
SUBSTITUTE SENATE BILL 5149

State of Washington

69th Legislature

2025 Regular Session

By Senate Human Services (originally sponsored by Senators Cortes, Hasegawa, Krishnadasan, Lias, Nobles, Saldaña, Salomon, Shewmake, and C. Wilson)

READ FIRST TIME 02/06/25.

1 AN ACT Relating to expanding the early childhood court program;
2 amending RCW 2.30.100; and creating a new section.

3 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

4 NEW SECTION. **Sec. 1.** The legislature finds that the early
5 childhood court program has federal funding through September 2027
6 and is currently not operating at capacity. Expanding access to early
7 childhood courts ensures that these funds can be used to serve more
8 families in the dependency system.

9 The legislature further finds that there is a historical and
10 ongoing impact of systemic racism within child welfare, especially as
11 it affects Black, indigenous, and marginalized families. Recognizing
12 the role of historical policies that devalue cultural and racial
13 identities, this act aims to promote family integrity and dignity
14 while supporting healthy outcomes through equitable and culturally
15 sensitive practices.

16 **Sec. 2.** RCW 2.30.100 and 2021 c 285 s 2 are each amended to read
17 as follows:

18 (1)(a) A superior court may establish an early childhood court
19 program to serve the needs of infants and toddlers who are under the

1 age of (~~three~~) six at the time the case enters the program and
2 dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW.

3 (b) An early childhood court program is a therapeutic court as
4 defined in this chapter that provides an intensive court process for
5 families with a child under age (~~three~~) six who has been found
6 dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW. To be eligible for the early
7 childhood court program, a parent must have a child under age
8 (~~three~~) six that is dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW at the
9 time the case enters the early childhood court program. The case may
10 remain in the early childhood court program (~~after the child is age~~
11 ~~three or older~~) if the child is still dependent pursuant to chapter
12 13.34 RCW.

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

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

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

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

27 (ii) Coordinating and participating in family team meetings;

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

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

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

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

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

38 (c) A community team established by the court and consisting of
39 stakeholders to the court that serve as an advisory body to the court
40 and who implement the early childhood court program. The community

1 team shall include diverse membership to include, but not be limited
2 to, former parent participants, foster parents, parent and child
3 advocates, an attorney for parents, a department of children, youth,
4 and families caseworker, and a judicial officer. The community team
5 aims to:

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

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

11 (iii) Support multidisciplinary trainings; and

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

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

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

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

34 (g) Ensuring that parents are critical participants in the early
35 childhood court program. Having experienced and culturally informed
36 professionals supporting and working with families involved in the
37 dependency court system is critical to successful reunification of
38 families. The court shall aim to foster an environment in which all
39 professionals involved in the early childhood court program increase
40 their awareness of different forms of bias and the trauma and

1 adversity that often accompany poverty, mental health, and substance
2 use by identifying or developing training that increases such
3 awareness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 (l) Each early childhood court program must collect and review
26 its data, including data related to race and ethnicity of program
27 participants, to assess its effectiveness and share this data with
28 the oversight board for children, youth, and families established
29 under RCW 43.216.015. The oversight board for children, youth, and
30 families established under RCW 43.216.015 shall share this data and
31 hold or offer to assist in holding statewide meetings to support
32 alignment to the core components and statewide consistency.

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

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

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

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

1 (iii) Experiencing disabilities.

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

4 (p) Ensuring that parents voluntarily participating in the early
5 childhood court program receive all available and appropriate
6 services.

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