Leveraging the Coalition's collective voice and vision to the broader stakeholder community relays the urgency and importance of what children need to thrive and what barriers need to be addressed to advance equitable access and strong outcomes for all children in Chattanooga-Hamilton County.