

# BALTIMORE CITY INFANTS AND TODDLERS PROGRAM CREATES A PLAN THAT PUTS FAMILIES FIRST

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The Baltimore Infants and Toddlers Program (BITP) makes families a priority in their work to bring the best early intervention services to the children of Baltimore City.

BITP primarily serves families with young children - 0 to 3 years old - who may be experiencing a delay in development or who have been diagnosed with a condition that is likely to affect development.

## EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Speech pathology and audiology
- Occupational therapy
- Physical therapy
- Psychological services
- Case management
- Medical services for diagnosis
- Health services related to other early intervention services
- Family education, counseling, and support



In 2016, BITP decided to take a close look at the early intervention services they were offering. They wanted to see if their services were serving all families well, especially families of color and those who speak a language other than English. And most importantly, they wanted to find out what could be better. They called this effort the “BITP Strategic Refresh.” The goal was to create a plan that would guide them in the next five years. What follows is a summary of what BITP did to develop the plan and the actions they will take to improve support for children and families in Baltimore City.

# WHY THIS PLAN MATTERS

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The earliest years of a child's life are important. The years from one to three are a time of rapid brain-building. And they are a time when what children learn helps put them on a path to success in school and life.

BITP can play a critical part in making sure children get off to a good start.

We know children grow and learn at their own pace. We also know that some children may need extra support to get and stay on track. Early intervention supports infants and toddlers with developmental delays by helping families reach their goals for what they want their children to know and be able to do. Services are planned with families and are based on what we know about how all infants and toddlers learn. We know for instance, that:

- Infants and toddlers learn through interactions with people they know and trust
- Babies learn through everyday activities that take place in their normal surroundings and routines
- Learning is like climbing a ladder – new skills build on ones already developed
- It's not hard to get infants and toddlers to learn new things – they are naturally curious and driven to learn.

By using this information and recognizing families as the experts on their own children, early intervention services and supports help infants and toddlers to reach important learning and developmental milestones.

That's the role that BITP plays for Baltimore City. Because BITP is the only agency offering early intervention, it was important to create a plan that could meet the needs of all the children and families in the city.

## HERE IS WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOW BABIES' BRAINS ARE BUILT:

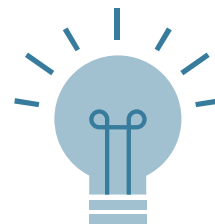
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Children are born learning – with over 100 billion cells all ready to build babies' brains

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The child's first thousand days (pregnancy to age 2) have more influence on a child's development than any other time in their life



Between birth and age 3, children's brains are making more than 1 million connections every second

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By age 5, 90% of a child's brain is formed



# WHO THE PLAN IS FOR

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To make sure their plan was right for the city, BITP also asked: “What’s it like to be a child in Baltimore City – and what might be getting in the way of children’s growth and development?”

## HERE IS WHAT THEY FOUND:

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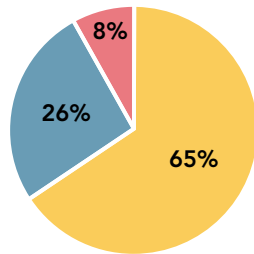
Children are a big part of what Baltimore City looks like



**IN FACT, CHILDREN UNDER FIVE MAKE UP MORE THAN 30% OF THE CITY’S POPULATION**

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Children in Baltimore City come from different cultures and backgrounds – making it a city rich in diversity:



65% Black | 26% White | 8% Hispanic

However, many children in the city are facing situations that can get in the way of healthy growth and development.

**15,000 (CHILDREN NOW LIVE IN POVERTY**

And we know that children living in poverty are more likely to face things that can put them at risk for delays or disabilities.

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**41%** of children entered Kindergarten ready to learn  
*(up from 38% last year)*



But data also showed children living in low-income households, who are English learners, or with an identified disability were less likely to start school ready to succeed.

This points to the potential unmet need for young children who could benefit from early screening, evaluation and intervention services. Access to services can serve as a protective buffer to experiences that might impact children’s development and boost school readiness by eliminating delays before entering school.

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# HOW THE PLAN WAS CREATED

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BITP took a look at these facts and used them to guide their planning. Following is a quick review of how BITP created the plan and what they will to do in the future:



## STARTED WITH A VISION

### THE VISION

All Baltimore City Infants and Toddlers and their families will have equitable access to a high quality early intervention system to ensure children's optimal development and future success.



