



Connecting Families to the Mixed-Delivery System Evaluation of Trusted Advisors Grant in Michigan

Authors: Patricia Garcia-Arena, Stephanie D'Souza, Lauren Burr, Isobel Sorenson, Ann-Marie Faria, and Natalie Tucker-Bradway

In 2020, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Office of Great Start was awarded a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) renewal grant. This grant funded the Trusted Advisors Grant program, among other MDE initiatives, as part of the state's broad goal to make Michigan the best state for raising a family. All active Great Start Parent Coalitions (GSPCs) are eligible to apply for Trusted Advisor Grants of up to \$20,000 to implement projects that include this focus. Trusted Advisor Grants were first piloted using Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant funds but are now financed through Michigan's PDG B-5 funds. Through these grants, Trusted Advisors work directly with families to increase family knowledge and choice within the early childhood mixed-delivery system and elevate families' voices to inform state policy and practice.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to evaluate the Trusted Advisors Grant program. The evaluation focuses on four questions:

1. How were Trusted Advisors Grants implemented across the state?
2. To what extent did the Trusted Advisors Grants create relationships, support families' needs, and connect families from underrepresented groups to the mixed-delivery system?
3. To what extent were activities related to the Trusted Advisors Grants increasing family knowledge and choice within the mixed-delivery system?
4. To what extent did activities related to the Trusted Advisors Grants increase the flow of information or input from families to system stakeholders?

About Trusted Advisors Grant

Trusted Advisors Grants attempt to improve local connections with families with children ages 0–5, engaging them more fully in early childhood activities and community supports. These grants provide funding to local communities to recruit local trusted advisors already known to families. Trusted advisors conduct outreach with families to achieve the specific goals of each grantee. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees also used funds to address the changing needs of families. The goals of the Trusted Advisor Grants (as specified in the grant application cover sheet) are as follows:

- Increase participation in, navigation of, or accessibility to the mixed-delivery system (e.g., increasing enrollment and access to services, removing barriers, assisting with transitioning between programs).
- Increase knowledge of early learning and development needs.
- Improve coordination among Great Start Collaborative (GSCs), GSPCs, or mixed-delivery system services (e.g., by facilitating collaboration among service providers).
- Build or strengthen social capital, community connections, and/or economic well-being (e.g., by facilitating support groups, mentorships, strengthening families).

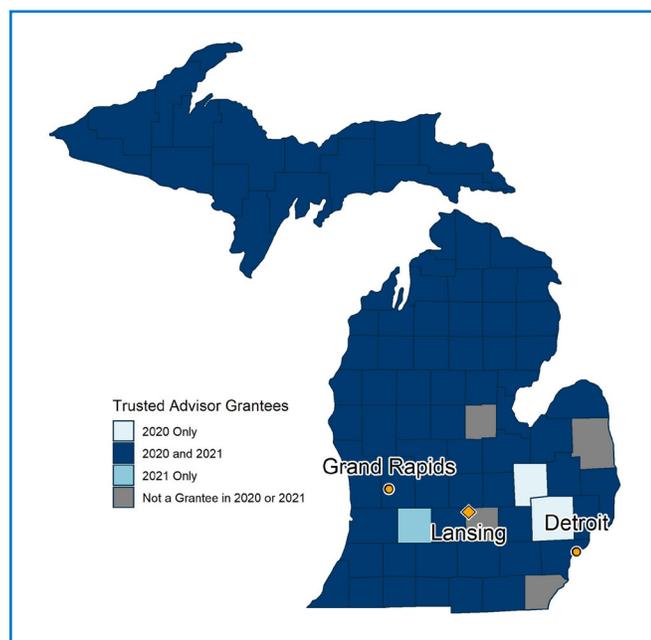
To achieve these goals, Trusted Advisor Grants typically conduct outreach and work to build authentic relationships with families as well as between providers and families. Some public messaging campaigns such as *Talking is Teaching*, parent cafés, or activities (live or virtual) that target early literacy activities are funded by Trusted Advisor Grants.

