

The State of Systems in Monterey County: An Examination of Supports for Children Ages Prenatal to Five





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Systems in Monterey County: An Examination of Supports for Children Prenatal to Five presents trends in local data to inspire Monterey County stakeholders to address the questions “how do we each understand our part in supporting the healthy development of children, starting prenatally,” and, “how do we collectively do better?” According to data collected in 2022, less than one-third of kindergarten children met the expected levels of development for math, literacy, self-regulation, social-emotional skills, or physical development. While this is an improvement over past years, the data indicates we have a long way to go. The most important drivers of kindergarten readiness are those that impact child and family well-being, which depends on the functioning of our broader social, economic, health, and education systems.¹ By understanding trends in the systems supporting children over the last decade, we can better identify the strengths in the ways we support young children and families and suggest areas of opportunity for improvement.

System Performance for Children Ages Prenatal to Five

Shifting systems to better support children ages prenatal to five in the following five areas will have the greatest impact on healthy child development, including school readiness.

1. Family Financial Stability

2. Family Health Care

3. Optimal Nutrition

4. Early Care & Education

5. Family Support Services

1. Family Financial Stability

Poverty has the largest impact on child outcomes when experienced during the first five years of life, yet children ages 0–5 are more likely to experience poverty than at other ages.² Public programs that aim to reduce earning instability (e.g., fair scheduling laws, paid sick leave), stabilize families' income (e.g., CalFresh, cash aid, universal basic income), create consistency in developmental contexts (e.g., housing programs, reliable child care), and build family and community capacity to prevent/adapt to economic instability will benefit children's healthy development and readiness for school.³ Here are some key data points related to family financial stability in Monterey County:

- In 2023, 64% of households with children under six had incomes below what was needed to meet basic needs.⁴
- In 2022, one-third of children were in families without secure employment.⁵
- As of 2021, most of the available jobs are not jobs that pay a living wage, with benefits and job stability.⁶
- The proportion of children aged 0–5 supported by Medi-Cal has increased over the last decade while the proportion of children aged 0–5 supported by CalWORKs has declined.⁷
- Across multiple indicators, children live in worse housing conditions than most other areas of the state.⁸

As a result, this report emphasizes three goals to support community readiness:

★ Goal 1

Increase availability of jobs in Monterey County that pay a living wage and provide benefits and job stability (including jobs that are traditionally underpaid/undervalued to provide stability to families).

★ Goal 2

Increase access to family stability programs and ensure programs provide enough resources to meet families' ability to thrive.

★ Goal 3

Improve housing conditions for families with children prenatal to five.

2. Family Health Care

Families need access to excellent prenatal care and primary care within medical settings that are comprehensive, compassionate, culturally affirming, and family centered. Early and regular prenatal visits are associated with better birth outcomes, reducing the risk of complications such as preterm birth, low birth weight, and perinatal mortality.⁹ Children receiving their recommended well-child visits are more likely to be ready for school.¹⁰ Infants and toddlers experience more rapid growth and development than at any other time in their lives so addressing health needs in this narrow window is critical. Here are some key data points related to family health care in Monterey County:

- Rates of low birth weight have increased over the last decade.¹¹
- Higher percentages of birthing parents accessed early and adequate prenatal care over the last decade; however, disparities persist and worsened in some cases.¹²
- In 2022 infants and toddlers with Medi-Cal were less likely than other age groups to receive all the preventative services they were entitled to, though more children with Medi-Cal are receiving their well-child visits than they were a decade ago.¹³
- In 2019 Monterey County ranked second out of all counties in the percentage of children (80%) screened for lead by their second birthday.¹⁴

As a result, this report emphasizes two goals to support community readiness:

★ Goal 1

Increase early and adequate prenatal care access for birthing parents, with specific emphasis on teen, Black, and Indigenous parents and those without a high school degree.

★ Goal 2

Increase rates of young children with Medi-Cal who receive all their preventative health care services (including well-child visits, immunizations, and developmental and other health screenings), with specific emphasis on one- and two-year-olds.

3. Optimal Nutrition

Although optimal nutrition is important for everyone, it's particularly important for communities to ensure that birthing parents and children under five receive optimal nutrition due to the rapid development that happens during this time.¹⁵ Food insecurity in early childhood is predictive of lower cognitive and social-emotional skills in kindergarten—particularly food insecurity experienced in infancy and toddlerhood.¹⁶ Nutrition assistance programs—such as CalFresh and WIC—are crucial for food insecure children in Monterey County. CalFresh and WIC have been successful in enrolling children in services early, but there are likely more children who could benefit from both programs.¹⁷ Here are some key data points related to optimal nutrition in Monterey County:

- In 2022, 18% of children were food insecure.¹⁸
- In 2023, the percentage of all children aged 0–5 served by CalFresh (41%) was similar to the percentage served a decade earlier.¹⁹
- In 2021, 44% of all **infants** were enrolled in CalFresh by their first birthday—a larger proportion than in California at large and an increase from the decade prior.²⁰
- The rate of child care facilities participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program declined over the last decade, though rates for Monterey County are better than for California at large.²¹

As a result, this report emphasizes two goals to support community readiness:

★ Goal 1

Increase access to nutrition support programs among families, especially for pregnant women, and two-, three-, and four-year-olds.

