

FIRST CONNECTIONS



Fact Sheet

WHAT IS FIRST CONNECTIONS?

First Connections is Arkansas' family-centered, coordinated early intervention system for infants and toddlers with disabilities or experiencing a developmental delay. First Connections brings together families and professionals from education, health, and social service agencies to coordinate locally available services and resources to help caregivers assist in their child's learning and development.

Families are eligible to participate in First Connections when they include children, ages birth to three years, whom:

- Are experiencing a developmental delay
- Have a diagnosed physical or mental condition that has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay

Key principles:

- 🧩 Parents and family members are a child's first teachers; with supports and resources all families can enhance their child's learning and development.
- 🧩 Infants and toddlers learn best in their natural environment through every day experiences and interactions with familiar people in familiar contexts with typically developing peers.
- 🧩 All children, no matter what their physical, cognitive, or emotional level of development, need meaningful opportunities to develop skills, establish a sense of self, and lay a foundation for life-long learning.

Our Mission:

First Connections collaborates with families to facilitate the child's participation in family and community activities through intervention linked to specific family-centered goals which support the family's enhancement of their child's development.

- 🧩 All children learning together fosters the potential of every child; children with disabilities have the right to play and learn alongside children without disabilities.
- 🧩 The family and IFSP team collaboratively plans and writes strategies/activities, services, and supports to enhance the child's participation and learning in natural environments and every day activities, using the child's and family's strengths to overcome challenges and to accomplish goals that reflect family priorities for their child's development.
- 🧩 Active family/caregiver participation in the early intervention process is critical to a child's development with support and training from qualified early intervention service providers.
- 🧩 Early intervention is designed to meet the needs of infants and toddlers who have a developmental delay or disability while offering supportive services to the family, like parent education/training to help parents understand their child's developmental abilities in order to promote their child's development.

TURNING THREE – TRANSITION:

Families participating in First Connections (early intervention under Part C of IDEA) receive support and assistance in transitioning to “other appropriate programs” prior to their child’s third birthday. The family and their transition team work together to complete a transition plan as part of their child’s Individualized Family Service Plan. No later than ninety days prior to their child’s third birthday, the family and their transition team meet for a transition conference to ensure a smooth transition for the toddler and for the family. Successful transition relies upon collaborative relationships between agencies through interagency policies, procedures, and resources covering administrative support, staff development, and family and child preparation. First Connections providers and representatives from the Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are members of local transition teams that also include Head Start, HIPPY, daycares, and other agencies and/or programs into which young children transition to for continued learning and development.



QUALITY ASSURANCE/MONITORING:

One of the lead agency’s key responsibilities is providing general supervision of EI providers, programs, and activities funded through federal early intervention funding. To enhance its ability to identify areas of need and to improve compliance with federal and state rules, Arkansas’ First Connections uses a focused monitoring approach to general supervision. The lead agency monitors programs, providers, and activities through remote data analysis, on-site early intervention record audits, provider record audits, parent and provider interviews and complaint investigations. Quality Assurance Monitors also provide technical assistance to providers in the regions they serve and collaborate with the data unit and comprehensive system of personnel development to determine areas of need for program improvement efforts.

WHAT IS THE ARKANSAS INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COUNCIL (AICC)?

Arkansas’ Interagency Coordinating Council (AICC) is comprised of members appointed by the Governor to advise and assist the Part C program in its responsibilities. First Connections is administered by the Division of Developmental Disabilities services within the Department of Human Services.

The AICC is comprised of members representing parents of children with special needs, state agency groups, physicians, insurance, early childhood special education, early intervention service providers, legislators, and others. The AICC is committed to holding the mission and principles of First Connections and to keeping abreast of issues, concerns, and trends which may affect First Connections in the future.

The AICC utilizes standing committees developed around the basic components of early intervention, to identify current issues, gather information, and make informed and supportive recommendations to the lead agency to assist the lead agency in developing an early intervention system of the highest quality, which seeks to balance family-centered services with fiscal responsibility.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COUNCILS (LICCs)?

LICCs in regions of Arkansas bring together individuals serving children 0-5 who are experiencing developmental delay in order to promote coordinated, community-based, family-centered intervention supports and services. Each regional LICC provides the authentic voice for early intervention at the local level by identifying concerns, issues, and strengths unique to each community and then collaborating to develop a system to meet locally-identified needs.