## DECIDED WHAT WAS MOST IMPORTANT

### THE CORE VALUES

Based on the vision that all children and families are receiving high quality services, BITP set the following core values:

- **ACCESS** - Ensure all children and families are able to get the services they need most – especially children and families who may be facing the biggest barriers
- **QUALITY** - Ensure services support all areas of children's development and are delivered in a way that meets families' needs and values
- **EQUITY** - Ensure services recognize and build on families' culture, beliefs, and home language and all children – regardless of race, ethnicity, or income – can be enrolled and stay in the program as long as needed





# DEVELOPED THE PLAN

## THE PROCESS

To develop the final plan, BITP took the following steps to be sure they were able to get the help needed, collect the right information, and hear from families and the community:



### CREATED A LEADERSHIP TEAM

The work began by forming a team that would give advice and guide the planning process

### LISTENED TO FAMILIES, BITP STAFF, & COMMUNITY

Focus groups and interviews were held with families, BITP staff and community members to hear about their experiences with BITP and recommendations for the future

### DEVELOPED A SET OF STRATEGIES

BITP looked at all they learned from the research, from families and the community and created a list of most important next steps

### LEARNED MORE ABOUT WHAT WORKS IN SIMILAR COMMUNITIES

BITP looked at the research on early intervention, what other cities are doing to improve early intervention services, and what other programs across the city were doing to support families and children

### CREATED AND SHARED THE FINAL PLAN

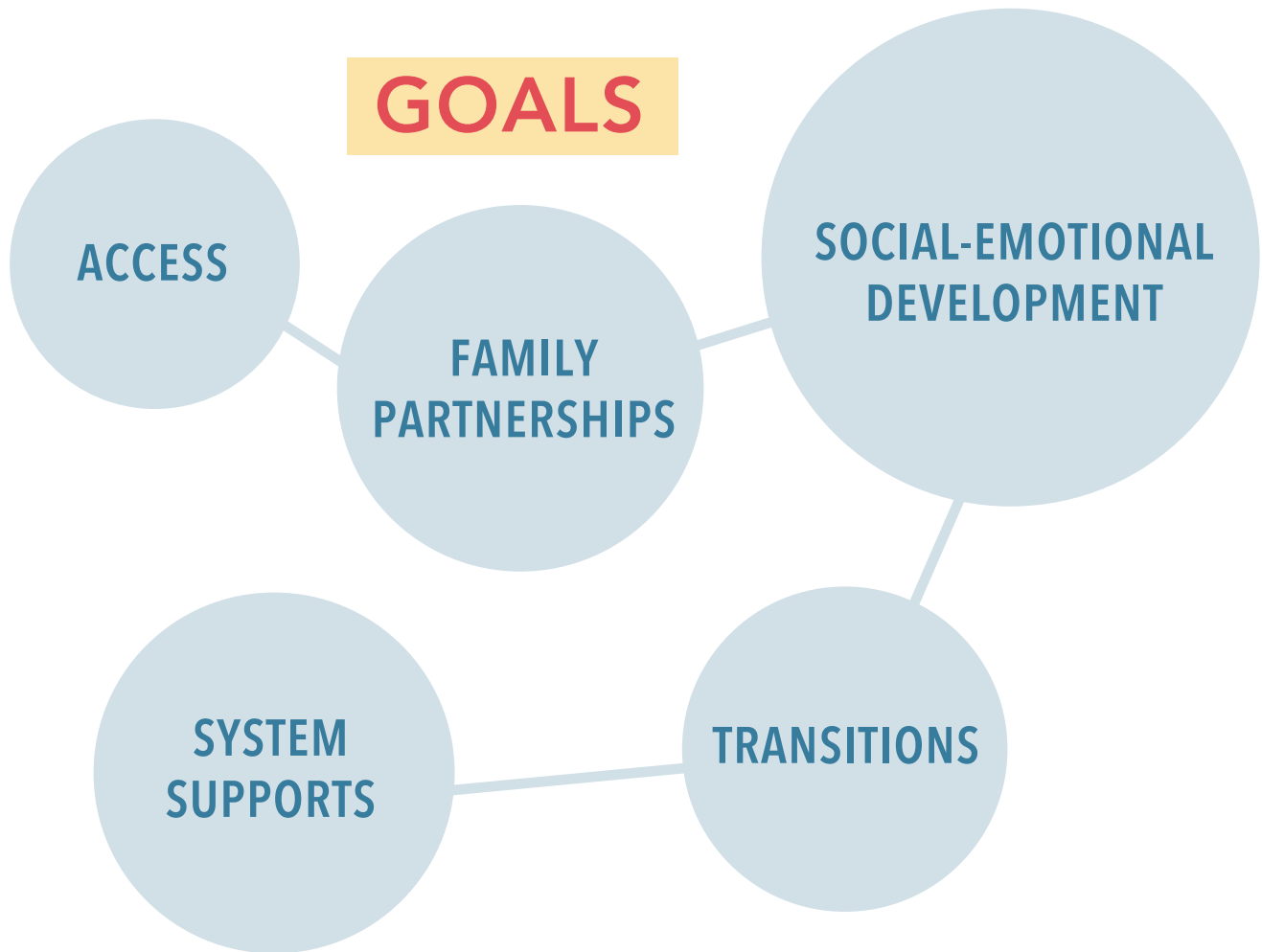
The 5 Year Strategic Plan was developed – which included goals, strategies, action steps, and ways to measure success – and was shared through community meetings



