

Expanding the Use of *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* in New York's Early Childhood System During the Pandemic: The NY Acts Project

Background

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created the *Act Early Response to COVID-19* state grants in late 2020 to help children, families, and communities adapt to the pandemic and other traumas. Specifically, the grants were designed to improve the early identification of young children with developmental delays or disabilities by integrating the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* (LTSAE) program into early childhood systems. LTSAE encourages parents of young children to track their child's developmental milestones and act early if they have concerns about their child's development.



New York used the grant to create a collaborative project composed of state and local agencies and programs representing child care, child welfare, home visiting, early intervention, and pediatric health care. Melissa Passarelli (Docs for Tots) and Dr. Romina Barros (NYU Langone Hospital – Long Island) serve as Act Early Ambassadors in New York and co-lead the project in the state, with Docs for Tots acting as the organizational lead.

NY Acts Team:

NYS Department of Health – Division of Family Health (Bureau of Early Intervention, Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV))

NYS Department of Health – Medicaid (First 1000 Days on Medicaid project)

NYS Office of Children and Families – Bureau of Child Care

NYS Office of Children and Families – Child Welfare

NYS Department of Education – Office of Special Education

New York State Office for New Americans

NYS Council on Children and Families (Early Comprehensive Childhood Systems project)

University of Buffalo Pediatrics (Early Comprehensive Childhood Systems project, Western NY place-based community)

Help Me Grow – Onondaga

Children's Institute (Rochester GROW/Help Me Grow – Rochester)

The NY Acts Project

New York was the only state to attempt a project across multiple agencies and programs rather than through a statewide plan. The LTSAE Ambassadors believed that individualized plans allowed programs to capitalize on their strengths and encouraged creativity in plan design. The CDC took particular interest in this innovative model's potential for replication in other states.

Each of the *NY Acts* ten member agencies developed a project using the LTSAE program to 1) identify and remove barriers to early identification of developmental delay, and 2) adopt strategies to improve the ability of very young children to adapt to adverse conditions such as the pandemic. The work plans were implemented over one year (September 2020–August 2021).

Although the agencies operated independently, there were many similar themes across the work plans. Nearly all the members identified these desired outcomes: 1) Establish new partnerships to promote LTSAE information and materials; 2) Enhance services to families; and 3) Increase provider knowledge and use of LTSAE. Among the common themes was a commitment to think creatively about the trusted points of contact for young children. To do this, agencies broadened their definition of “provider” to include such services as libraries and immigrant serving organizations when determining where to target information, materials, and training.



Agencies developed tracking on how and where materials and trainings were used, and assessed provider knowledge in order to determine whether providers changed their behavior after training. They also provided staff and families with books, brochures, online materials, and supported LTSAE training and technical assistance.

The agencies also planned for sustainability by developing methods to continue distribution of free LTSAE materials, and continuing training and technical assistance. Teams incorporated feedback from families and providers into sustainability plans and enhanced collaborations with other agencies at the state and local levels.

NY Acts formed a learning community to assist members with implementation. Members met monthly to learn about the resources of LTSAE and share challenges and successes. Each agency also received individualized, monthly technical assistance from the NYS Act Early Ambassadors.

Accomplishments

Supported Families. Because COVID disrupted health care and service provision for families, one of the goals of *NY Acts* was to reach families who might have missed out on opportunities to learn about developmental milestones. The ten participating agencies were able to reach thousands of families by training over 700 providers working with those families. Those providers have the potential to reach thousands more families in the years ahead.

NY Acts encouraged agencies to be creative in identifying families and then build outreach to new partners to make these activities permanent. Agencies developed partnerships with trusted

“*Thousands of families are expected to learn about the importance of developmental monitoring through Peer Family Navigator interactions.*”

—NYS Department of Health, Medicaid

community messengers like pediatricians’ offices, child care providers, libraries, and home visitors. Materials were created in English and Spanish and, in some cases, additional languages, and were made available

by partners during their regular interactions with families and at community events.

Trained the Early Childhood Workforce. *NY Acts* members provided materials and training to hundreds of early childhood educators and service providers around the state. These providers included pediatric office staff, home visitors, child care providers, patient navigators, service coordinators, program managers, and training coordinators. These provider leaders then shared the LTSAE resources and information about how to discuss developmental delays with parents with more of the workforce, and with the families they serve, through in-person and online events, trainings, presentations, newsletters, and social media.

Disseminated Materials to Families and Providers. A hallmark of the national LTSAE initiative is the rich and free [resources](#) for families and providers. A primary goal of *NY Acts* was to reach new audiences with these materials and encourage their wide distribution.

In one year, more than 10,000 LTSAE books, charts, flyers, and over 6,000 children's books were provided to New York families along with information on what to do if they suspect a delay in their child's development. These materials help families understand the stages of how a child plays, learns, speaks, acts, and moves. They also provide tools, guidance, and tips to help a family support their child's development.

