

The earliest years of life are generally thought of as a time for cuddling, playing, and laughing, with the occasional bout of sleepless, tearful discomfort. Unfortunately, the reality of early childhood for children born into disadvantaged communities is too often filled with violence, instability, and inescapable poverty. Children growing up in these situations have more challenges developing the foundations of social and emotional wellness that allow children to form loving bonds with caregivers, play joyfully with other children, and enter school prepared to learn.



A simple change at the pediatrician's office can make a huge difference for all children growing up in communities entrenched in poverty, violence, and instability. Project LAUNCH transforms pediatric practices (medical homes) into a source of strength for children. Families and pediatricians become protectors of early childhood mental health with the implementation of Project LAUNCH.

To ensure all children can benefit from Project LAUNCH, we simply need to ensure that every pediatric medical home has an early childhood mental health clinician and a family partner dedicated to prevention-focused direct service and consultation. These additions transform primary care into a place for parents to build their capacity to parent and provide their children a safe and happy childhood.

Project LAUNCH changes lives. What follows is a snap shot of the impact we can continue to have in the Boston metropolitan area with continued funding. The story is told using the thoughts and words of providers, administrators, and most importantly, families.

Some stories are presented as **perspectives** — these words were recorded directly from the individual. Other stories are presented as **case studies** — these are the stories of individuals as told by the providers. Throughout the document the term parent is meant to include any primary caregiver, whether biologically the parent or not. All parent names have been changed.

Creating Capacity

Building Professional Capacity

A pediatric clinic with a Project LAUNCH team has specialized capacity to respond to a range of early childhood mental health needs immediately. Project LAUNCH services are fully integrated into the primary care system as an essential component of quality pediatric primary care.

The Project LAUNCH team builds clinic capacity to identify, understand, and respond to social, emotional, and behavioral health needs in a family centered way. Along with direct services, Project LAUNCH staff provide “drive-by” consultations, printed/electronic resources, and training opportunities to bolster medical providers’ ability to respond confidently and appropriately to early childhood mental health needs. Providers report that Project LAUNCH has transformed the way they understand, approach, and respond to early childhood mental health needs.

Codman Square Health Center

Dr. Fuchsia Mitchell has been a pediatrician at Codman Square Health Center for six years. She sees families everyday in her practice who are experiencing psychosocial stressors that are starting to impede social and emotional development of young children. Project LAUNCH is the specialized service she relies on to work with her youngest patients.

“Before LAUNCH, pediatricians could refer to Early Intervention or special education; that was it,” Dr. Mitchell said. “We didn’t have the capacity to address the specific group that LAUNCH is able to target. Our options for supporting families preventively have much improved with the addition of Project LAUNCH.”

Melissa Ryan is the clinical administrator for the Project LAUNCH program at Codman Square. She says that Project LAUNCH has transformed the way Codman Square providers care for families.

“Providers have a proactive step to take if there is a concern with a family and a place to follow up with referrals to address a variety of patient needs. If the LAUNCH program was not here, we would lose a critical resource to help vulnerable families.”

For the pediatricians at Codman Square, Project LAUNCH is a warm and safe place to refer families who are in need of the extra support they are unable to provide during traditional doctor visits. In addition to individual support, Project LAUNCH at Codman Square offers parent-child play groups and other engaging opportunities for families.

Case Study

Tina was 19 years old and had a one-month-old baby with Down Syndrome. She was experiencing breastfeeding difficulties. Her pediatrician recognized how much stress this was causing Tina and knew she and her baby could benefit from Project LAUNCH support.

“My first thought when we met this mother was, ‘How do we help this mom fall in love with this baby?’ Family Partner Jacqueline Rue said. “I saw that she had the energy and we just had to provide some support.”

The Project LAUNCH team provided lactation support, then guided Tina in finding specialized childcare and obtaining a voucher that allowed her to go to college. Tina eventually shared concerns about her child’s father not being

involved. The team provided emotional support, while mentoring her to find effective ways to communicate with the father.

“Tina is very attuned to her baby’s skills and is proud of her baby,” noted clinician Molly Mariano.

“She is very cued in to her daughter’s needs and knows how to advocate for those special needs. We are simply here to be an extra layer of support when she needs us.”

“How do we help this mom fall in love with this baby?”

*Family Partner
Jacqueline Rue*

Martha Eliot Health Center

Dr. Jessica Roth has been a pediatrician at Martha Eliot Health Center for 12 years. She sees a profound need for Project LAUNCH.

“Project LAUNCH has filled a really important niche,” Dr. Roth said. “It has been one of the most important and successful programs that has been here in the last 12 years. I can’t conceive working without LAUNCH now ... I feel Martha Eliot would be leaving families so much more vulnerable.”

Project LAUNCH often serves families who have complex needs and a history of unsuccessful navigation of convoluted systems meant to support them. With support from Project LAUNCH, Dr. Roth said, pediatricians are better equipped to engage families allowing “bridges to be built over dangerous abysses and pitfalls that families have to navigate.”

Project LAUNCH brings an important family centered perspective to the pediatric setting, said Emily Fischer, clinical administrator for Project

LAUNCH. The Family Partner she works with, Yokaira Landron, continually reminds medical providers to put themselves in the shoes of their patients, advocating that pediatricians understand the family’s circumstances in a holistic way.