# WHAT IS IN THE PLAN

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BITP's final plan includes five goals for the future. You can read about each one and what BITP will do to reach it here...



# GOAL 1: ACCESS

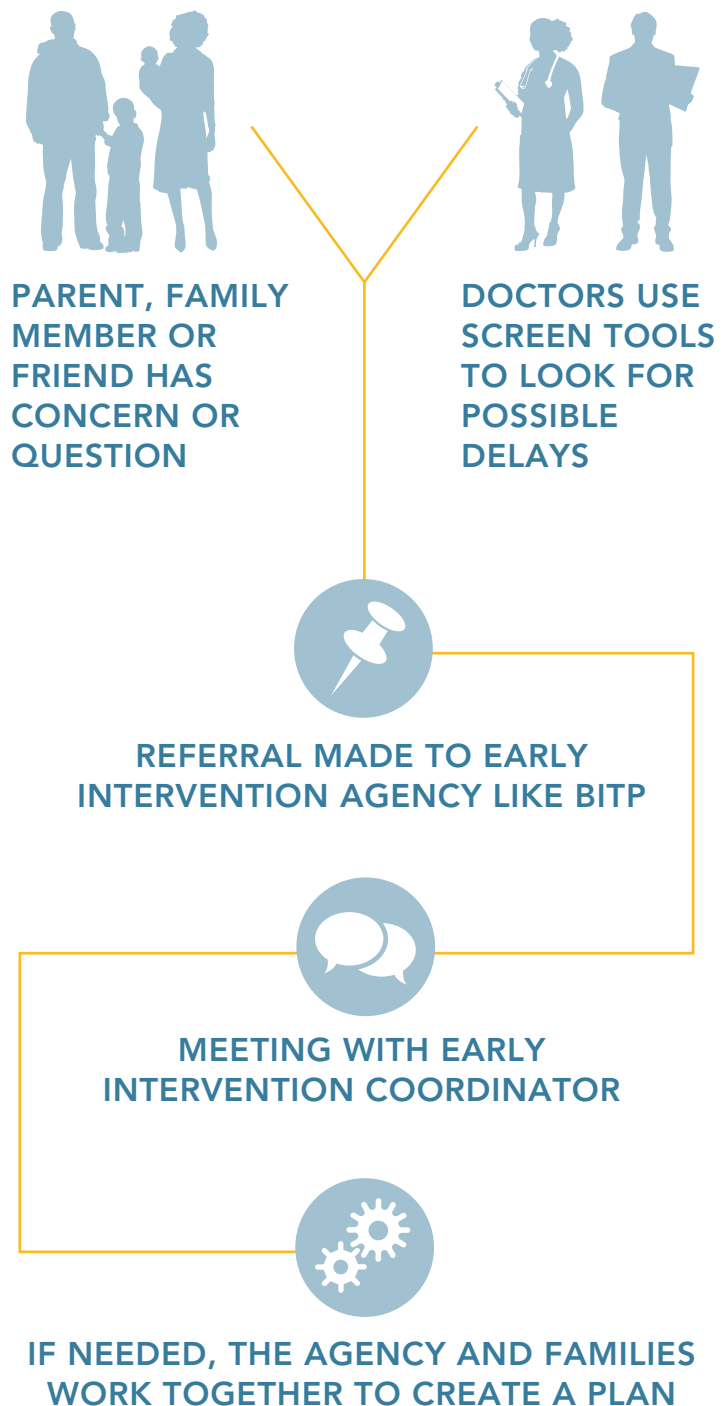
Children will have equitable access to early intervention services that are timely, continuous, and culturally and linguistically responsive.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Early intervention often starts when a parent, family member, or friend has a concern or question about a child's development. Sometimes doctors use screening tools to look for possible delays. When this happens, a referral is made to the early intervention agency like BITP. The next step is meeting with the early intervention coordinator for an evaluation and assessment. If special services are needed, the agency and families work together to create the Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) to get support.

