

What's working across the Cradle to Career Network

Outcome: Kindergarten Readiness



Essential Question: Do students and families have access to adequate public supports and neighborhood conditions to enable them to succeed academically and in the workforce?

Indicator: Access to prenatal care, Childhood experiences, Food security, Health insurance coverage, Mental and emotional well-being

Impact

The first eight years of a child's life are critical for brain development and lay the foundation for future learning, health and life success. Kindergarten readiness, a key milestone in early learning, begins even before birth, with access to quality health care and healthy neighborhoods rich in resources. Early and comprehensive prenatal and neonatal care increases the likelihood of a child being born healthy and remaining healthy.

Cradle to Career Network members **Cradle to Career Fresno** in **California** and **Spartanburg Academic Movement** in South Carolina are ensuring that families and babies receive the care they need through universal and targeted strategies designed to increase access and provide support.

The Landscape

Access to early prenatal care is a critical factor in healthy births, yet nearly 1 in 5 women in the U.S. receive late or no prenatal care, with the greatest disparities among Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic women — increasing the risk of preterm birth and low

birthweight (March of Dimes, 2023). After birth, home visiting programs have proven effective at improving outcomes for both parents and children, with studies showing these programs reduce maternal depression and child maltreatment while supporting healthy child development (National Home Visiting Resource Center, 2023). Addressing these gaps is essential to ensuring families receive the care and support they need for a strong start.

Indicator and Evidence-Based Practices

Indicator: Access to Prenatal and Neonatal Care

Why it matters: Early prenatal care improves birth outcomes by identifying and treating maternal health conditions. Mothers who receive quality care are less likely to have pre-term or low birthweight infants and are more likely to access regular pediatric care (Rhode Island Kids Count). Prenatal care also equips parents with essential knowledge and resources for a healthy pregnancy, newborn care and postpartum health.

Evidence-Based Practices: To ensure more babies are born healthy and thriving, communities are implementing comprehensive, evidence-based prenatal care strategies that support mothers before, during and after pregnancy. These strategies focus on increasing access to high-quality care, reducing barriers and providing education and support for expectant parents.

- **Expanding Home Visiting Programs:** Programs like Family Connects in Spartanburg and Early Matters Fresno provide expectant and new parents with in-home support from trained nurses, social workers and early childhood specialists. These programs improve maternal health, reduce stress and lead to better birth outcomes. In Fresno, home visitation participants experienced 36.4% lower pre-term birth rates than the county average.
- **Culturally Responsive Doula Care:** Community-based doula programs, such as Birth Matters in Spartanburg and The BLACK Doula Network in Fresno, offer culturally affirming support for pregnant persons. These doulas provide guidance on health, birth plans and postpartum care. In Spartanburg, 82% of babies born through Birth Matters had a healthy birth weight and were breastfed at birth — key indicators of a strong start in life.
- **Integrated Maternal Health Services:** Spartanburg's Hello Family initiative has created a citywide model offering prenatal and maternal health services for every child born in the city. This holistic approach has led to population-level improvements in birth weight, neonatal intensive care admissions and emergency room visits.
- **Reducing Maternal Depression:** Home visiting programs in Fresno have shown significant success in reducing maternal depression, with 68% of participating mothers reporting decreased symptoms, improving their ability to care for themselves and their newborns.

Indicator: Childhood Experiences

Why it matters: Childhood experiences such as maltreatment, interparental violence, family disruption, poverty and chronic stress negatively impact a child's development and lifelong outcomes.

Evidence-Based Practices: A child's earliest experiences shape brain development, social-emotional skills and future success. Negative experiences — such

as exposure to poverty, family disruption and ongoing stress — can lead to adverse health and educational outcomes. Communities are proactively strengthening families and creating safer, more supportive environments for children.

- **Parenting Support and Education:** Programs like Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) in Spartanburg provide evidence-based tools and coaching to help 681 parents manage challenges and foster positive family dynamics. These programs help reduce stress, strengthen parent-child relationships and support children's emotional well-being.
- **Early Intervention and Family Stabilization:** Hello Family's wraparound services identify families at risk of trauma and connect them with resources before issues escalate. This proactive approach has led to 46 avoided emergency room visits and 58 prevented cases of child abuse and neglect in Spartanburg.
- **Strengthening Social Supports:** Community-driven networks like Fresno's Preconception to Age 5 Blueprint for Investment and Advocacy connect families with peer support, local resources and early learning opportunities. These initiatives have been shown to increase kindergarten readiness rates and improve long-term academic success.
- **Economic Mobility & Neighborhood Investment:** Research shows that children growing up in stable, well-resourced communities are more likely to succeed in school and life. In Spartanburg, 398 more children are on track for kindergarten readiness through targeted investments in maternal health, early learning and family economic stability as part of the Movement 2030 Plan.

Looking Ahead

By prioritizing early childhood investments, holistic family support and communitywide collaboration, **Fresno** and **Spartanburg** demonstrate how evidence-based strategies lead to measurable improvements in child well-being, academic success and long-term economic mobility. Their work offers a model for communities nationwide to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive from cradle to career.