

RCW 2.30.100 Early childhood court programs—Authorized. (1) (a)

A superior court may establish an early childhood court program to serve the needs of infants and toddlers who are under the age of three at the time the case enters the program and dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW.

(b) An early childhood court program is a therapeutic court as defined in this chapter that provides an intensive court process for families with a child under age three who has been found dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW. To be eligible for the early childhood court program, a parent must have a child under age three that is dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW at the time the case enters the early childhood court program. The case may remain in the early childhood court program after the child is age three or older if the child is still dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW.

(2) If a superior court creates an early childhood court program, it shall incorporate the following core components into the program:

(a) The court shall obtain a memorandum of understanding or other agreement with the department of children, youth, and families developed in collaboration with counsel for parents and children that outlines how the two entities will coordinate and collaborate to implement the core components overall.

(b) A community coordinator who may be employed by the courts, the county, or a nonprofit entity and who is a person with experience and training in diversity, equity, and inclusion measures and is dedicated to:

(i) Facilitating real-time information sharing and collaboration among cross-sector professionals participating in the early childhood court program;

(ii) Coordinating and participating in family team meetings;

(iii) Identifying community-based resources and supporting the family's connection to these resources;

(iv) Building relationships and forming new partnerships across traditional and nontraditional services and systems;

(v) Identifying training needs of early childhood court professionals and facilitating the provision of training;

(vi) Supporting the convening of community team meetings; and

(vii) Performing the tasks outlined in this subsection describing the core components of an early childhood court program unless otherwise specified.

(c) A community team established by the court and consisting of stakeholders to the court that serve as an advisory body to the court and who implement the early childhood court program. The community team shall include diverse membership to include, but not be limited to, former parent participants, foster parents, parent and child advocates, an attorney for parents, a department of children, youth, and families caseworker, and a judicial officer. The community team aims to:

(i) Foster a learning environment and encourage an interdisciplinary approach to meeting the needs of young children and families;

(ii) Identify and respond to challenges to accessing resources and needed systems reforms;

(iii) Support multidisciplinary trainings; and

(iv) Recommend local court policies and procedures to improve families receipt of equitable and timely access to resources and remedial services for the parent and child.

(d) More frequent status hearings than the review hearings required under RCW 13.34.138 established by the judicial officer, these status hearings are separate from the review hearings required under RCW 13.34.138 and are intended to provide additional support to the family.

(e) A community coordinator that serves as a liaison between the court and community-based resources to identify community-based resources, identify barriers to engagement, and collaborate with stakeholders to connect families to assessments and referrals. The community coordinator shall facilitate connecting parents with informal and formal social supports, including but not limited to peer, community, and cultural supports.

(f) Family team meetings neutrally facilitated by the community coordinator. The family team may include all parties to the case and other people or other service providers identified by the parent to be part of the support system for the parent involved. The family team engages the parents, and the attorney for the parent, in their case plan and expediently addresses family needs and access to services and support.

(g) Ensuring that parents are critical participants in the early childhood court program. Having experienced and culturally informed professionals supporting and working with families involved in the dependency court system is critical to successful reunification of families. The court shall aim to foster an environment in which all professionals involved in the early childhood court program increase their awareness of different forms of bias and the trauma and adversity that often accompany poverty, mental health, and substance use by identifying or developing training that increases such awareness.

(h) Ensuring that families receive early, consistent, and frequent visitation that is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers; minimizes stress and anxiety for both children and parents; and occurs in a safe, comfortable, and unthreatening setting that supports parents to nurture and care for their child.

(i) The court shall ensure that the individualized case plan for parents involved in the early childhood court program address protective factors that mitigate or eliminate safety risks to the child.

(j) The court should encourage a respectful, strength-based, compassionate approach to working with parents in the context of the early childhood court program.

(k) The court shall support the development of agreements that encourage:

(i) Stakeholders participation in any available statewide structure that supports alignment to the approach of the early childhood court program, cross-site cooperation, and consistency;

(ii) Program data is regularly and continuously reviewed to ensure equity and inform and improve practice; and

(iii) Stakeholder utilization of technical assistance, training, and evaluation to assess effectiveness and improve outcomes.

(l) Each early childhood court program must collect and review its data, including data related to race and ethnicity of program participants, to assess its effectiveness and share this data with the oversight board for children, youth, and families established under RCW 43.216.015. The oversight board for children, youth, and families established under RCW 43.216.015 shall share this data and hold or

offer to assist in holding statewide meetings to support alignment to the core components and statewide consistency.

(m) The caseworker assigned to an early childhood court program must have received training and competency related to cultural antiracism, and antiracism.

(n) Each early childhood court program must be responsive to community needs and adopt best practices related to family reunification and serving all families, including those who are:

(i) Black, indigenous, and persons of color;

(ii) Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer; and

(iii) Experiencing disabilities.

(o) An attorney for the parent must be present during every meeting of the early childhood court program.

(p) Ensuring that parents voluntarily participating in the early childhood court program receive all available and appropriate services. [2021 c 285 s 2.]

Findings—2021 c 285: "(1) The legislature finds that there is an urgent need to provide greater support to young children and their families involved in Washington state's child welfare system. Infants and toddlers comprise a substantial portion of all child abuse and neglect cases in Washington state; the rate of entry for children under age one into the care of Washington state's child welfare system is the second highest in the nation. Research demonstrates that both the trauma of neglect as well as the trauma associated with entering the child welfare system shapes young children's brain development and have lifelong impacts on young children's social, emotional, and physical well-being. Young children and families of color are particularly impacted by child welfare involvement and the factors leading up to it.

(2) The legislature further finds that early childhood court programs provide timely, evidence-based, evidence-informed, and trauma-informed interventions. Early childhood court programs reduce maltreatment recurrence, number of placements, and the time it takes to achieve permanency, while increasing equitable access to services.

(3) The legislature further finds that statewide standards are necessary to ensure the quality, accountability, and fidelity to evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions of early childhood court programs. Statewide standards will also promote equitable access to these programs, especially among children and families of color.

(4) The legislature further finds that early childhood court programs that de-emphasize termination of parental rights and focus on the safe reunification of children with parents or maintain children with family or other suitable persons promote the long-term emotional and psychological health of children and minimize the trauma and racial disproportionality experienced by children and families of color who are involved in the dependency court system.

(5) The legislature further finds that the administrative office of the courts has secured funding for the first year of the early childhood court program to support their evaluation efforts. While funding is not mandated through this act, the legislature acknowledges that the administrative office of the courts is not able to complete its required responsibilities as provided for in this act without dedicated funding. The legislature finds and declares that[,] in the future, the office may seek funding through public and/or private funding opportunities, and it may partner with local organizations to

seek further funding, although it is not required to do so." [2021 c
285 s 1.]