
SENATE BILL 5149

State of Washington

69th Legislature

2025 Regular Session

By Senator Cortes

Prefiled 01/07/25.

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.** (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 (2) The legislature further finds that courts need clarification
10 that they may use early childhood court funding to provide upstream
11 supports, services, and resources to families at risk of entering the
12 dependency system should they elect to do so.

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

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

3 (1)(a) A superior court may establish an early childhood court
4 program to serve the needs of infants and toddlers who are under the
5 age of (~~three~~) six at the time the case enters the program and
6 dependent pursuant to chapter 13.34 RCW.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 (iii) Support multidisciplinary trainings; and

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

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

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

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

37 (g) Ensuring that parents are critical participants in the early
38 childhood court program. Having experienced and culturally informed
39 professionals supporting and working with families involved in the
40 dependency court system is critical to successful reunification of

1 families. The court shall aim to foster an environment in which all
2 professionals involved in the early childhood court program increase
3 their awareness of different forms of bias and the trauma and
4 adversity that often accompany poverty, mental health, and substance
5 use by identifying or developing training that increases such
6 awareness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

36 (m) The caseworker assigned to an early childhood court program
37 must have received training and competency related to cultural
38 antibias((~~r~~)) and antiracism.

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

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

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

6 (iii) Experiencing disabilities.

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

9 (p) Ensuring that parents voluntarily participating in the early
10 childhood court program receive all available and appropriate
11 services.

12 (3) A court may provide coordination, resources, and services
13 through its early childhood court program or through the community
14 coordinator established under this section to families with a child
15 or children under the age of six who are at risk of becoming the
16 subject of a dependency case under chapter 13.34 RCW.

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