

Family Support Coordination

First Things First will expand families' access to the information, services and supports they need to help their young children achieve their fullest potential. To make the best choices, families need access to information that educates them about what their child is learning and doing, how to optimally support early childhood development and child health and what resources or programs are available in their community. Families also need opportunities to connect with other families in their community. The continuum of high-quality services and support will be planned, developed, funded, and delivered in a family-centered, comprehensive, collaborative, culturally and linguistically responsive manner that best meets the needs and preferences of families, leverages available resources, and involves families in the program development and implementation. As a result of First Things First's efforts, families who need or want assistance have the support they need to use language and play throughout their daily routines and interactions, read with their children daily and increase their competence and confidence about their ability to support their child's safety, health and well-being.

To meet families' needs for clear and specific information, First Things First Regional Partnership Councils can implement a family support coordination strategy that serves families with children under 5 primarily through direct case management service. The strategy is implemented in five steps: assessment, goal setting and service plan development, identification and linkages to services, coordination and monitoring of services, disengagement. Case management begins with an assessment process. A thorough assessment of strengths and needs by a case manager and family members, working in partnership, will help to identify existing strengths on which the family can build and needs that should be addressed. The quality of the assessment hinges on the case manager's skill, the quality and comprehensiveness of the assessment tool, and the relationships the case manager has been able to establish with the individual or the family.

Second, the case manager works with each family to set goals and develop a plan. A good assessment allows the case manager to assist the family in setting goals and developing a detailed plan of the supports and services needed to achieve those goals. Goal setting and plan development proceed mutually as a partnership between the family and the case manager. As part of the plan, each family will also identify when and how they will disengage and transition from formal case management services including what tools and information they may need to continue to navigate the family support system of services, programs and providers and advocate for themselves and their young child within that system.

Third in the case management process is identification and linking to services. This is the central task of case management. The case manager assists the family in linking with different providers of support and services identified in the plan.

Fourth in the process is coordination and monitoring of services. Services are coordinated so the family gets what it needs, when they need it. This function includes helping the family to assess the appropriateness and helpfulness of services and supports, and to revise or replace a plan that may no longer be effective.

Finally, there is disengagement from formal case management service. As identified in each family's service plan, the case manager assists the family in disengaging from formal case management services, while assisting them in building an ongoing plan for maintaining progress made including anticipating possible future needs and when or where to seek additional resources.

An effective case manager works with many different provider agencies to arrange and monitor delivery of appropriate services and support. The level of case manager involvement depends on the degree and immediacy of the needs of the particular individual or family. Intensive case management should be provided to those families whose assessments indicate immediate need such as those families experiencing a crisis and/or who are at high risk for substance abuse and/or domestic violence.

All families can experience a crisis that impacts their child's development, health and general well-being. Crisis is defined as an upset in a steady state causing a disruption in a family's usual way of functioning, i.e. significant disruption to daily routines and interactions. Due to a crisis, parents and families are fundamentally able to cope but are temporarily overwhelmed and unsure of where to turn for help.

Crisis includes:

- Disruption to family dynamics such as domestic violence, separation, incarceration of parent, depression and other behavioral health issues
- Disruption of family economics such as loss of employment, loss of housing, homelessness

An individual's or a family's ability to deal with a crisis situation is influenced by their physical and behavioral characteristics and their attitudes and beliefs. Even families with generally stable lives and networks of support can become overwhelmed by stressful events. For example, poor physical health, a low level of personal energy, an overly sensitive temperament, and mistrust of community service providers set the stage for difficulty in coping with a crisis.

Families at all income levels are vulnerable when they experience a crisis such as domestic violence, child maltreatment and depression, and these challenges are especially prevalent among low-income families. Families with lower incomes are at even greater risk when a crisis occurs because they are already coping with tremendous amounts of stress related to various concerns, such as covering the cost of housing, paying for a sick child to see a doctor, or ensuring the family has enough to eat. Sometimes, families must even cope with loss of housing and homelessness. Children raised in such high stress environments are at risk for suffering many adverse developmental effects, such as poor health and school failure, which can create a cycle of poverty across generations. Immediate and effective case management can help mitigate these circumstances. Family Support Coordination can be an effective strategy with families in crisis as well as with families who are generally seeking assistance to navigate a complex system of state and local services and programs.

To develop a seamless and coordinated system of family support within the larger context of an early childhood system, it is necessary to impact the coordination and collaboration of program and service providers and community stakeholders (service integration) while implementing a strategy of family support coordination that directly serves individual families (case management/ service coordination). Service integration includes activities with providers,

families and community stakeholders that contribute to the overall development of a service delivery network while service coordination is the direct work with individual families to link them with the most appropriate resources at critical junctures in the course of parenting and raising young children. Regional Partnership Councils and grantees should be cognizant of the components that lead to successful collaboration, coordination and, thusly, effective case management services for families. Creating and maintaining collaborative efforts is a challenging process. In fact, poorly managed community coordination and collaboration activities can damage relationships and result in distrust and territorialism. One approach to coordination, which is most effective in communities with little history of working together or where trust is lacking, is to first bring service providers together for networking. As successes occur, the group is able to transition to more intensive levels of working together. It is recognized that structures promoting this collaborative model may need to be developed in many communities. Building a collaborative service model requires that participants develop a shared vision, recognize the value of working together and are willing to invest the time and resources necessary to help families achieve service objectives. For collaborative service models to be effective, participants in the planning process should have the authority to make commitments on behalf of their agency. Specific activities can foster the development of increasingly intensive levels of coordination. In order to have successful case management services, it is important to build coordination and collaborative partnership among service and program providers.