This brief describes key findings from the evaluation of the Trusted Advisors Grants from May 2020 through March 2021. The purpose of the evaluation is to describe the initial rollout and implementation of the Trusted Advisors Grant program. Data sources used in the evaluation are presented first, followed by findings of the evaluation based on each of the four research questions, and, finally, recommendations for future implementation of the Trusted Advisors Grant program.

The Trusted Advisors Grant program was widely implemented across the state.

To answer the first research question—How were Trusted Advisors Grants implemented across the state?—we collected information on 2020 and 2021 grantees. Trusted Advisor grants were provided to all GSCs that requested funding. Among the 51 GSCs that requested Trusted Advisor Grant funds in either 2020 or 2021, most grantees (48 or 94%) requested funds in both years. Two grantees requested funding in only 2020 and 1 grantee requested funds in only 2021. Those 51 GSCs represent 76 of the 83 counties (92%) in Michigan. Exhibit 1 shows the Michigan counties that requested grants during the last two grant cycles.

Exhibit 1. Map of Trusted Advisors Grantees



DATA COLLECTION

This evaluation draws on multiple data sources to describe the statewide rollout of Trusted Advisors Grants to date.

- AIR and its partner, Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI), completed a **document review** of the 2020 Trusted Advisors local evaluation reports, grant applications about grantees' areas of focus, community partners, material dissemination plans, and data collection activities. Of the 50 GSCs that received funding in 2020, AIR analyzed 51 evaluation reports.¹
- AIR conducted **key informant interviews** with three MDE leadership staff to capture state administrators' perspectives on Trusted Advisors Grants and the implementation of the statewide rollout.
- In December 2020, AIR held three 1-hour **focus groups** with grantees. The focus groups included questions about the implementation of the Trusted Advisor Grant programs, outreach to families from underserved populations, and shifts in programming that occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty-six GSC/GSPC sites were invited to participate in the focus groups, and 23 participants from 17 GSC/GSPC sites attended: 53% of the sites were new, 47% of the sites were veterans, 65% of the sites were implementing Talking is Teaching, 53% of the sites were rural, and 47% of the sites were urban. The 23 participants were from all eight regions of the state. Focus group participants represented a variety of roles, including parent liaisons, Trusted Advisors, and GSC directors and coordinators.

¹ Delta-Schoolcraft submitted two evaluation reports in 2020.

Goals of the 2020 Trusted Advisor Grantees

Trusted Advisor Grantees could specify multiple goals for each grant cycle. According to the grant applications, nearly all grantees (90%) said their top goal was to increase knowledge of early learning and early childhood needs in their communities (see Exhibit 2). About half of the grantees also aimed to increase participation in or accessibility to the mixed-delivery system or strengthen community connections. Fewer grantees (about a third) aimed to specifically increase coordination at the systems level, and about a third of grantees also provided support to families to respond to their shifting needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exhibit 2. Most Common Goals for the 2020 Trusted Advisors Grantees

Stated goals of Trusted Advisors Grants	Percentage of grantees
Increase knowledge of early learning and early childhood needs.	90%
Increase participation in or accessibility to the mixed-delivery system.	55%
Strengthen community connections.	51%
Improve coordination among GSC or mixed-delivery system services.	37%
Respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.	31%

Note. Data come from the 2020 Trusted Advisors Grant Evaluation Reports (N = 51).

Populations Targeted by the 2020 Trusted Advisor Grantees

Trusted Advisor Grantees choose their targeted populations based on needs assessments conducted by the GSPCs. The focus of each grant varies, based on the needs in that specific community. However, there is some consistency across the grantees. For example, nearly all Trusted Advisor Grantees (92%) targeted families in their 2020 grants, and almost three quarters of the grantees (71%) also focused on children ages 0–5 (see Exhibit 3). Within their family outreach and activities, about half of the grantees had fatherhood initiatives (50%) or focused on supporting grandparents (55%), expecting families (49%), or foster families (45%).

Trusted Advisor Grantees also targeted historically marginalized communities or those that may be isolated from the early childhood mixed-delivery system. The most common focus was to better connect with low-income families or families in rural communities (see Exhibit 3). About a third of the grantees specifically supported families with children with special needs, and other notable groups served include dual language learners or Native American/First Nations families.

