

Family-Friendly Eligibility and Enrollment Policies

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) offers states, territories, and tribes the flexibility to develop high-quality child care programs that best suit the needs of low-income families as they pursue financial self-sufficiency and school success for their children. The statutory and regulatory commitment to flexibility provides Lead Agencies with broad discretion to design their programs to meet the needs of families and providers and to streamline program efficiency. Given this flexibility, Lead Agencies have the opportunity and responsibility to craft family-friendly policies that promote program access, economic stability for low-income families, and improved learning and care outcomes for children.

What are Family-Friendly policies?

Family-friendly policies are the laws and regulations that recognize the importance of families to society and act to meet, directly or indirectly, the needs of parents, children, and providers. Family-friendly policies are beneficial to everyone involved and can in the long run benefit community and society in general. Policies that promote continuity, such as lengthening eligibility periods and allowing a child to remain eligible between redetermination periods, are consistent with CCDF goals and are examples of family-friendly policies.



This brief outlines opportunities and benefits of family-friendly policies, and provides examples of how Lead Agencies can simplify eligibility and enrollment to best meet the needs of families and providers.

Opportunities and Benefits of Family-Friendly Policies

Support Developmental Needs of Children. CCDF regulations emphasize the importance of implementing policies that increase the length of subsidy receipt, and thereby support the developmental needs of children. Subsidy policies can support children who begin child care with one provider as a preschooler to remain with that provider as they age through their school-age years.

CCDF regulations also emphasize coordination with programs such as Head Start, state-funded prekindergarten, and school-age programs to expand continuity of care. Partnering with 21st Century Community Learning Centers and other school-age services is an example of an opportunity to increase continuity of care for children, families, and providers by combining funds and sharing program costs.

Support Parents' Work Activities and Family Economic Stability. CCDF regulations require Lead Agencies to establish redetermination periods of 12 or more months. Longer eligibility periods provide increased financial stability to families and continuity of care for children. The regulations provide additional protections for working parents, including redetermination procedures that must not unduly disrupt employment. An example of this is Lead Agencies allowing families to submit paperwork online instead of in-person.

Instead of restricting child care services to only occur during the parent's work hours, Lead Agencies have the flexibility to authorize hours to support a child's enrollment in high quality, full-day or year-round care, including summer care. This supports the developmental needs of the child and simplifies services offered by providers to parents.

Continued service provisions can promote continuity of care for children whose parents lose a job or end other approved activities, such as education or training. Low-income families, including those with school-age children, need stable support systems. If parents lose a job or end an education or training program, child care services must continue at the same level for at least three months. This supports continuity of care for the child and gives the parents an opportunity to find a job or enroll in an education or training programs.

Income policies can be more fluid. Lead Agencies are required to gradually phase out assistance for families whose income has increased at the time of redetermination but remains below the federal threshold of 85% of the state median income (SMI). Lead Agencies should establish entry and exit income criteria to minimize the cliff effect that comes when families lose their subsidy because of earning slightly higher incomes.

Promote Program Integrity. Family-friendly policies not only benefit families but can promote the integrity of the program. In general, streamlined eligibility processes are less difficult to administer. Eliminating complex rules and eligibility practices reduces administrative workload burden. CCDF error measures demonstrate that Lead Agencies with less complex eligibility processes generally have fewer administrative errors than those with complex program rules and practices.

Simplifying eligibility processes can improve compliance. Parents and providers may be more likely to comply with program rules and procedures that are easy to understand and require less effort to complete. Reduced administrative burden brings opportunities to allocate staff and resources to activities that increase program integrity and support program goals.

Summary

Family-friendly policies in CCDF benefit families by offering financial stability for parents and continuity of care for children. Additionally, Lead Agencies may find that these policies increase program integrity through a reduction in administrative burden and promotion of parent and provider compliance.

The family-friendly policies discussed in this brief support CCDF goals including promoting economic stability for low-income families and learning outcomes for children. Lead Agencies designing their own programs should consider an evaluation of the benefits and impacts of making existing eligibility policies more family-friendly. Include in these evaluations the potential impact on administrative errors and other areas of program integrity.