Members also introduced families to the free [Milestone Tracker](#) app. Developed by the CDC, the app helps families track a child's milestones from age two months to five years with illustrated checklists; provides tips for encouraging a child's development; and helps families find out what to do if there are concerns about how the child is developing. Milestone Tracker app downloads increased 33% from January–July 2021 compared to the same period in the previous year, with nearly 100,000 app downloads in New York during the *NY Acts* reporting period.

Members used Facebook groups, blog posts, newsletters, and websites to promote LTSAE and the resources. This was the first time many agencies used their education programs to expand distribution of LTSAE. Now there is a blueprint for future efforts to remind colleagues and staff about these free resources and to incorporate the information into materials for new staff.

Expanded Use of LTSAE. *NY Acts* was designed to engage organizations that were not currently using LTSAE trainings and materials in their programs as well as to encourage existing partners to increase exposure within their networks. The effect of this branched approach was twofold—more managers and supervisors of direct service programs at the state and local levels were exposed to the LTSAE curriculum and new front-line workers were directly trained in using the materials in their work with families.

The project was able to engage several new partners at the state level including the NYS Office for New Americans and NYS Medicaid. In addition, many of

“I try to go to all the workshops; I really like them... I would like to tell you I really like and appreciate the information and help you give.”

— From a participant in NYS ONA (Office for New Americans) (through an interpreter)

“100% of Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) survey respondents said they increased utilization of LTSAE materials.”

—NYS Department of Health, Medicaid

the *NY Acts* members developed new collaborative partners such as pediatric practices, schools, and libraries at the local level to help them reach parents.

Changed Practice to Sustain Outcomes.

Incorporating sustainability into a project can be difficult but from the beginning, *NY Acts* asked teams to institutionalize LTSAE in their programs and trainings. Throughout their work, members considered and tested ways to ensure that information on LTSAE became part of standard procedures, routine communications, and ongoing trainings.

Members measured where and how materials were distributed and how parents and providers reacted to the information to understand what changes in their practices and methods were making a difference and should be continued. Members shared successful strategies through the learning collaborative.

Lessons Learned

- ▶ **Sustained integration requires commitment at all levels of organizations.** All levels of an organization, from managers and supervisors to front line staff, must be involved in making the changes needed for integration to be successful and sustainable. Changes to procedures, training, and materials means that work and resources are shifted in some way. Building support early is important to the long-term viability of the changes.
- ▶ **A little funding builds infrastructure and good will.** While the LTSAE materials are free, funding is necessary for staff, trainings, postage, and other direct and indirect costs of providing new services. Adding a little money to an organization's budget creates an incentive since it will not consume resources needed for existing programs.
- ▶ **Technical assistance is necessary to maintain commitment over time.** Incorporating LTSAE into the workflow of providers can be challenging. Technical assistance from the *NY Act* Early Ambassadors to provide updates on materials,

assist with training questions, share best practices, and keep programs connected contributed to the success of *NY Acts* and will be needed to ensure that a commitment to LTSAE can be maintained after the learning period.

- ▶ **Language matters.** Materials for families on early childhood development must be available in languages spoken by new American families. While many languages are available through the LTSAE campaign, the NYS Office for New Americans [adapted the materials](#) to make the information culturally appropriate and accessible for their target populations. There must be continued efforts to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate materials so all families can benefit from LTSAE.

Next Steps

Completion of the activities for the *Act Early Response to COVID-19* grant does not mark the end of the potential for *NY Acts*. The success members had in reaching families and the increased engagement in the LTSAE program by providers highlights the need to continue the work.

- ▶ **Provide funding for technical assistance.** While the *NY Acts* members plan to sustain their engagement and use of LTSAE, it will take additional staff time and technical assistance to ensure that this is accomplished. Achieving meaningful change is hard and takes time. The capacity for further technical assistance from the Act Early Ambassadors would help members further integrate LTSAE into programs.

“The more we worked on this project, the more opportunities we found to share the information with other stakeholders and in different formats (e.g., Facebook).”

—NYS Department of Health, Bureau of Early Intervention



“Most providers are excited about the prospect of increased parental engagement in developmental monitoring.”

— NYS Medicaid

- ▶ **Provide funding to entrench changes to programs.** Training staff on LTSAE and arranging activities for parents to learn about the program requires resources. Additionally, while the LTSAE materials, such as books, charts and apps are free, the staffing needed to order, distribute, monitor, and track these materials imposes additional costs on programs. Programs will benefit from specific funding or reimbursement opportunities to continue integration efforts.
- ▶ **Continue *NY Acts* to deepen partnerships.** *NY Acts* demonstrated that there is potential to expand the reach of LTSAE across the many stakeholders of the early childhood system. In order to maintain the momentum, the existing *NY Acts Team* should be continued under the auspices of existing work connected to early childhood. This would build on the relationships established during the grant and would encourage the building of new partnerships.

For more information on *NY Acts* or LTSAE, contact Melissa Passarelli at melissa@docsfortots.org or Romina Barros at actearlyny@gmail.com

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