



## SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Imagine you are a parent with three children. Your middle child has tantrums that each last an hour at least four times a day. How would you manage this situation? Imagine you are a fourteen-year-old who has just given birth to a child. Where do you start to learn how to parent? Imagine you have a history of mental health problems, are working hard to move from welfare to work, but your son cannot maintain a day care placement for even two weeks at a time because of his challenging behaviors. Where would you turn for help?



Hobbs, a psychologist and past president of the American Psychological Association. Although PEP operates many programs, we will focus on the continuum of early childhood services and how these programs support children and their families in search of help through the maze of services and transitions. PEP's Early Childhood continuum of services includes two Early Intervention Centers (EICs), PEP Early Start, and Day Care Plus.

First of all, it is important to know that you are not alone. Statistics indicate that approximately 12% of children are in need of significant mental health services, and an even greater percentage of children are at-risk for developing significant mental health problems. However, only a very small percentage of young children are receiving any level of mental health service.

The challenges facing the family to access services are often overwhelming. Once the family has accessed services the challenges continue. One of these challenges is to successfully navigate through the multiple transitions associated with receiving services from an array of professionals and systems. As mental health professionals, we often look on with wonder as we see families trying to respond to the multiple transitions and demands placed upon them by service providers. Each of these transitions has the potential to cause a great deal of difficulty for the children and their families.

This article highlights one agency's effort to assist families with this issue. Since 1971, Positive Education Program (PEP) has helped children and their families with multiple challenges build skills to grow and learn successfully. PEP's programming is grounded in the principles of *ReEDucation* developed by Dr. Nicholas

### Early Intervention Centers

PEP's Early Intervention Centers serve families with young children by providing short-term educational and therapeutic services to the child and the parent. It uses professional staff as consultants to families, believing that support for the adults in a child's environment will positively influence the child's ongoing development. The EIC program requires the parent/caregiver and "target" child under the age of six to attend a center-based program. All family members are welcome to come and the program is available weekdays, both days and evenings, as well as Saturday mornings. This flexible schedule accommodates most families' work or school schedules. The program operates year round, allowing for entry and exit at any time.

Families are assigned a professional staff member, who has at least a master's degree in special education, psychology, or related fields and has experience working with families in a strength-based philosophy. In addition, each family is assigned a session coach, a parent who has previously completed the program, thus helping to insure a credible and culturally compatible treatment partner. It also insures that this family can contact EIC staff for help with their child at any time during their child's school years.

Families often encounter a bewildering set of bureaucratic rules in obtaining services and managing smooth transitions as their child grows older and needs change. EIC staff understands that an integral part of their role is to assist families with these transitions. The level of support varies with the knowledge, skills and abilities of the parent. For families overwhelmed by a child with emotional difficulties, support may range from providing information and coaching before transition-related meetings, to attending planning and reporting meetings with the parent, to advocating for the child and family at these meetings. Our goal is to empower families as soon as they are able to manage this role. However, for most meetings with medical personnel, schools, and the Department of Children and Families (DCFS), families typically require support. Initially, EIC staff make themselves available to attend these meetings at the family's request. Once families have developed important knowledge and confidence, they are able to self-advocate successfully.

### PEP Early Start

Unlike the EICs, which are center-based, PEP Early Start is a home visiting program serving families with children birth to three years of age who are at-risk for developmental delay, abuse, or neglect. PEP Early Start, borrowing from the EIC's parent-implemented model, is the only home visiting program in the county that utilizes EIC program parent coaches as paraprofessional home visitors. Families participating in Early Start are asked to deal with many transitions as a result of receiving services from multiple agencies and due to systems' demands requiring cross agency collaboration.

Working with both their home visitor and service coordinator, families develop an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) that outlines in detail how these transitions will be handled and what kind of assistance the home visitor and service coordinator will provide. Often, this assistance includes facilitating referral to other service providers, accessing health care, and coordinating services and benefits from the Department of Human Services. One of the primary functions of the family's service coordinator is to streamline services and create a schedule with the family that is both appropriate and manageable. As a provider, PEP Early Start has achieved considerable success providing consistent transition support to families.

### Day Care Plus

The third member of the PEP Early Childhood continuum is Day Care Plus. The Day Care Plus Program was established to provide consultation and technical assistance services to child care providers, and support for families with children experiencing difficulties in the child care setting. The program's consultants work with staff, parents, and all agencies involved, working out a seamless and effective program for children experiencing emotional/behavioral difficulties.

The goal is to maintain children successfully in their child care placements. Often parents are forced to choose between child care and special services because special services traditionally have not extended into the child care setting. Economics and welfare reform too often force parents to forego special services due to the pressing need for child care. This situation sets up the child for failure and often places an unrealistic demand on the child care provider. As in the programs mentioned previously, Day Care Plus places a great deal of emphasis on minimal, smooth, and seamless transitions for children and their families.

For better than a quarter of a century, Positive Education Program has been working with families to provide the best possible mental health services for children. PEP's services are based on an ecological model. This model is holistic and asset-based. It incorporates the medical perspective, but that perspective is not its only driving force. PEP is always open to change and continually adapts its services to meet the needs of the families it serves.

The need for appropriate services for children with mental health needs is great. PEP will always be an active advocate for these children and their families and is committed to providing the best and most effective services.

The twelfth principle of ReEDucation states, "A child should know some joy in each day." PEP extends this principle to the child's family and believes they should also know joy in each day. That is why PEP's early childhood services focus both on the child and the child's family. We believe that is the only way to deliver effective services to young children in need.

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