

# What Do Missouri's Youngest Children Need to Succeed?

## 2019 Missouri Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment Early Childhood Professional Guide

Missouri's youngest children need everyone to work together to support a safe and healthy early childhood. But exactly how are we doing this? What do families expect? What do early childhood professionals need to provide the best care possible? To answer these questions, the University of Missouri-St. Louis' Community Innovation and Action Center studied the early care and education system in Missouri. Researchers gathered data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Missouri Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education, Social Services, and Health and Senior Services, as well as Child Care Aware® of Missouri and the federal Office of Head Start. Researchers conducted 22 listening sessions and 15 key informant interviews with early childhood professionals and families, which engaged a total of 304 people in both rural and urban areas across Missouri. Researchers also gave a survey to over 900 early childhood stakeholders. The result is the 2019 Missouri Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment.

### What We Learned About Missouri's Early Care and Education System

Missouri's system includes many program options, such as home visits, licensed and license-exempt child care providers, and preschool programs. Child care can be provided through private licensed centers, religious-based centers, group home care, public school districts and small 'neighbor' care options. Different options have different state requirements. Here are some top findings about the system overall:

#### The Cost of Child Care

Families across Missouri struggle to pay for child care. Seventy percent of Missouri's families have working parents and those families spend large portions of their income on child care. Despite the high cost of care, many early childhood professionals are unable to earn a living wage. Additionally, some early childhood professionals may have to make difficult choices about which children get care, because of eligibility and reimbursement requirements.

#### Accessing Care for Babies and Toddlers

Using the Center for American Progress definition, more than 80% of Missouri's children live in a child care desert, which is an area without enough state licensed child care. Every county in Missouri qualifies as a child care desert for children under age two.



## Snapshot of Missouri's Children

**448,000**

### Children Under Age 5

49% Age 0-3      51% Age 3-5



74%  
Live in Cities



81/115  
Counties are Rural

Source: US Census Data

## Getting Children Ready for School

Early childhood professionals need to be intentionally supported in school readiness, so all children are learning, when they go to elementary school.

## Services for Children with Disabilities

Across the state, families and early childhood professionals find it hard to locate supports for children with developmental delays or disabilities.

## Mental Health Care

Urban and rural families from across the state said children need help with social-emotional development, mental health, and trauma-informed care. Early childhood professionals expressed a need for training sessions that would help them provide the best care. Finally, the mental health of early childhood professionals themselves is also an important consideration.

## Service Coordination

Many Missouri families use a variety of early childhood services and programs, offered through different agencies. Early childhood professionals report that they do their best to connect families to additional services, but that improving coordination would ensure that families have an understanding of their options and opportunities.

## Quality Programs

Quality is a way of understanding whether a program is a 'good' program. Currently, the state does not have a way to understand quality across all programs. Missouri is testing a new approach - the Quality Assurance Report (QAR) - that may become more widely available in the future. The QAR will help early childhood professionals gain recognition for high-quality services and help professionals make improvements where needed.

## Early Childhood Workforce

Missouri's predominantly female child care workforce is paid low wages, has insufficient access to benefits and struggles to maintain their own well-being, financial stability and morale. This not only impacts the workforce, but also child care operations and, ultimately, the children participating in child care. The early childhood workforce must be treated like the important professionals they are, including access to professional development, higher wages and benefits.



### **Barriers to Accreditation**

Few facilities go through the accreditation process due to high standards that may be unachievable for some facilities, in addition to logistical and financial barriers. Resources and support would help more facilities achieve this important marker of quality.

### **Financing Challenges**

The funding structure for the early care and education system in Missouri is a complex, challenging system for both families and professionals to navigate. Eligibility cut-offs can be unexpected and leave families with limited options. This has a particularly negative impact on low-income families. Also, families and professionals are often forced to choose between quality and affordability of care, which can impact the wages for early childhood professionals. Recommendations for improvement include adjusting eligibility cut-offs and reimbursement rates.

### **System Coordination**

Improving coordination and collaboration between Missouri agencies can better prevent children from “falling through the cracks” when important services are needed. There are at least 10 state agency programs that provide important services to young children and families. This can lead to confusion and missed opportunities for families. Recommendations include continuing state agency coordination efforts, continuing to understand families’ experiences, exploring ways to restructure existing services and supporting local coordination efforts.

### **Accountability and Measurement**

It is hard to help children and families, when there is little information about services they are receiving and whether the services are high quality. Focusing on sharing information that can help early childhood professionals best serve families is one important step to closing gaps for families in Missouri. Additionally, implementing quality assessments and professional development across the state will provide recognition to high- quality professionals, help programs make needed improvements and help families make informed decisions.

**“My hope would be that we as professionals, as a community, as a state, understand that what we’re doing with kids now has a direct impact on what our society looks like later.”**

- Listening Session Participant

## Ways We Can Improve and Promising Progress

The Needs Assessment included a “Risk and Reach Analysis” to find key issues (risks) and services (reach). Missouri’s goal is to identify key issues that can be used to better coordinate services. This will help children across Missouri have a better start. Here are a few examples of findings from the report:

Where We Can Improve	Promising Progress
<p><b>Risk: Child Maltreatment</b></p> <p>When someone hurts a child physically, emotionally or sexually, the child suffers long-term problems. These problems affect the child’s ability to learn and grow. Five percent of Missouri children are facing or have faced this sort of harm.</p>	<p><b>Reach: Participation in Home Visiting Programs</b></p> <p>Missouri offers a number of home visiting programs that support the whole family. For example, Parents as Teachers has been providing effective home visits with families across the state since the 1980s.</p>
<p><b>Risk : Child Poverty</b></p> <p>In Missouri, 23% of children under age 5 live in poverty and 14% of all Missourians live in poverty.</p>	<p><b>Reach: Federal Program Enrollment for Children</b></p> <p>Children thrive when they get the help they need. There are several federal food and medical assistance programs that are effective and help children thrive; 64% of Missouri children are enrolled in these programs.</p>
<p><b>Risk: Inadequate Prenatal Care and Low Birth Weight</b></p> <p>If a mother doesn’t see a doctor enough during her pregnancy, the baby may not be as healthy as it could be. In Missouri, 21% of mothers do not receive the prenatal care that they need and 9% of children are born weighing less than 5.5 pounds. Low birth weight can lead to problems, for children, as they grow.</p>	<p><b>Reach: Missouri Preschool Program</b></p> <p>Missouri Preschool Program provides funding to child care centers for quality improvement. This program has been successful in 30 counties, but it is not statewide yet. This program could be even better, if all children had access to quality preschool.</p>

## Moving Forward

This assessment identified strengths and weaknesses in how our state best serves its youngest children. Based on the findings from the study, we recommend that the state use these findings and other information to improve the early care and education system throughout the state. Missouri has the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of its youngest children and to continue to grow its support for families and early childhood professionals across the state. State leaders will continue to do this through the implementation of a strategic plan.

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