Across all grantees, the number of families engaged with grant funding ranged from as few as 27 families to as many as 7,207 families. The sites with smaller family outreach typically used funding to support more intensive or one-on-one projects (e.g., parent cafés), whereas the grantees with much larger numbers (sometimes in the thousands) reported on more light-touch outreach conducted through social media and online outreach activities (e.g., disseminating information about early childhood services on websites, creating and posting short videos on social media, or using text messaging campaigns to reach families).

Exhibit 3. Targeted Populations for 2020 Trusted Advisors Grantees

Population		Specific populations/communities	
Parents and caregivers	92%	Low-income families/families living in poverty	77%
Families	86%	Rural communities	71%
Children	71%	Families of children with special needs	33%
Grandparents	55%	English learners/dual language learners	14%
Fathers	50%	Native Americans/First Nation	10%
New mothers	49%	Refugees	4%
Expecting parents	47%	Migrants	2%
Foster parents	45%	None of the above	8%
Young/teenage parents	29%		
Incarcerated parents	< 10%		
None of the above	< 2%		

Note. Data come from the 2020 Trusted Advisors Evaluation Reports (N = 51).

COVID-19 CHALLENGES

Grantees reported challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions. The most commonly noted challenges included the following:

- **Engaging and retaining participants:** Fifty-three percent of the grantees reported difficulty engaging and retaining families because of limitations on face-to-face meetings; parents struggling to balance children’s virtual school and activities with work; and limited opportunities to recruit parents in the usual settings such as schools, businesses, and community organizations.
- **Virtual engagement:** Thirty-three percent of the grantees reported challenges connecting with families virtually, including limited internet access, discomfort with online platforms, screen fatigue, and limited interest in virtual offerings.
- **Evaluation challenges:** Thirty-one percent of the grantees reported difficulty measuring participation levels and demographic characteristics of families in outdoor or virtual events.

State administrator interviewees reported providing implementation assistance, technical assistance and guidance, connections to resources, and collaboration during these challenging times.



“And it has been a beautiful thing this past year. I try to find [the] positive . . . , though COVID allowed us to have more of these, one-to-one . . . we’re learning about each other. And so, and that really helped me to learn more about [grantees] and how to support them.”

–MDE administrator



Trusted Advisors Grantees focused on building relationships with families, supporting families’ needs, and connecting families from underrepresented groups to the mixed-delivery system.

To answer the second research question—To what extent did the Trusted Advisors Grants create relationships, support families’ needs, and connect families from underrepresented groups to the mixed-delivery system?—we reviewed the grantees applications and evaluation reports and spoke directly with grantees in focus groups and state administrators in interviews.

About one third of the Trusted Advisor Grantees built strong relationships with families with the grant funding.

Building authentic relationships between families and between families and service providers is one of the major goals of the grant program. About half of the Trusted Advisor Grantees (26 of 51 or 51%) aimed to create relationships among caregivers or between caregivers and providers, and 19 grantees (37%) successfully implemented activities in this area. Specifically, 16 grantees (31%) successfully offered activities that cultivated caregiver-to-caregiver relationships. These grantees offered activities such as playgroups and parent cafés (facilitated by families, for families) to cultivate relationships among families. Grantees overwhelmingly described the main outcome of these activities as greater social connection with other families, which helped ease isolation compounded by social distancing restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, nine grantees described successfully offering activities that aimed to cultivate relationships

“Where I’ve seen growth since I’ve been with the state of Michigan is, I think the relationship piece, we have really been driving that home. I think that’s the foundation for everything that you want to do. You have to have meaningful relationships with people . . . to connect with the community.”

