



The NJ SEEDlings Program: Transforming Pediatric Primary Care to Support Early Childhood Development

New Jersey is home to more than 500,000 infants and toddlers ages five and under, nearly 30% of whom live in households with an income less than twice the federal poverty level. Throughout our state's distinct communities, differences are often seen in maternal and infant health outcomes and NJ SEEDlings aims to provide meaningful support to address these gaps.

Launched in 2022, NJ SEEDlings: Supporting Everyone in Early Development, aims to transform the delivery of pediatric primary care for the prenatal-to-five-year-old (P-5) population, particularly those eligible for NJ FamilyCare (Medicaid or CHIP) or uninsured families. This HRSA-funded initiative is focused on enhancing the capacity of New Jersey's early childhood workforce to deliver high-quality early childhood development (ECD) services that address the needs of young children and their families.

"This cooperative agreement provides an exciting opportunity to build on NJAAP's work in addressing disparities by supporting families during the critical prenatal to 5-year period that sets the stage for long-term outcomes," noted Usha Ramachandran, MD, FAAP, NJAAP's Early Childhood Champion and Co-PI for NJ SEEDlings. "Through building partnerships with parents and key stakeholders, and adopting a collaborative learning approach, we hope to bring about a transformation of pediatric primary care that emphasizes a family-centered, strengths-based approach to support family well-being and infant-caregiver relationships and promote early childhood development. By integrating evidence-based programs such as Reach Out and Read and the Keystones of Development curriculum, we will equip pediatric practices to adopt universal promotion and prevention efforts with all families, along with additional supports based on family needs and risks through HealthySteps."

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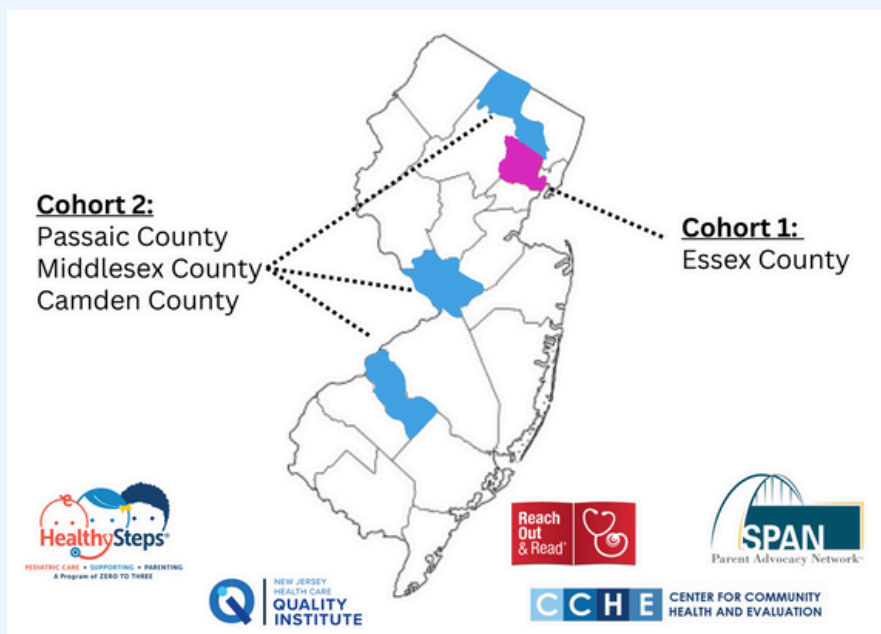
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The program is built around four core objectives:

1. Increase the number of ECD experts trained, equipped, and placed in pediatric settings: Practices are onboarding a HealthySteps Specialist and a Family Resource Specialist to support child development, promote early relational health, and help families navigate systems and advocate effectively.
2. Ensure pediatric practices offer a continuum of ECD services: Practice teams implement Reach Out and Read from birth to promote early shared reading. The team-based, evidence-based HealthySteps model is also leveraged to increase rates of screening & referrals for prenatal to 5-year-old families.
3. Improve ECD knowledge and abilities among pediatric primary care staff: Practice teams engage in a 6-month Project ECHO® to improve ECD knowledge and learn from content experts and peers. A Learning Community also meets quarterly to build a network among ECD stakeholders and spotlight resources across the state.
4. Identify and advance solutions to ECD service delivery: A policy and sustainability workgroup is helping identify strategies to effectively deliver ECD services within primary care. Patient and Family Advisory Councils at each practice ensure high-quality, family-centered care is central to program implementation.



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The four geographic areas where we are engaging pediatric practice teams in this transformative initiative include: Paterson, Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden, NJ. Core partners supporting these efforts include the [HealthySteps](#) national office at [Zero to Three](#), [Reach Out and Read NJ](#), the [New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute](#), [SPAN Parent Advocacy Network](#), and the [Center for Community Health and Evaluation](#).

In addition to ensuring the core objectives are met, this program also seeks to engage parents and caregivers as equal partners in their children's growth and development, helping them to become greater advocates for their families by providing them the tools and resources they need to thrive. The impact of this type of engagement can already be observed and appreciated through hearing directly from parents, providing a valuable lens through which to understand the importance of this work.

"Thank you for your support in [connecting me to] the Early Intervention program," expressed the mother of a pediatric patient at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. "My son has made a lot of progress, thanks to God and the program. It ends on his birthday, and he will [soon] start special education school. I know everything will go very well there too."

This initiative is vital for improving the health and well-being of prenatal to 5-year-old children in New Jersey by equipping pediatricians, practice staff, and community partners with the tools, knowledge, and skills to provide comprehensive early childhood care. By working in partnership with pediatric practices teams, ECD experts, early relational health professionals, and families, we are creating a sustainable, collaborative system that ensures every child in New Jersey receives the early childhood development support they need to thrive.

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