

Early Childhood Court Evaluation Plan Overview

Evaluation Purpose

To assess implementation fidelity, equity, family experience, and outcomes of the Early Childhood Court (ECC) model in Washington State; to support continuous quality improvement (CQI); and to ensure the system advances child and family well-being, uses reliable data, and elevates lived expertise. [RCW 2.30.100](#) authorizes Washington courts to create voluntary Early Childhood Court programs for dependency cases involving children 0-6, using a trauma informed, developmentally focused, and culturally responsive approach. The law requires ECCs to have a multidisciplinary team, hold more frequent non-adversarial hearings, adhere to best practice models, create written local procedures, and participate in statewide data and evaluation efforts.

Program Approach

Evaluation Questions

The research questions were developed based on the program logic model and the RCW requirements outlined in RCW 2.30.100.

1. Implementation and Capacity:
 - a. How consistently are ECC model practices implemented across sites?
 - b. How functional are the data systems, tools, and feedback processes?
2. Family Experience:
 - a. How do families experience the ECC process?
 - b. Are ECC families receiving developmental, medical, and behavioral health services, and are delays reduced compared to similar non-ECC cases?
 - c. To what degree are visitations consistent and strengthened among ECC families, consistent with RCW 2.30.100 expectations for early, frequent, developmentally appropriate, and low-stress visitation?
 - d. Are families engaged (FTMs and Court)?
3. Outcome and Impact:
 - a. Are services timelier than non-ECCs?
 - b. Are reunifications and placement stability improving?
 - i. Do ECC children experience higher rates of reunification, shorter time to reunification, and fewer placement changes compared to non-ECC populations?

- ii. Are more ECC children placed with relatives while in care, and do they experience fewer re-entries or recurrence of maltreatment?
 - iii. Are ECC families experiencing improvements in parent well-being, resilience, skills, and family functioning?
- c. This evaluation also assesses racial and ethnic disparities in access, services, and outcomes, in alignment with RCW 2.30.100(2)(i), which requires ECC programs to identify and address barriers to equity.

Evaluation Approach

Mixed methods including qualitative and quantitative data from the following data sources:

1. Administrative Data
2. Surveys
3. Court Observations
4. Self-Assessments of Core Components
5. Training, Technical Assistance, Education, and Outreach Trackers
6. Training Evaluations
7. External Partner's Parent Surveys

Assumptions and External Factors

Assumptions include stable funding, appropriate staffing, functioning data systems, and community trust. External factors include workforce turnover, policy shifts, and systemic inequities.

Partners

The ECC statewide evaluation relies on collaboration with multiple external partners who contribute data, tools, surveys, and expertise essential to understanding family experience, implementation fidelity, and outcomes. Key partners include:

- Zero to Three (ZTT): Manages and maintains the ECC database, supports data quality, assists with service access and visitation data, and contributes to understanding developmental and early childhood service connection patterns.
- JBA (James Bell Associates): Provides parent survey instruments, supports analysis of parent experience and perceptions, and contributes community partner survey tools for system feedback.
- ECC Site Coordinators: Support local data entry and accuracy, distribute partner surveys, assist with court observation logistics, and provide contextual information about implementation and county-specific practices.

- Washington State Center for Court Research (WSCCR): Provides administrative data (placements, permanency, court involvement), supports matching ECC and comparison populations, and contributes analytic and reporting expertise.
- Family & Youth Justice Program (FYJP): Supports family engagement, elevates lived experience, informs survey design and interpretation, and collaborates on equity considerations.
- Community Partners: Participate in Family Team Meetings, provide essential services to families, and complete the anonymous community partner survey that captures cross-system collaboration, service access, team communication, and observed family outcomes.
- Judicial, Child Welfare, and Behavioral Health Partners: Contribute perspective and feedback through interviews, surveys, court observations, and participation in ACT and FTM processes.

Reporting and Use of Findings

Findings will be shared with partners through summaries, reports, and brief feedback loops, which involve sharing results with counties and partners and gathering their input. Public reports will be posted on the following public websites: www.courts.wa.gov and www.fyjp.org. Evaluation results will inform state and local policy, ECC training priorities, and CQI cycles.