

The Act Early Response to COVID-19 Project: Year One

At-a-Glance

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "Learn the Signs. Act Early." (LTSAE) program aims to improve early identification of developmental delays and disabilities, so children and their families can get the services they need as early as possible. The program provides free, high-quality, research-informed tools and resources to support parent-engaged developmental monitoring for all children. In addition, the program supports a network of Act Early Ambassadors to promote and integrate the use of these tools and resources into early childhood programs.

Why Early Identification is Important

Early identification of children with a developmental delay or disability is important because early intervention improves children's ability to learn and reduces the need for more costly intervention over time. Unfortunately, most developmental disabilities are not identified until after a child begins school, so many children miss the opportunity for early intervention services. Data suggest delays in early identification has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. CDC is working to address these challenges through its "Act Early Response to COVID-19" special project.

The Act Early Response to COVID-19 Project: Year 1

The Act Early Response to COVID-19 Project was developed to lessen the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early identification of developmental delays and disabilities. The project also aims to increase support for families with young children during this stressful time. It is funded through federal COVID-19 supplemental funding and administered through a cooperative agreement between CDC and the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD). The project funds and supports Act Early Ambassador-led Response Teams, which are made up of representatives from different early childhood programs. These Response Teams collaborate to ensure continued early identification of young children with developmental delays and disabilities during the pandemic, and to support resiliency among children, families, and communities.

Early Childhood Partner Programs

- Title V
- Part C (Child Find)
- Help Me Grow
- HRSA funded Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grants
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- Disability Advocacy
- Early Care and Education
- Head Start
- WIC
- Home Visiting
- Child Welfare

Year 1 Project Goals

1. Develop and coordinate an Act Early Ambassador-led (or co-led) state/territory team of partners from different early childhood programs
2. Engage the state/territorial team in conducting a needs assessment for early identification during the COVID-19 pandemic



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3. Develop, implement, and evaluate a plan to address early identification in the state or territory
4. Identify, implement, and evaluate strategies to support the resiliency of children, families, and communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

Goal 1: Establish an Act Early Response Team

In Year 1 of the project (September 1, 2020 – August 31, 2021), 43 states and territories established Act Early COVID Response Teams. These Response Teams were led or co-led by Act Early Ambassadors and made up of partners from different early childhood programs. Response Team members participated in a needs assessment to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early identification. The teams then developed work plans to meet project goals. Teams met regularly throughout the year to accomplish those objectives. This served as a strategy to strengthen early identification.

Team Successes

Some state response team members integrated LTSAE into their respective programs by establishing policies or creating training opportunities

Response team leads reported greater buy-in and more collaboration for this initiative compared to prior efforts to engage across programs and systems

Goal 2: Identify barriers and opportunities related to early identification

Response Teams and their early childhood partners completed a needs assessment to identify barriers and opportunities related to early identification. The goal of the assessment was to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early identification of children with developmental delays and disabilities in their state or territory. Two web-based surveys ($N = 392$) were conducted with team leads ($n = 43$) and early childhood partners from 43 states and territories ($n = 349$). State/territory Response Teams used these findings to guide development of workplans. Findings from this assessment will inform future efforts to support early identification of developmental delays and disabilities among young children birth to age 5 years.

Barriers Identified

A majority of respondents reported that various components of early identification were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic

Many respondents reported they lacked the ability to monitor early identification because the state or territory did not have a data collection system

Goal 3: Improve early identification of developmental delays and disabilities

Response Teams were tasked with developing, implementing, and evaluating a plan to address barriers identified in the needs assessment. Teams also established next steps on identified opportunities for early identification. Common strategies used across all teams include the use of training, developing policies, and disseminating and communication using LTSAE materials.



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Common Strategies Used by Response Teams

Training	Policy	Communication & Dissemination
Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child development • Using LTSAE materials for early identification • Conducting screening • State or territory referral systems • State or territory early intervention programs 	Early childhood programs requiring training for providers Developing and using standardized materials with LTSAE to create a common message about early identification	Collaborate with community members where families are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 to identify strategies for dissemination of information about child development and early identification Promoting LTSAE messaging and resources on buses and in bus stops
Training Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customizing LTSAE materials and the <i>CDC's Watch Me! Celebrating Milestones and Sharing Concerns</i> online training for different early childhood programs • Archiving recorded trainings for future use • Providing implementation guides • Developing opportunities for practitioners and families to collaborate and learn from one another 	Training an early childhood program on how to use the states' online screening platform	Promoting LTSAE and information about early identification through radio public service announcements

Goal 4: Support resiliency among families with young children

During Year 1, teams were encouraged to identify, implement, and evaluate strategies to improve resiliency of children birth to 5 years and their families during COVID-19 response and mitigation efforts.

Lessons Learned

Year 1 of the Act Early Response to COVID-19 laid a strong foundation for a second year of the project. The teams achieved greater understanding of what the existing challenges are for early identification, as well as facilitators to support implementing a more seamless process.

Year 2 of the Act Early Response to COVID-19

In Year 2, teams will expand their work plans to address the major components of early identification and promote resources and activities that helps to build the capacity of children, families, providers, and/or early childhood systems to withstand and/or recover from the strains and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resiliency Building Strategies

- Support for well-child developmental promotion
- Support for timely referrals
- Connecting families with early intervention services
- Linking families with needed services (e.g., WIC)
- Promoting and distributing resiliency resources, tools, and materials

Key Lessons Learned

Recognition of the importance of actively engaged partnership teams

States and territories' need for an early identification data system to monitor child and family progress



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