The problem is – many children and their families do not make it to the first step of connecting with the early intervention agency. There are many reasons why this happens, but it means that children who could have a chance to get the services they need are not getting them. Sometimes it is because it is not made clear to families how early intervention can help. Sometimes it is because the wait between a referral and evaluation is too long. And sometimes it is because family cultures, beliefs, or home languages are not considered when referrals are made in the first place.

For BITP, this is a big concern. In 2015, BITP received 2,033 referrals. When they looked at these numbers, they found many children were referred, but never received an evaluation or assessment. They worried that children who were eligible for early



intervention were not getting it. They wanted to make sure all families and children referred had what they needed to take the next step. They also wanted to make sure children who had been assessed and were eligible for services got started. That meant trying to learn more about where and why families were not being best supported and were “falling out of the system.” To find the answer, they asked themselves questions like:

- How many times did we try to reach a family, but could not locate them?
- Are there ways to connect with families that we are not using?
- Are there ways to connect that might work better for families who speak a language other than English?
- What concerns might families have about making the connection to BITP?
- Could we be doing a better job of working with doctors and others to be sure they have the information they need to refer families to BITP?

These questions helped BITP make a plan for what they could do to improve access to services, while keeping each families’ cultural and linguistic uniqueness in mind.

## **WHAT WILL BITP DO TO IMPROVE ACCESS?**

**To make sure all families are making it from referral to evaluation and assessment and receiving needed services, BITP will:**

- ➔ **Develop a communication plan to share with families and the entire community about what early intervention is, why it’s important, and how BITP can help**
- ➔ **Collect information that will help BITP learn more about when and why families are not moving from referral to evaluation or are not continuing with services**
- ➔ **Make sure community partners - like doctors’ offices and child care programs - are using screening tools and making referrals if needed**
- ➔ **Reduce the time it takes to schedule an appointment with BITP**
- ➔ **Find ways to include culture and home language when working with families**



## GOAL 2: FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Families are authentically engaged as active partners in the identification, planning, and delivery of early intervention services.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Research tells us that early intervention works best when it is focused on supporting families. Services are most effective when they start by recognizing families are the experts on their children. Plans are based on families' needs and hopes for their children's growth and learning. Activities are designed to help families reach the goals they set. Services take place during everyday routines and in children's natural environments – like at home, in libraries, and at child care centers. Finally, providers are most effective when they act as coaches and consultants giving information and building families skills as their child's first teacher.

BITP has placed families at the center of planning for the Strategic Refresh. Their goal is to build on what the research says about high quality services to make sure all families in Baltimore City receive services and supports that are right for them. This starts with hearing from families about what they want and what they know about their child. BITP wants to make sure families have the time they need during assessment and planning to share information about themselves, their daily lives, and their wishes for their children. They want to be sure that services planned fit into each families' daily routines and make use of what is easily available. Finally, BITP wants to make sure service providers and coordinators understand the importance of being coaches and consultants and how to best support all families. BITP believes that when they are able to partner with families, it gives children the best chance for healthy growth and to support learning.



## WHAT WILL BITP DO TO INCREASE FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS?

To make sure families are being involved and supported as partners in their children's early intervention plan, BITP will:

- Use tools and models that increase the time that families have to:
  - Ask questions about early intervention
  - Share information about their children
  - Help create a plan that fits into their daily lives and meets goals for their children and themselves
  
- Look for ways to increase providers' knowledge and skills as coaches and consultants to families

## GOAL 3: SOCIAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Families receive the services and coaching needed to effectively support their child's social-emotional development.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Social-emotional development is a part of a child's overall health and well-being. It includes how children interact with others and how they cope with stress. Positive social and emotional experiences prepare children to be self-confident, trusting, curious, and able to relate with others. Research tells us that children's relationships with adults are most important for their social-emotional development. Without relationships with caring adults, children may have challenges managing feelings and getting along with others. Exposure to negative experiences and long periods of stress can also get in the way of healthy development and can lead to learning delays. Early identification and support for children with social, emotional and behavioral health needs can go a long way to protect against the negative impact of these experiences.

The social-emotional health of children and families is a big priority and an important part of BITP's Strategic Refresh. Infants and toddlers in Baltimore City face many challenges that put them at risk for poor social-emotional development. Data shows that this is especially true for children living in poverty and for children of color. Across the country, children's exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (or ACEs) has been used as a way to measure stressful events that can impact health and developmental outcomes. In Baltimore City, almost one third of all children under 17 have been exposed to two or more ACEs. This is higher than anywhere else in the state and higher than the national



average. BITP is using this and other information as a way to understand what's happening in Baltimore City. They know that 54% of children who left BITP in 2015 had a social-emotional delay when they entered early intervention. Understanding that many young children and families are experiencing trauma and stress, they want to be sure the services they offer can help make a difference.

