One Family’s Story:
What Early Childhood Systems Can Offer

Case Study
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The Family

Ethan and Mary live with their mother and father. Ethan was born at 28 weeks gestation and suffered from failure to thrive due to low birth weight. He is now two years old and is very active. Mary, Ethan's four-year-old sister, is eager to please the adults in her life. The siblings’ mother, Sally, is always excited about anything that Ethan does; she gives him frequent praise. Joseph, the father, expects Mary to be the big girl in the family and help her mother with Ethan. Joseph, who holds two jobs—one full-time and one part-time—has aspirations of becoming a firefighter, but he has been unable to pass the entrance exam. Sally works one job in a local store, 6 days a week, 8-10 hours per day during peak holiday seasons, but often her hours are cut to fewer than 20 per week.

Neighborhood/Housing/Community

The family has moved three times this year. Though they have stayed in the same city, they have moved to a different neighborhood each time. Before the first move, the family lived within walking distance of the extended family. At one point, the family lived with Ethan and Mary’s maternal grandmother, aunt and two cousins. The family attends a church in the city; however, dad is often unable to attend due to work. Mom likes to take the children to a Saturday playgroup at the local library that includes other caregivers and parents/guardians. It was at the library that she learned about the public preschool for Mary. The local parks are in disrepair and the parents agree that they do not appear safe; therefore, the children don’t play outside often.

Health Care

The family switched pediatricians based on the advice of a friend who suggested that another pediatrician would better address concerns about Ethan, especially those related to the behavior issue reported by his child care program. The mother believed that the teacher did not like Ethan and did not understand him and his needs. Sally and Joseph called three pediatric practices before they found one in their area that was accepting new patients.

Ethan and Mary’s parents have not been to the doctor in two years. The last time Mom went was for her post-partum check-up after the birth of Ethan. Ethan receives Part C services both for developmental delays in speech and language and due to the early concerns with weight gain. Mary appears to be overweight; dad describes her as big-boned.
During the time they lived with their aunt, Ethan and Mary did not attend child care or public preschool; the aunt cared for them while their mother and father worked. Joseph and Sally have a child care voucher, but each time Sally's hours are cut, she loses her child care voucher. She is only able to keep full-time hours about six months per year. Sally's mother was compensated by the state as an informal caregiver when Sally and Joseph lived with her. The new neighborhood has six-hour-a-day public preschool for three- and four-year-olds; it did not have a slot for Mary so she attends a school that is not located in the neighborhood. The community schools are mostly charter or magnet schools. Mary was enrolled as soon as her mother found a school that had an opening mid-year.

Due to the frequent moves and the family's unreliable transportation, Ethan and Mary have had to switch child care settings. Ethan had to switch child care programs due to the location of Mary's public school program. The current child care center gives a discount for a second child. Due to Mary's reduction in work hours to fewer than 20 per week over 12 weeks, she lost her child care certificate. She is on the waiting list for a new child care voucher. Over 50 percent of her income goes to pay for child care.

At least once a week the children are late for preschool and child care because the parents share an unreliable car. When the car broke down, Mary missed a week of preschool and both children could only get to child care. After child care, the mother or the grandmother picks up both children.

Mary's teacher has had special training in the social and emotional development of young children. She says Mary is the best student; she is quiet and keeps to herself and does not cause any trouble. Mary is very responsive to requests from adults; however, she rarely initiates play with other children or participates in classroom discussions. She does enjoy books and can often be found in the book corner turning the pages of books by herself.

The teacher has regular calls with Mary's mother and understands the stress created this year by the multiple moves. Her understanding of the family's circumstances and the stressors in Mary's life allows her to appreciate the time Mary spends alone. However, she recognizes the importance of Mary creating peer relationships and expressing her needs independently. Mary's teacher has created peer-learning opportunities using the learning stations in the class as a part of her individualized plan to support Mary's development of relationships with peers. She worries, however, that when Mary moves on to kindergarten this fall, her new teacher may not understand how Mary uses quiet time in school and that he/she may perceive Mary as unengaged.

Mary's preschool completed an evidence-based formative assessment showing her growth patterns at three points during this school year. Mary's parents have been given a summary of the formative assessment to provide to the kindergarten teacher. As a part of the transition to kindergarten, Mary's preschool took the children on a trip to the local elementary school; however, school assignments have not been made and the school they visited may not be her assigned school.

Ethan's teacher has a bachelor's degree in early education but has not had specialized training in speech and language development or social and emotional development. Ethan's teacher looks forward to the day when Ethan, who has had a hard time staying on task, is no longer in early education and care. Ethan talks all the time, but is not easily understood and is often frustrated when he tries to communicate, especially with peers. Ethan can often be found walking around the class, with the teacher trying to prevent him from getting into trouble.
Discussion Questions

**Family**

1. What might happen if the mother quits work and loses child care? What might help Sally stabilize or improve her work situation?

2. What is the potential impact of this family scenario on Ethan and Mary over the next three years?

3. What kinds of help might Sally and Joseph benefit from that will support their children?

4. What kinds of help might Sally and Joseph benefit from that will support their own self-sufficiency and greater economic security?

5. What are the long- and short-term consequences of the parents’ lack of consistent health care?

**System**

6. What kinds of help might Sally and Joseph benefit from that will support their own self-sufficiency and greater economic security?

7. Whose responsibility is it to intervene on behalf of Ethan and Mary?

8. What set of comprehensive services should be available to Sally and Joseph on behalf of their children?

**Policy**

9. Which other state agencies are impacting this family’s life or could be useful in helping meet family goals?

10. What decisions or actions could the state early childhood system take to support these children and their family?
About BUILD

BUILD supports the people who set policies, provide services and advocate for children from birth to age five.

Taking a systems approach, BUILD partners with state leaders working in early learning, health/mental health/nutrition, and family support and engagement. BUILD provides guidance, leadership training and capacity building.

BUILD also acts as a network that convenes state and community leaders, online and in-person, to share best practices, resources and strategies, with a focus on integrating family and child-serving systems, advancing quality and racial equity. BUILD leverages 50-state learning to provide customized technical assistance that is designed to meet the unique needs of states and communities.

Why it Matters

With increasing evidence from brain science, we know that the first five years of a child’s life set the foundation for all future growth and development. We also know that investments in early childhood enable increased health, school readiness, and ultimately, the ability to be a part of an educated workforce critical for our future prosperity. Creating effective early childhood systems in states and in communities is the only way to ensure the healthy growth and development of each and every child.

Addressing Racial Disparities

Today, race and place are predictive of children’s healthy development and for success in school and life. To address these disparities, systems-building work at all levels can be neither “colorblind” nor passive. It must intentionally level the playing field in terms of power so that public action, allocation of resources, and oversight are shared responsibilities of a representative leadership. In BUILD’s systems work, all actions are assessed to ensure impact is equitable for children and families of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and for families of diverse socio-economic status.

Work with BUILD

With a staff of seasoned experts including researchers and evaluators, BUILD provides customized and targeted technical assistance, financial support and professional development opportunities to early childhood leaders in the public sector and the private advocacy and foundation community.

For additional information, go to www.buildinitiative.org or contact Susan Hibbard, Executive Director, at info@buildinitiative.org.