

Elevating Prevention and Promotion in Early Childhood Mental Health: A Case Study Series

This case study is part of a series that describes evidence-based, innovative, and exemplary practices that support positive mental health for children. The case studies of five organizations highlight key elements of prevention and promotion efforts in early childhood mental health as well as the contextual factors that support implementation. Case study sites were selected from an environmental scan that identified innovative and exemplary practices and approaches to prevention and promotion in early childhood mental health.

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WeGo Together for Kids

A Collective Impact Model to Strengthen Early Childhood Mental Health Through Structured Partnerships

What is this initiative?

[WeGo Together for Kids \(WGTK\)](#) is a collective impact initiative focused on the health, safety, learning, and social-emotional well-being of West Chicago families and children. Through its collective impact initiative, WGTK convenes more than 60 partners across multiple agencies to provide after-school programming, parent-child workshops, home visiting, and case management that promote positive mental health and prevent mental health difficulties starting in early childhood.

Whom does WGTK serve?

WGTK serves families in the West Chicago area, catering to children from infancy through 12th grade. The organization serves a diverse community, which includes a large Spanish-speaking population and families with low incomes. These families are at increased risk to adversity and trauma, due to living in under-resourced communities, with limited access to local supports and services including those related to mental health and well-being.

How does WGTK use prevention and promotion to support mental health?

West Chicago includes many Spanish-speaking families, families with low incomes, and families facing complex trauma who also face barriers to accessing mental health services. In response, WGTK identified mental health as a service delivery priority. Through its collective impact initiative, WGTK focuses on

Key terms

Promotion and prevention. Strategies and services to strengthen skills, support resilience, reduce risk factors, and establish supportive environments for mental well-being.¹

Collective impact initiative. Bringing partners together to achieve social change through relationship development, shared data and data decision-making, common goals, communication, and meaningful funding allocation and sustainability.

¹ Saxena, S., P.K. Maulik, and World Health Organization. "Prevention and Promotion in Mental Health." World Health Organization, 2002.

programming for early childhood mental health (birth to 8), youth and family mental health (middle and high schoolers), and out-of-school time.

- **Early childhood.** WGTK’s partners provide access to play and learning in which a parent-child relationship can be fostered. The partners engage families in playgroups and parent support groups, home visiting, parent-child workshops, and early childhood music programming. For example, the West Chicago Public Library District runs family playgroups and reading circles.

WGTK also works with community programs in the West Chicago Elementary School District 33 Birth to Three program and Teen Parent Connection program to provide supports to and sharing among parents, including a group for young fathers. These programs provide a safe, private, and nonjudgmental environment where parents can discuss their challenges and emotions and receive resources and tools to increase healthy behaviors and promote positive mental health.

- **Youth and family mental health.** WGTK provides mental health counseling services for youth (middle and high school-age children) and their families. It prioritizes funding for community mental health clinicians (CMHCs) hosted by its partners, Metropolitan Family Services and the DuPage County Health Department. CMHCs are highly skilled behavioral health practitioners who provide prevention, early intervention, and school- and home-based therapeutic and crisis intervention to students and their families. They work exclusively with students and families in West Chicago’s District 33 through referrals. For example, they provide family and youth support groups and workshops as a safe space to learn about mental health and develop skills to prevent mental health difficulties.
- **Out-of-school time programming.** WGTK and District 33 partner with [Puente del Pueblo](#), a faith-based community organization, and the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) to provide children in elementary through middle school access to out-of-school time opportunities and to bridge these with their home life. Puente del Pueblo is based in the same neighborhood as two apartment complexes for under-resourced communities, where some students reside, making it easier for families to access resources and communicate with program staff. Puente del Pueblo staff build rapport with children and their families, which helps them become familiar with anything that may affect mental

What is WGTK’s approach?

Collaborative and relational. WGTK convenes partnering organizations and promotes sharing and collaborative planning. It prioritizes and nurtures strong relationships. WGTK builds these relationships on trust and communication among its partners as well as between the partnering organizations and the community to support mental health in early childhood and out-of-school settings.

Emphasis on equity and accessibility. WGTK ensures that those most affected by systemic and institutional shortcomings have a meaningful voice and perspective in shaping decisions. It promotes accessibility to mental health supports by providing bilingual services, offering home visits through family liaisons, and bringing some services to participants.

Shared responsibility and accountability. WGTK values the perspectives of, and is accountable to, its partners and the community. Community input helps achieve the partners’ goals of supporting mental health needs and ensures that the initiative aligns with the values and priorities of children and families benefiting from the services. This collaborative approach is crucial for effectively promoting mental health and tailoring support to the community’s needs.

health. They then connect with social workers to help refer families and children to resources to prevent further mental health difficulties. Puente del Pueblo also offers intensive case management to families experiencing severe medical or mental health concerns, difficulty obtaining stable housing, or severe economic hardship.

A story of success: Providing mental health supports in families' native language



"One of the issues is access to bilingual service providers.... Being able to provide clinicians that are bilingual means a lot in the community. A lot of the local private-practice folks are English-speaking.... A success of the program is that parents and kids can receive [mental health supports] in the language that they speak at home."

—WGTK leadership member

CAPE, another program in the partnership, offers art and recreational after-school programs for parents and children led by local community artists and teachers in District 33. CAPE also offers a moms' class dedicated to community-building and promoting positive affirmation through creativity for women dealing with trauma or facing literacy and language barriers. By engaging in this program, participants learn about mental health and healing, fostering a healthier mindset and building positive self-esteem. This program bolsters mental health promotion during childhood by strengthening the support network for mothers, which in turn benefits their children's emotional well-being.

Fostering success through connections across multiple child-serving sectors

Through its collective impact initiative, WGTK organizes its partners into working groups by focus areas—such as mental health, food access, and physical health—where they establish shared priorities. WGTK aligns its services with the community's mental health needs by engaging community members as key voices in planning and initiative development. For example, in 2022, a small work group of partners—including Educare West DuPage, Teen Parent Connection, District 33, and the DuPage County Health Department—engaged with West Chicago families with young children. Parents living in large, under-resourced communities expressed a desire for playgroups. In response, WGTK planned to have case managers lead playgroups within the community. This provides an opportunity to build parents' social connections with their children, which will in turn promote children's positive mental health and development as well as parents' positive mental health during the stressful stages of early childhood.

What are barriers to implementing WGTK?

Workforce. There's a shortage of staff with expertise in early childhood mental health (from birth to age 5, a crucial time in development). To address this, WGTK has invested substantial funds to expand training opportunities for staff working with this age group.

Funding. WGTK encounters difficulties obtaining grants due to the staffing needed for completing and managing grant applications. The workload associated with multiple applications surpasses WGTK's staff capacity.

Centering collaboration and connection as a pathway to success



"Whenever you [multiple] voices at a table, sharing wisdom and observation, [it] informs everybody's program and services ... and across all of the different areas that we touch, those connections are really what makes people and WeGo Together for Kids ultimately successful [in providing supports]."

—WeGo Together leadership member

How does WGTK find and manage resources to sustain the initiative?

Since 2014, WGTK has received substantial funding from the United Way Neighborhood Network grant, which provides flexible funding to support operations. Contributions from District 33; the Siemer Institute, which funds a network of partners that support families facing challenges; and donations from various other sources also financially sustain the program.

In 2023, WGTK secured two new grants focused on mental health from the DuPage Foundation and the DuPage Community Transformation Partnership. One grant supports the work of mental health clinicians in District 33 and aims to expand their efforts by adding social work interns or new part-time staff.



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