–MDE administrator

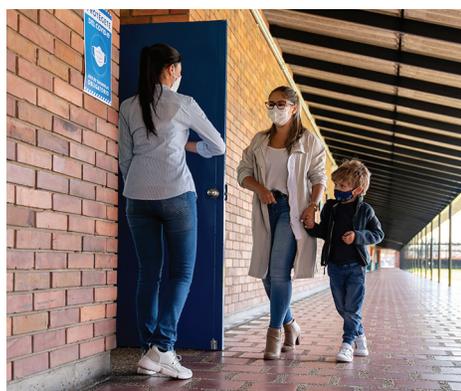
between caregivers and providers. The most common strategies included conducting virtual outreach to area families via telephone, text, and chat (three grantees) and conducting in-person outreach to families in community settings (e.g., afterschool programs, convenience stores, neighborhoods, churches, low-income housing sites, libraries; two grantees). One specific population targeted in relationship-building work was fathers, including those who are or have been incarcerated. Grantees described the desired outcomes of this work as building trust and understanding families' needs and dreams for the future.

This work was essential, because to serve families, Trusted Advisors needed to first rebuild families' trust in early childhood program agencies and institutions. Grantees, state administrators, and focus group participants all reported that building authentic connections with families was critical to undoing the sense of mistrust these families feel toward these agencies because of previous negative experiences.

Nearly all Trusted Advisor Grantees supported the needs of families in their local communities through their grant-funded activities.

Nearly all Trusted Advisor Grantees (46 or 96%) conducted activities that aimed to meet a community's developmental, material, psychosocial, or physical health needs; 41 grantees (80%) successfully implemented activities in this area.

- **Developmental Needs:** Seventy-three percent of the grantees reported educating caregivers and providers on key developmental concepts and skills. The most common approach used by far was implementing Talking is Teaching concepts (28 grantees). For example, 22 grantees distributed high-quality Talking is Teaching materials; 19 grantees trained or used trusted messengers to share concepts; and 10 grantees installed environmental prompts (e.g., signs or posters from the Talking is Teaching campaigns).
- **Material Needs:** One third of the grantees reported providing children's books. A few grantees partnered with other agencies to provide basic needs, school-focused materials, and play materials.
- **Psychosocial Needs:** Thirty-five percent of the grantees reported focusing on the psychosocial needs of families, *outside of child development*, including trainings on parenting, parental self-care and resilience, trauma and protective factors, and positive discipline. Grantees also supported male caregivers in developing pro-fathering attitudes, knowledge, and skills through workshops, social media, and podcasts.
- **Physical Health Needs:** Fewer grantees (10%) supported the physical health needs of families. Activities included a "mindfulness for children" course focused on yoga, exercise, and dance; a first aid/CPR course; and immunization/well child visit education. Two other grantees planned to distribute materials to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, but it is unclear if this activity was completed.



About one third of the Trusted Advisor Grantees focused on connecting families to various programs and services in the mixed-delivery system.

Connecting families to the mixed-delivery system is one of the long-term goals of the Trusted Advisor Grants. In 2020, the grants also specifically focused on reducing isolation and increasing connections for specific groups (e.g., foster families providing service for birth through age 5; advisors trained in community organizing skills; populations that are not well represented/voices that are not at the GSC/GSPC table [such as refugees,

Native Americans/First Nations people, underresourced communities or populations]). In 2020, about one third of the grantees (31%) reported a specific goal of connecting underrepresented families to the mixed-delivery system, and 10 grantees (20%) successfully connected families to the mixed-delivery system. Specifically, eight grantees (16%) provided an active, engaged referral processes, which generally involved grantee representatives (care coordinators, navigators, parent ambassadors, family coaches, or other Trusted Advisors) working directly with caregivers to assess needs, provide information, facilitate the use of referral systems or provide warm referrals, and/or provide follow-up calls to check on progress with getting connected. Three additional grantees successfully expanded efforts to connect families to the mixed-delivery system by collaborating with partner agencies, including GSCs (one grantee) and medical practices/health systems (two grantees).

Trusted Advisor Grantees used a variety of strategies to increase family knowledge and choice within the mixed-delivery system.

To answer the third research question—To what extent were activities related to the Trusted Advisors Grants increasing family knowledge and choice within the mixed-delivery system?—we again reviewed the grantees applications and evaluation reports and spoke directly with grantees and state administrators.

Grantees reported that they supported family knowledge and choice by serving as a centralized, one-stop shop for early childhood services in their communities.

