



The Future of Children

Princeton - Brookings

Research-Practice Partnership Brief

Leveraging the Capacity of Research-Practice Partnerships During COVID-19

Maia Connors, Amanda G. Stein, Eleni L. Manos

Start Early

About Start Early: Start Early (formerly known as the Ounce of Prevention) is a nonprofit public-private partnership advancing quality early learning and care for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to help close the opportunity gap. For nearly 40 years, Start Early has delivered best-in-class doula, home visiting and Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Bringing expertise in program delivery, research and evaluation, professional development and policy and advocacy, Start Early works in partnership with communities and other experts to drive systemic change so that millions more children, families and educators can thrive. Learn more at www.StartEarly.org.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges for research-practice partnerships (RPPs). Overnight, work that had been done in person—providing services to children, families, and staff; collecting data; and engaging in partnership activities—had to either become virtual or cease entirely. Program partners needed information quickly to respond to the health, mental health, and economic crises that were rapidly emerging among early childhood professionals, children, and families. Research partners were confronted with timelines and data collection procedures that were no longer feasible,

and partially completed studies that no longer answered the most pressing questions. In response, RPPs themselves had to adapt quickly to shifting priorities and unprecedented conditions.

We have previously described how an “embedded partnership” between the program and research teams within a single organization can help build and organize the capacities needed by RPPs to be sustainable and effective. At the center of the embedded partnership model is the idea that fully integrating research within practice, and practice within research, helps position partners to evolve and improve together within the context of a stable, long-term RPP. Our own experiences as research partners in two of these embedded RPPs suggest that the organizational structure, culture, interdisciplinary expertise, and sustainable infrastructure that support our partnerships has never been more critical to our success than it is right now.

In March 2020, both the Essential Fellowship, a professional development program for early childhood care and education leaders, and Educare Chicago, an Early Head Start/Head

Start school for children from birth through age five and their families, quickly pivoted from in-person activities to virtual. Because the program and research partners kept working together in an interdisciplinary, learning-oriented organization, it was natural for us all to continue to lean on our stable relationships and existing RPP infrastructure through this challenging transition, despite many competing priorities.

For example, Educare program partners turned to their research partners for guidance on families' preferences and level of engagement with virtual services. And the Essentials Fellowship RPP revisited their logic model to ensure that delivering the program virtually didn't negatively affect engagement or learning. In addition, by building on the existing data collection infrastructure, both RPPs could quickly adapt their data collection plans to leverage critical, newly available data via technology platforms such as Zoom participant records, chat, and polls; web-based child assessments (for example, e-DECA and Hatch Early Learning systems); and parent engagement tools (such as ClassDojo and ReadAskChat text-based prompts). By revising discussion protocols and incorporating new data sources into existing dashboards, both RPPs were able to refocus data utilization routines they had established before the pandemic, allowing them to examine more relevant questions and evidence.

These experiences showed us that the resources and time we had spent building trusting relationships and RPP capacity created efficiencies in our collective ability to respond in this time of crisis. As we navigated meaningful changes in program delivery, inquiry, and improvement, our RPPs were able to learn and adapt quickly to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19.