★ Goal 2

Increase access to affordable, healthy foods for all child care programs.

4. Early Care & Education

Early care and education programs serve families in multiple ways: to support both parental employment (family financial stability) and child development. However, the extent that early care and education programs adequately support both those purposes varies greatly. Children and families need high-quality care as early as possible. High-quality child care for infants and toddlers is just as important as preschool and pre-kindergarten in supporting school readiness.²² Here are some key data points related to early care and education in Monterey County:

- In 2022 there were enough licensed care spaces for only about one-quarter of children aged 0–5 and fewer total slots compared with 2012.²³
- Data from 2019 and 2022 show that most children who qualified for subsidized care were not able to access it—the gap for infants and toddlers was even wider.²⁴
- As of 2020, only 38% of three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in preschool or transitional kindergarten.²⁵
- In 2022, over three-quarters of elementary school principal survey respondents viewed preschool through third grade alignment as a clear and explicit priority—though only one-third of elementary schools had been able to establish formal partnerships with the primary early care and education programs that send children to their school.

As a result, this report emphasizes four goals to support community readiness:

★ Goal 1

Increase the availability of public and private funding for early care and education programs and providers, and the infrastructure around them.

★ Goal 2

Support the quality of early care and education programs and services.

★ Goal 3

Increase coordination between early childhood programs and elementary schools.

★ Goal 4

Build a cohesive system of career pathway and business support for early child care and education programs and providers.

5. Family Support Services

Young children’s well-being is directly tied to the well-being of their parents and other caregivers. Having what the American Academy of Pediatrics calls “safe, stable, and nurturing relationships” with primary caregivers helps infants build a sturdy brain architecture that promotes optimal learning and development.²⁶ These safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (“nurturing relationships”) can also buffer young children from the adverse effects of stressors.²⁷ Parents *also* need reliably responsive and supportive relationships to avoid the stressors that impact their children. When systems take responsibility for the conditions that produce hardships at the family level and provide needed supports, they enable parents to better focus on providing nurturing relationships with their young children.²⁸ High-quality support services for families focus on promoting early relational health via culturally responsive and strengths-based programming as well as connection to community resources.

Additionally, parenting development programs that support nurturing parent-child relationships have been shown to promote healthy parent-child attachment and are linked to improved outcomes for children’s cognitive, language, motor, and socioemotional development.²⁹ Because relational health is crucial for both parents and children, providers working with young children across all sectors and systems need the knowledge and skills to support nurturing relationships, not just between parents and children but also between themselves and the parents and children they serve.

As a result, this report emphasizes three goals to support community readiness:

★ Goal 1

Increase the reach of integrated family support services for children prenatal to five.

★ Goal 2

Ensure children with developmental delays are connected to services as early as possible.

★ Goal 3

Increase family access to a relational health workforce—providers across the sectors serving children prenatal to five who can support healthy relationships and overall well-being of children and families who have experienced loss, trauma, and other adversities.



5. FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES (CONT.)

Here are some key data points related to family support services in Monterey County:

- Developing more holistic and integrated services to support families with complex needs at a time of declining Tobacco Tax funds meant that First 5 Monterey County served fewer parents and children in the 2017–2023 funding cycle than in the past.
- As of 2022, 80% of children who could benefit from home visiting were not receiving these services.³⁰
- As of 2022, the majority of elementary schools reported offering family support services to children aged 4 and up; however, most did not offer these services for families with children under 4 (based on survey responses).
- Infants and toddlers are likely not receiving the early intervention services they need. In FY 20/21, 3.98% of the 0–3 population in the region were served by Early Start.³¹
- As of 2022, there was a severe shortage of child psychiatrists, a starting place for understanding the lack of mental health providers trained to work with young children in the county.³²

Summary

GOALS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Healthy development in the first five years, including school readiness, depends on the holistic well-being of children and families. Consequently, addressing gaps in child and family well-being involves the whole community, spanning specialties, systems, and services, and including lawmakers, administrators, neighbors, family, and friends. Together we can develop and implement the strategies that will meet our shared aspirations for thriving children and a thriving Monterey County. Each section in the full report includes specific recommendations to address the priority goals.



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