ROLE OF INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COUNCIL (AICC) MEMBERS

Establishment of Council

A State that desires to receive financial assistance under part C of the Act must establish a State Interagency Coordinating Council (Council) 34 CFR § 303.600:

- The Council must be appointed by the Governor. The Governor must ensure that the membership of the Council reasonably represents the population of the State.
- The Governor must designate a member of the Council to serve as the chairperson of the Council or require the Council to do so.
- Any member of the Council who is a representative of the lead agency designated under 34 CFR §303.201 may not serve as the chairperson of the Council.

(Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1441(a))

Membership

AICC members are appointed by the Governor to meet guidelines for States' Interagency Coordinating Councils established under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part C §303.601 to include:

- At least 20 percent of the members are parents, including minority parents, of infants or toddlers with disabilities or children with disabilities aged 12 years or younger, with knowledge of, or experience with, programs for infants and toddlers with disabilities.
- At least one parent member must be a parent of an infant or toddler with a disability or a child with a disability aged six years or younger.
- At least 20 percent of the members must be public or private providers of early intervention services.
- At least one member must be from the State legislature.
- At least one member must be involved in personnel preparation.
- At least one member must be from **each** of the State agencies involved in the provision of, or payment for, early intervention services and have sufficient authority to engage in policy planning and implementation on behalf of these agencies.
- At least one member must be from the State Educational Agency responsible for preschool services to children with disabilities and have sufficient authority to engage in policy planning and implementation on behalf of the SEA.
- At least one member must be from the agency responsible for the State Medicaid and CHIP program.
- At least one member must be from Head Start or Early Head Start agency or program in the State.
- At least one member must be from a State agency responsible for child care.
- At least one member must be from the agency responsible for the State regulation of private health insurance.
- At least one member must be a representative designated by the Office of the Coordination of Education of Homeless Children and Youth (McKinney-Vento).
- At least one member must be a representative from the State child welfare agency responsible for foster care.
- At least one member must be from the State agency responsible for children's mental health.

The Governor may appoint one member to represent more than one program or agency and the Council may include other members selected by the Governor, including a representative from the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) or, where there is no school operated or funded by the BIE in the State, from the Indian Health Service or the tribal council. Diverse membership is critical to assisting the lead agency (Department of Human Services' Division of Developmental Disabilities Services) in overseeing the state-wide family-centered early intervention system (Part C program).

Communicating with Constituencies

AICC members represent the various statewide constituencies of parents of children who are or were Part C eligible, providers of services to the 0-3 population, and state agency representatives that work with the system of supports and services for families with children 0-3 with disabilities.

There are various opportunities and methods available to AICC members to communicate with their constituencies. For example, members can talk with their constituencies in the various venues where they work; they can share information by disseminating the handouts from AICC meetings or the minutes of meetings. Members could also connect constituents to LICC groups where families can serve as active participants in the area in which they live.

Members can bring information from their constituencies to the AICC and add their input to the Council's discussions or an individual may contact their AICC constituent regarding a topic the individual would like to share with the AICC during a quarterly meeting for consideration on the agenda (for more information, see "Guest Protocol," #5). Members may also want to invite a constituent to a Council meeting as guest. AICC Members are asked to inform LaToya Pettus or Amanda Smith (501-683-5805) or latoya.pettus@dhs.arkansas.gov or amanda.smith@dhs.arkansas.gov when they extend an invitation to ensure that there is adequate space to accommodate all guests.

The public is always welcomed to attend any AICC meeting, and a "Guest Protocol" has been developed to make their visit meaningful. Time is allotted after all agenda items have been covered (at the end of the meeting) to accept public comment.

Guests who wish to share information and/or present a topic with the AICC may do so with advanced approval, preparation, and notice. Guests who wish to have time allotted for their topic (or formal public comment) that he/she wants to present to the AICC may do so by contacting an AICC Member at least two weeks in advance of a regularly scheduled AICC meeting date and indicate that you would like to make a formal "Public Comment" in order to be added to the AICC agenda. Individual comments on specific topics, if approved by the AICC Member initially contacted as well as the AICC President, are added to the agenda at a specified time. Individuals addressing the AICC on a previously approved agenda item are asked to arrive on time and be prepared to make comments during the allotted time.

Activities

The AICC is the advisory group for the State's Part C Program (First Connections) and provides valuable feedback and assists the lead agency in identifying areas in the Part C Program that need attention and provides collaboration necessary to make identified improvement strategies possible. Members have engaged in activities designed to enhance the system, which have included:

- Infrastructure analyses
- Suggesting educational speakers, workshops, and conferences,

- Forming of subcommittees (see below),
- Influencing federal and state legislation,
- Developing and reviewing pilot projects,
- Reviewing/analyzing data,
- Reviewing fiscal information,
- Facilitating regional and statewide meetings,
- Establishing a clearinghouse of information,
- Conducting surveys, and
- Attending annual retreats.

