

Early Childhood Mental Health in Jefferson County, Colorado



Executive Summary

About Early Childhood Mental Health

In 2019, community partners convened over the course of a year to create the Bright Futures Roadmap - a comprehensive vision to help Jeffco families and children thrive. To further support families and children in Jefferson County (Jeffco), and refresh the work of the Bright Futures Roadmap, this report was developed, which focuses on early childhood mental health (ECMH) strengths, needs, strategies, and opportunities in our community and identifies policy and funding mechanisms that could or do support ECMH.

This document is intended to serve as a guide of early childhood mental health (ECMH) policy and funding initiatives and opportunities, and identify actionable strategies in Jeffco to inform community growth and investment from 2022-2025.

Bright Futures Roadmap & ECMH

Two Roadmap Cornerstones specifically align with early childhood mental health:

Cornerstone 3: Health & Wellness Programs and Providers in Jefferson County have access to mental health consultation in order to fully support families' well-being.

Cornerstone 4: Systems Coordination Jefferson County has a robust screening, assessment, and referral system that addresses physical, social-emotional, behavioral, and social determinants of health.

An important next step in supporting Jeffco's young children and their families is to review the Roadmap and its Cornerstones for opportunities to expand early childhood mental health beyond ECMH consultation (Cornerstone 3) and screenings, assessments, and referrals (Cornerstone 4). A robust early childhood mental health system includes a comprehensive array of best practices that can support all children and families with promotion of positive social emotional development, prevention of mental health problems, and intervention/treatment when they do occur.

Best Practices in ECMH

Research and expert review point to 12 best practices that, if available across communities, could provide a support system for the mental health and social emotional growth of young children and families. Through comprehensive interviews with Jeffco family members, a county commissioner, community mental health organization staff, Early Childhood Council staff, a state legislator, Early Intervention staff, and other state and county representatives, this report identifies an array of existing services and supports available in the county that align with best practices in ECMH.

Jeffco Implementation of Best Practices in ECMH

Information from eight interviews was compiled, along with a community scan that reviewed services and supports available in Jeffco. The following identifies that all best practices are being implemented in the county at least minimally, and indicates the extent of implementation based on interviews and the community scan.

Recommendations within each best practice category are identified in the full report. Overall, recommendations point to needing a clear picture of implementation in the county, in particular for the practices above that ranked as a 1 in implementation, as these tended to be unclear in their scope across the county.

1 = limited or unclear implementation 2 = moderate implementation 3 = significant implementation 4 = community-wide implementation	Implementation Level
Social emotional screening of young children is integrated in well-child visits and valued as part of a comprehensive children's health system	3
Screening for pregnancy-related depression and anxiety in mothers occurs as part of a well-child visit or new mother's health care follow up	2
Parent and caregiver education and support is offered to strengthen children's healthy social emotional development	3
Early childhood mental health consultation to early learning and home visiting professionals is available	3
Child mental health professionals are available in pediatric, family medicine, and other primary health care settings where young children are seen	1
Caregivers' wellness is supported to strengthen their own abilities to support young children's mental health	3
Trauma-informed practice and healing-centered engagement are used across communities, including early care and learning settings	2
Early care and learning settings are environments where social emotional learning occurs and positive solutions to behavioral challenges are developed	3
The workforce that supports young children and their families has specific knowledge of early childhood mental health commensurate with their professional capacity and role	2
Developmentally appropriate diagnostic tools specific to young children are available and used when indicated in clinical settings	1
Quality improvement strategies in early care and learning settings consider how teachers and other staff support children's social emotional and mental health	2
Use of suspension and expulsion of young children from early care and learning settings is mitigated to reduce cycles of inequity	3

Additionally, Colorado's philanthropic community has an opportunity to leverage state and federal funding by helping ECMH programs and services prove their success, potentially leading to a conversion of philanthropic investments into longer term, more sustainable funding.