According to the focus group participants, the primary way that Trusted Advisors help increase family knowledge and choice within the mixed-delivery system is by serving as a centralized source of information on programs and services. Trusted Advisors can connect families with many diverse supports and assist families in enrolling in programs or accessing the services they need. This is one example of a successful “No wrong door policy.” By reducing the burden on families to access services, the Trusted Advisors created stronger connections for families and increased their exposure to different services they might not have otherwise known about or used.



Almost half of the grantees increased family knowledge and choice within the mixed-delivery system by distributing materials to families.

A goal of the Trusted Advisor Grants is to increase family knowledge of the early childhood services in their community and increase the choices they have to support their young children and families. According to the 2020 applications and evaluation reports, 22 grantees (43%) aimed to help increase family knowledge and choice within the mixed-delivery system with their funding, and 15 grantees (29%) successfully implemented activities in this area. Specifically, 12 grantees (24%) produced a variety of informational materials intended to get the word out about available community supports

and services to increase family knowledge about the mixed-delivery system. This included presentations, printed materials (handouts, flyers, brochures, resource guides), private Facebook groups, short videos about available resources or agencies, websites, and text messaging services. One grantee also planned to create a smart phone app, but its use with families is not yet clear. The grantees reported anecdotally that these efforts were successful and increased family knowledge of services and resources and, ultimately, enrollment in services. In addition, three grantees mentioned training families to

navigate components of the mixed-delivery system or providing ongoing system navigation support through agency staff.

Many Trusted Advisors Grantees also distributed physical materials to families, such as literacy kits and tote bags filled with toys and books. Grantees distributed materials either directly to families or through local partners, such as Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children clinics, who gave the materials to families during appointments. These materials served as an entry point for discussions with families about how they can support their child’s development through activities in the home as well as about developmental screenings, potential referrals to other agencies, and housing assistance.

 We’ve always said in our county that we have no wrong door and someone’s going to help you get there. It’s just that we would rather instead of you having to go to one agency and then say, ‘No, you need to talk to the school district.’ Instead of sending the parent to the district to get the questions answered, that the Trusted Advisor can get the answer and then contact the parents, so you still only have one person communicating with that family and really building that strong relationship so they are really comfortable and confident when it comes to enrolling in the program.”

–GSC Director

Families often are not directly involved in local- or state-level policy or practice decisions, but Trusted Advisors document family needs and amplify family voice with policymakers.

Finally, to answer the fourth research question—To what extent did activities related to the Trusted Advisors Grants increase the flow of information or input from families to system stakeholders?—we relied on qualitative focus groups and interviews. Although there were a few instances of increased flow of information from families to system stakeholders as a result of the Trusted Advisor Grants, sites mostly focused on family outreach and program implementation at this stage. Based on the focus group discussions, increasing the flow of information from families to system stakeholders does not seem to be the main focus of the grantees. Instead, sites primarily focused on increasing outreach to families from underreported groups and establishing meaningful relationships with these families. Families often are not directly involved in local- or state-level policy or practice decisions (e.g., choosing the types of interventions needed in the community). Rather, Trusted Advisor Grantees act to amplify family voice by advocating on their behalf.

Through their work of engaging families, Trusted Advisors learn the perspectives of families, particularly those in underrepresented groups, and amplify family voice.

Family perspectives shape the work of Trusted Advisors and are used to inform larger discussions about how best to serve families with young children. For example, as mentioned, respondents reported that some families have a sense of distrust of agencies and programs based on previous experiences. Trusted Advisors recognize the need to rebuild a sense of trust with families and the need to change the ways agencies engage families. Partnerships with local agencies may be one way in which sites are helping to share families’ perspectives with system-level actors at a local level.

One site reported that, after the pandemic began, increasing coordination among systems-level stakeholders, including Trusted Advisors, was a top priority. Discussions related to identifying the needs of families in the community, whether health needs or job loss, for instance, as well as determining funding streams to meet these needs were informed directly by the connections and relationships that Trusted Advisors built with families. In the past year, Trusted Advisors continued to provide critical reporting on conditions in the community.

