

# Responding to Children and Youth with Complex Behavioral Health Needs

## Overview

Supporting children with complex behavioral health needs is a critical and evolving challenge that requires innovative, systemic solutions. This involves integrating trauma-informed care, improving cross-sector collaboration, expanding access to appropriate levels of care, and strengthening the workforce. Emphasizing early intervention, family-centered approaches, and data sharing are key strategies to improve outcomes and create sustainable, community-based systems of support.

This ongoing effort aims to address the unique needs of children and families, reduce disparities, and foster healthier, more resilient communities through innovative policies, integrated care models, and dedicated stakeholder collaboration.

## Deep Dive into Key Topics

### 1. Progress and Innovations in Behavioral Health Support

- **Trauma-informed care integration:** Over the past 10-15 years, trauma awareness has become central to best practices, leading to more effective, compassionate care models that recognize the impact of trauma on child development.
- **School-based mental health expansion:** Federal initiatives and state programs have supported delivering Medicaid reimbursed mental health and other health services within schools, recognizing that children spend most of their time in educational settings.
- **Specialty programs for complex needs:** States are developing targeted programs to address the needs of children with co-occurring conditions, developmental disabilities, and involvement with multiple systems like juvenile justice and child welfare.
- **Peer support and family engagement:** Increasing emphasis on peer support programs for youth and families, integrating these into the systemic continuum of care to foster community and resilience.

## 2. Ongoing Challenges and Systemic Barriers

- **Access to appropriate levels of care:** Despite progress, many children still face barriers to timely, high-quality care, often due to systemic gaps and rigid service levels that require "failing out" of lower tiers before advancing.
- **Workforce shortages:** Critical shortages of licensed clinicians and support staff hinder the ability to meet demand, especially in underserved areas. Broadening the workforce with non-licensed professionals and peer supports is vital.
- **Fragmented systems and silos:** Child welfare, juvenile justice, Medicaid, and education systems often operate independently, creating barriers to coordinated, holistic care.
- **Data sharing and collaboration:** Inefficient data exchange hampers timely decision-making and results in families retelling their stories repeatedly, delaying progress and increasing frustration.

## 3. Strategic Approaches and Future Opportunities

- **Early screening and prevention:** Leveraging Medicaid's Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit to promote early detection, diagnosis, and intervention—especially during routine well-child visits—can normalize behavioral health as part of overall health.
- **System design and policy innovation:** Building flexible benefit packages, updating policies, and creating formalized inter-agency agreements ensure that services are tailored to community needs and adaptable over time.
- **Integrated care models:** Promoting models like person-centered medical homes, health homes for complex cases, and collaborative care teams that include primary care providers, care managers, and specialists to deliver seamless, family-centered care.
- **Funding and blended resources:** Encouraging states to creatively blend Medicaid, child welfare, grants, and other funding streams (e.g., Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) to expand and sustain innovative programs.
- **Workforce development and succession planning:** Addressing workforce shortages by broadening roles for non-licensed staff, creating pathways for new professionals, and planning for retirements to ensure system sustainability.
- **Technology and data solutions:** Implementing electronic health records, co-location models, and data-sharing agreements to streamline care coordination and reduce administrative burdens on families.

## Why This Matters

This episode offers actionable insights into how systemic change, policy innovation, and community engagement can transform the landscape of pediatric behavioral health. It highlights the importance of a child-centric, family-driven approach that leverages existing resources, fosters collaboration, and prioritizes early intervention.

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## For More Information

For tailored support and strategic guidance on advancing behavioral health initiatives for children and youth, contact [Shawn Thiele Sacks](#) or [Jason Vogler](#) or email us at: [mercergovernment@mercerc.com](mailto:mercergovernment@mercerc.com).

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