

Families as Allies
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Focus Group Findings

In early 2013, as part of the Early Childhood System of Care Expansion Planning Grant, Families as Allies (FAA) conducted family Focus Groups to gather planning input from caregivers of children who manifest behavioral health needs during early childhood. This important effort resulted in 33 Focus Groups conducted across the entire State, with representation from a variety of important parent constituencies, including Head Start parents, parents of children in child care programs, young parents themselves involved in mental health services, FAA family support groups, young mothers in a church-run support group, foster parents of young children, and families using private insurance to receive necessary services. Laura Smith, LMSW, Project Director, oversaw and coordinated the focus groups.

The Focus Group findings are an essential set of data informing the resulting Strategic Plan. These primary themes emerged from parents and caregivers participating in the entire set of Focus Groups:

- I. Behaviors that may indicate mental health challenges in young children are not being recognized by professionals in contact with families of young children and, therefore, young children are not being referred for mental health evaluations.
- II. Few, if any, resources for assessment of mental health needs in young children are available.
- III. Families have very limited access to appropriate treatment interventions for mental health challenges faced by their young children.
- IV. Few school communities and teachers are able to understand and manage early childhood mental health challenges with appropriate tools or strategies.
- V. Young children experience child care/preschool disruptions and parents/caregivers experience employment stresses due to behavioral challenges beyond the abilities of programs to manage.
- VI. Parents/caregivers identify specific barriers/roadblocks they face in seeking help for their young children:
 - a. Unqualified and uncommitted primary care physicians
 - b. Absence of experts who understand the mental health needs of young children
 - c. Teachers have no training in managing mental health challenges in young children
 - d. Parents constantly face apathy from providers, teachers, receptionists, caseworkers, and other professional system staff.
- VII. Parents/caregivers identify one-to-one help from other parents as highly important in overcoming the barriers they face.