“I think we have made big strides in creating an environment in pediatrics that acknowledges the strengths and needs of families,” Emily said. “Even when everything is falling apart, families are in the position of guiding their care with support from Project LAUNCH.”

Dr. Roth agreed, noting how the whole health center has learned from the very warm and connected approach the Project LAUNCH team takes when working with families, starting with the referral and introduction process known as the “warm hand-off.”

“The Project LAUNCH model helped us realize that we lose families when we only address immediate emergencies,” Dr. Roth said. “There needs to be an enduring connection built with families. This way families come in for help before they find themselves in a full crisis.”

The
Power
Couple

Family
Partner

+

ECMH
Clinician

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=

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Unique combination of personal and professional perspectives.

Ability to build relationships and facilitate trust between families and providers.

Keeps family voice in every communication.

Family Partner Perspective

Family Partner Yokaira Landron describes how she helped a new doctor at Martha Eliot Health Center think about her patients’ needs in a different way.

“A provider came to me with a request to consult with a mother. She was concerned that the baby was sleeping in the bed with the parents.”

“I was happy to go with the provider to speak to the family; but first I asked if she had tried using her own lived experience to connect with the family. I knew she was a mother of an infant; and, I knew she had

struggled to get her own baby sleeping in a crib.”

“I said to her, ‘let’s go in there together, and you’re going to tell your own story.’”

“This way the parent can see that they are the same. The parent can see that it is not a weakness or something wrong with them. Very educated people, like doctors, have parenting challenges too.”

“Very educated people, like doctors, have parenting challenges too.”

*Family Partner
Yokaira Landron*

“While talking with the mother, we discovered that they were in a one bedroom apartment and the crib was in the room. The doctor had not asked that.”

“She told me she never thought to ask parents how many beds they have in a room or how many rooms in the apartment.”

“I think it was a valuable experience for the provider on multiple levels.”

Capacity building with the family

Project LAUNCH provides opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn about early childhood mental health. Parents working with Project LAUNCH are coached to nurture positive social

and emotional development, and learn to understand and respond appropriately to child behaviors. This focus on improving a parent's understanding of their child's behavior, joined with an emphasis on taking care of their own mental health, leads to parents who are better equipped to raise happy, healthy children.

Boston Medical Center

Dr. Genevieve Preer has been a pediatrician at Boston Medical Center for 4 years after spending 3 years there in residency. She relies on the expertise of the Project LAUNCH staff to enhance her practice and better respond to parent concerns about behaviors.

"Often, I refer families to Project LAUNCH when the parent voices concern about a behavior that falls in the realm of normal," Dr. Preer said. "The behavior might be developmentally appropriate, but the parent needs support. Whatever guidance I can give in a 20-minute visit is not nearly as effective as what the Project LAUNCH staff can do."

The Project LAUNCH team at BMC forms a relationship with parents, provides opportunities for the parent to develop and practice new skills, and then maintains a presence for families to turn to when new challenges occur.

"Having the Project LAUNCH team actualizes what we, as pediatricians, think is best for our patients but would rarely happen in the absence of that support," Dr. Preer said.

Parent Perspective

A mother of two children, aged 8 and 6, describes what Project LAUNCH at BMC, means to her.

"Andrea has been a wonderful support. She has taught me how to think for myself, how to help myself, how to be a better mom and

"The behavior might be developmentally appropriate, but the parent needs support."

*Pediatrician
Genevieve Preer*

understand my children"

"In my family, disciplining was hitting and screaming. I didn't want that

Case Study: Addressing a parent's concern in a meaningful way

Lorraine was an older mother with 2 adult children and Wilson, a 15-month-old son. Lorraine was incarcerated for the first year of Wilson's life. She shared with Dr. Preer feeling completely overwhelmed by Wilson's behavior.

"Although the behaviors were very challenging, such as peeing on the floor, I found they were normal behaviors, perhaps exacerbated by the mother's anxiety and lack of recent parenting experience," Dr. Preer said. "I did not think a referral to In-Home Therapy was appropriate."

The Project LAUNCH team used dyadic play and coaching to

help Lorraine appropriately respond to Wilson's behaviors. They talked about routines, reducing television time, and having consistent caregivers.

"I don't have the skills the Project LAUNCH team used to help in this situation," Dr. Preer said.

Had the Project LAUNCH team not been an option, Dr. Preer would have attempted a referral to a less appropriate service and scheduled a follow-up appointment for the family.

"The referral probably would have been a dead-end and nothing would have been done to truly make a difference for the family," Dr. Preer said.

for my kids. Andrea taught me the 'count to 5' tactic to stay calm when disciplining my children and helped me to understand the importance of explaining to my kids why I am putting them in a timeout. I didn't know that before."

"I always thought, 'my kid is just shy' but now I understand her mental health. I learned how to have better conversations with my kids and I have more patience with them. I used to get so aggravated that they wouldn't talk to me, now we have better communication and I am way less aggressive."

"I have the relationship with my kids now that I always wanted to have with my parents and never had when I was growing up."