Many of the topics and issues that the AICC has decided to take action on have required that a subcommittee be established to review pertinent information and meet more frequently than the membership as a whole. Members who join a subcommittee usually have an interest or investment in the identified topic. Through work on a subcommittee, members learn more about each other as well as the topic of interest. Subcommittees typically meet between the scheduled meetings at the convenience of subcommittee members. The issue being addressed and the availability of the members determine the frequency of these meetings. It is not a requirement that you join a subcommittee, however, if you have a particular interest or perspective to offer, it is hoped that you will consider joining one.

Structure

The AICC meets quarterly, on the third Wednesday. Meetings are held in a centrally located, accessible, public space and last for two hours (10:00 – 12:00). A calendar of meetings is available, and reminder notices are sent out before each meeting. Agenda and meeting materials are disseminated by e-mail prior to the meeting. It is expected that members will make every effort to attend meetings regularly. Members are asked to send a delegate and notify the AICC President if they are unable to attend.

Meetings are facilitated by the AICC President or Vice-President if the chair is unavailable. A lead agency staff member and the AICC Secretary typically take the meeting notes, however in their absence; another member may be called upon to assist with this duty.

Staff from the lead agency arrange meetings, send out meeting materials, provide information on a regular basis at the meetings, and are available to members at any time. These staff members are not voting members of the AICC, but are present at all meetings to support the AICC. There are times when an invited guest will make a brief presentation or answer questions from the AICC.

Occasionally, the lead agency or AICC subcommittee members may need a response to an inquiry or feedback on a document between meetings. A fillable form called the Action Item Agenda is used to facilitate and communicate between meetings, when necessary. Members' prompt responses in these situations are appreciated.

Parents

Parents of children with disabilities, particularly those that are or have received services from First Connections, represent an important perspective that needs to be heard at each meeting. Part C of IDEA requires that 20% of a state's ICC membership be comprised of parents of children with disabilities. AICC members representing parents are expected to fully participate in meetings. Each parent's voice is

no less important than that of any other member of the AICC, and needs to be heard and encouraged. To facilitate attendance at meetings, the AICC is prepared to reimburse families for child care and mileage expenses. Family members should see a representative from the lead agency for the appropriate paperwork.

National surveys have revealed that parent members of AICCs need three things to function effectively:

- Respect,
- Information, and
- Support.

It is expected that all members will provide these to all every other member, but especially to parent members of the AICC. Parent members are encouraged to ask questions to gain clarification.

Family members have been vital in sharing what is working and what is not working in a family-centered early intervention system. They have served as an important link to information from other parents not represented on the AICC. They often see gaps in supports and services that are not apparent at a policy level. They are a constant reminder of the philosophy of “family-centered.” There are some parent members who are also professionals in the field. The AICC is fortunate to have them participating, as they bring an integrated perspective that few other professionals have. They can often model for parents who have less experience with “agency representatives” to ask questions, disagree if a comment does not feel accurate, and educate others on subjects the parents know intimately.

All AICC members give of their time and energy, and the lead agency appreciates the dedication and contribution of all participants. The participation of family members is particularly appreciated. The ability to speak about their personal situation, add another commitment to a full schedule, and work on behalf of all families in Arkansas is admirable. The AICC President or staff from the lead agency can facilitate finding a parent mentor on the AICC to assist parents to adjust to work on the Council.

Responsibilities of an AICC Member

The following are some of the responsibilities of an AICC member:

- Being familiar with the Arkansas’ family-centered early intervention system [First Connections] and Part C of IDEA as well as the preschool special education program and Part B/619 of the IDEA,
- Attending meetings regularly, and reporting to the AICC President your appointment of a delegate if not able to attend,
- Responding in a timely manner to requests for feedback on documents or other items,
- Representing the perspective of the organization/agency that you represent in AICC meetings,
- Avoiding speaking in “jargon” or acronyms, so everyone will understand your information,
- Presenting ideas, information, resources, and concerns to the AICC as appropriate,
- Respecting confidentiality of information exchanged at ICC meetings, as appropriate, and sharing AICC documents only after the AICC releases them for public dissemination.
- Advising key personnel of any changes in your contact information or role,
- Listening to others respectfully at meetings,
- Serving on subcommittee(s), if interest and perspective is relevant,
- Contacting the AICC President or lead agency staff for clarification of any issues or concerns, and
- Avoiding conflict of interest situations.