A few sites reported collecting feedback from partner organizations or directly from families after online events, which, in some cases, is used to improve program delivery. One site reported connecting with their local partner, a laundromat, to collect regular feedback about how families have been engaging with the literacy space set up by the site. Another site

mentioned collecting feedback from families after online trainings to understand families' awareness of programs and services available to them. A few sites, however, expressed difficulty with setting up systems for data collection.

In summary, it is not common for families to be directly involved with decision making about the services provided in their communities. More work could be done with the Trusted Advisor Grantees in the future to highlight the importance of this task and work to connect families directly with local and state decision makers.

“The richest piece of information from that particular grant is to look at what are the parents and communities are saying. How do we change our children, family, and communities with this grant that you might not see in data or numbers that we’re using, because everything can’t be calculated quite that way.”
–MDE administrator

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the various data sources, several recommendations emerged for improving the rollout and implementation of the Trusted Advisors Grants in upcoming grant cycles.

Recommended Best Practices for Trusted Advisor Grantees

Hire Trusted Advisors from grantees' target communities. Several grantees emphasized the importance of hiring individuals from the community they are trying to reach. Hiring from within the underrepresented or hard-to-reach area means that Trusted Advisors have preexisting, established relationships with members of the community, which facilitates the process of building trust within the community.

Continue to use both virtual strategies and in-person strategies after the COVID-19 pandemic ends. Many participants mentioned that although the COVID-19 pandemic has made some aspects of the work more difficult, particularly the lack of connection that comes from in-person interactions, they felt that virtual activities allowed them to reach families they would not have otherwise been able to reach. In their responses, Trusted Advisor Grantees noted that virtual activities help remove transportation and childcare barriers. In addition, they felt that some families were more receptive to engaging in activities from home.

Recommended Actions for State Partners

Ensure that Trusted Advisors Grantees have sufficient funds to continue disseminating high-quality materials in their communities. Focus group participants frequently described high-quality materials as an entry point to establishing connections with underrepresented groups. Sharing materials with partner organizations also helped grantees strengthen their partnerships with businesses and other organizations, enabling these organizations to distribute

GSPC messaging. Although these materials have been invaluable, several grant coordinators stressed the financial burden of providing materials. The state may consider providing financial support through Section 32p funds or subsequent Trusted Advisor Grants.



Establish a community of practice or similar space in which Trusted Advisors Grantees can share ideas and best practices. Focus group participants suggested that one of the most helpful supports that the state could provide for their grant work is a space for grantees to connect and share information. Grantees want to learn from one another and emphasized that sharing strategies and materials would save them money and effort and would help them avoid reinventing practices or strategies that others already may be using successfully. Sharing best practices among grantees may help address some of the challenges they face in meeting their targets. In spring 2020, MDE began holding meetings to discuss implementation and allow grantees the opportunity to share best practices with one another, and we encourage these meetings in future years of implementation.

“Trusted Advisor dollars have allowed me to have the tangible items that I can still hand out and get the message out and the awareness of what they are trying to implement.”
–GSC Coordinator

“We hired parents in the communities . . . So, they’re the pillar and then they have all these spokes of groups and families that they know.”
–Parent Liaison

“We’re reaching some families that we haven’t been able to reach before, but at the same time, I think that we all acknowledge that there is a lack of connecting when it’s only through the computer.”
–GSC Director

Conclusions and Next Steps

As the Trusted Advisors Grant program continues, many lessons can be learned from current grantees to improve family engagement with the mixed-delivery system. First, building relationships with families through a variety of strategies is critical to further improve trust and drive desired program outcomes. Second, increasing families' knowledge of available programs and services is important. Findings from the evaluation indicate that grantees engaged families in a variety of ways. Grantees also should continue to build a community of practice and support sustainability efforts that promote the Trusted Advisors Grant program in Michigan.

The evaluation team is currently administering family surveys to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which Trusted Advisors connect underrepresented families to the mixed-delivery system in Michigan. The first round of data collection through the family survey will close in spring 2021 and will be shared with stakeholders in late 2021.



1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor | Arlington, VA 22202-3289 | 202.403.5000

AIR.ORG

Copyright © 2021 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on AIR.ORG.

This brief was supported by the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Initiative (PDG B-5), Grant Number 90TP0055-01-00, from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, or U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.