## **WHAT WILL BITP DO TO INCREASE SUPPORTS FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?**

**To support social-emotional development and behavioral health, BITP will:**

- Offer more social-emotional and behavioral health services
- Improve identification of children who need social-emotional and behavioral health services
- Include more mental health specialists in assessment, planning, and service delivery
- Find new ways to fund social-emotional development and behavioral health services
- Make sure service providers are given the training, information, and tools they need to support families

## GOAL 4: TRANSITIONS

Children and families transition seamlessly from early intervention to preschool special education services

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Going from early intervention to preschool special education can feel like a major change. Transitioning means moving from services that might take place alongside families at home to services being delivered at school. It means getting used to new rules, new learning spaces, new teachers, and new routines. Communication is important between service providers and families to make sure they are given the information needed to prepare themselves or their children. Good transitions take time and planning. To be successful, they must:

- Make time for families to ask questions and get the information they need
- Include opportunities for children and families to meet new service providers
- Be planned early – as soon as services begin
- Make sure early intervention and preschool special education staff are talking to each other and with families

BITP has also made improving transitions an important part of the Strategic Refresh. For children and families in Baltimore City, transitions may take the form of a move from early intervention to preschool special education or a move to extend time within BITP. In either case, BITP has recognized the challenges that can be a part of the process and wants to be sure families are fully informed and engaged in planning next steps. For families who are making the transition to preschool special education, transitions have been especially challenging. BITP listened to concerns and stories from families, providers, and community leaders. Based on what they heard, BITP will work to find new ways to help children and families make successful adjustments to new settings and experiences. To do that, BITP has set some important goals. They want to be sure that they have all the information they need to understand family concerns and questions. They want to improve communication and cooperation between early intervention providers and preschool special educators. And most importantly, they want to be sure families - including those who speak a language other than English - know what comes next, what to expect, how they can be involved, and what they can ask for.



## WHAT WILL BITP DO TO IMPROVE TRANSITIONS?

To support effective transitions, BITP will:

- Collect the right information to understand the transition needs and values of families
- Make sure families who are racially, linguistically, and/or economically diverse get the supports they may need
- Find new ways to include families in planning for transitions
- Improve communication and planning across providers from early intervention and preschool special education

## GOAL 5: SYSTEM SUPPORTS

BITP has the required infrastructure and funding to administer a high quality early intervention system.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

To be successful, early intervention programs must start with a vision and guiding principles. They must embed quality into all their policies and practices. They must design and redesign systems that are responsive to families served. And they must prepare professionals to make sure they have the knowledge and skills to support each family and child. Finally, they must have the resources they need to keep programs going.

BITP knows that to reach its goals it must take a look at how it operates and is organized. In addition to the Strategic Refresh, BITP has been looking at ways to streamline services for families as they move from referral to assessment and IFSP planning to service delivery and finally to transition. That work has helped to identify gaps that need to be filled and examples of what is working well. BITP has also placed a high priority on hiring and preparing the highest quality providers and ensuring that funding streams are enough to keep programs and services in place.



## WHAT WILL BITP DO TO IMPROVE SYSTEM SUPPORTS?

To ensure it has what it needs to deliver high quality services, BITP will:

- Develop a training plan for all providers that includes a common set of skills and knowledge that every provider needs to have
- Develop a plan for bringing in new funding and using existing funds more efficiently



# WHO HELPED CREATE THE PLAN

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**The work to develop the plan has been a collaborative effort. Many individuals and organizations have contributed their time and resources to ensuring the success of this effort. Support came from:**

Baltimore City Health Department

Family League of Baltimore

Kennedy Krieger Institute

Baltimore City Schools

Behavioral Health Systems of Baltimore

Baltimore City Department of Social Services

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

**Ongoing input throughout the entire process provided by:**

The Local Interagency Coordinating Council (L-ICC) members

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Annie E. Casey Foundation

Aaron and Lillie Straus Foundation

**And many families, BITP staff members, providers, and community partners from across Baltimore City shared their insights in focus groups, participated in interviews, and provided meeting space to contribute to the successful completion of this plan.**



The development of this plan was supported by School Readiness Consulting. SRC believes that improving early childhood and affirming the right for all children to thrive represents the greatest opportunity to create a just society. As a consulting firm focused exclusively on early childhood, SRC partners with cities, districts, states, foundations, and nonprofits to develop and implement system-wide strategies that improve outcomes for children in school and life.

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