

Collaboration: a Smart Start Success

Work between agencies has become more productive because they have joint meetings where everyone is involved in pulling thoughts, ideas, and resources together.

Health Department, Child Service Coordinator

Smart Start brought all the stakeholders together to work together to identify needs and prioritize. Smart Start has given the county more of a focus, better communication and productivity at all of the agencies. It was wonderful to see people work together.

Schools, Supervisor

There is more interagency cooperation and we are working toward a seamless system of services to families.

YWCA Director

The Partnership is truly the nucleus of activity. It's doing more than any one person could know about and has made a tremendous difference in the community.

Community College V.P.

Smart Start was designed to help North Carolina children enter school healthy and ready to succeed. It does so by encouraging communities to decide how local resources can best meet the needs of families with young children. To accomplish that goal, community decision-making groups called Partnerships for Children were established and charged with bringing a diverse mix of community members together to identify community needs, target services to meet those needs, and work together cooperatively to insure the effectiveness of those services. Essentially, Smart Start Partnerships were designed to provide a structure for community collaboration that would result in more accessible, responsive and effective services with fewer gaps and duplications.

This report summarizes the findings of a multi-year study of the impact Smart Start has had on local interagency collaboration and the performance of local networks of service providers (i.e., local service systems) that serve young children. It was conducted by members of the FPG/UNC Smart Start Evaluation Team. Overall, the study has found that Smart Start Partnerships are improving the performance and coordination of the agencies that serve young children. They appear to have successfully provided their community agencies with new motivation and processes for working together cooperatively that are reducing some of the historic barriers to effective service provision. Specifically:

- Local Smart Start Partnerships have become central actors in local service systems across North Carolina;
- Local service systems in which Smart Start Partnerships have become more central are functioning more effectively;
- Smart Start Partnerships face daunting problems in their communities and are being challenged with new service coordination issues that will require continued collaboration between a broad variety of local organizations.

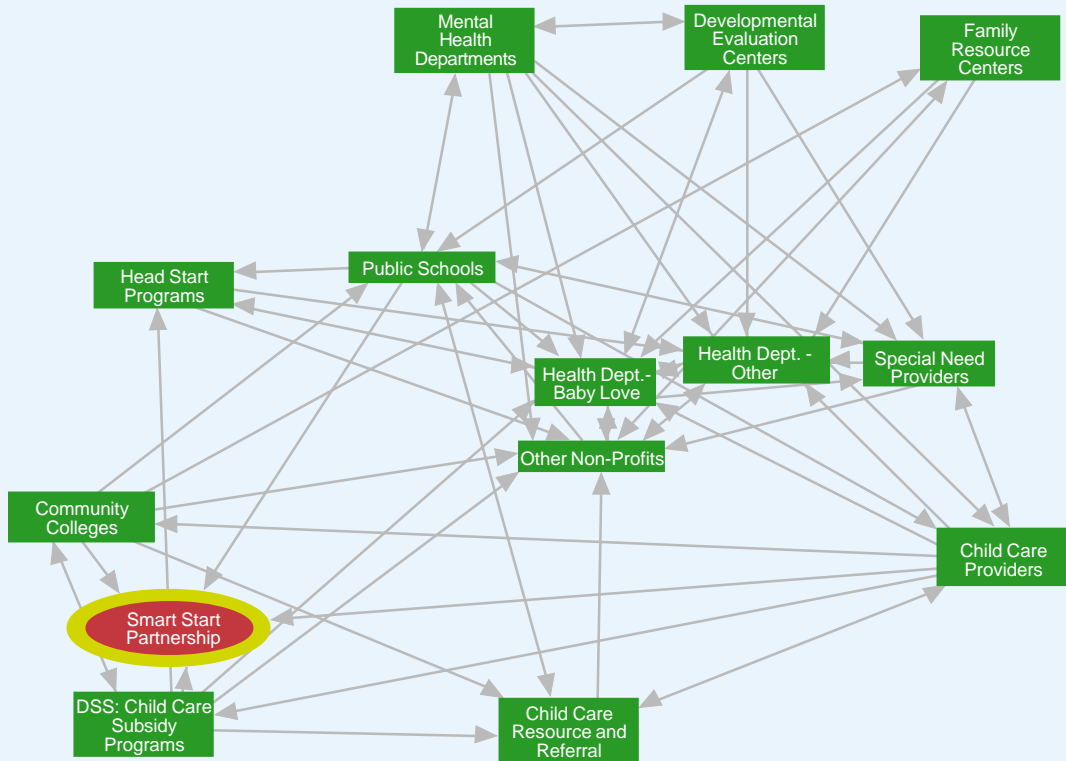
Study Methods

FPG/UNC researchers collected data about collaboration in the service areas of 10 local Smart Start Partnerships. The Partnerships were selected to represent the geographic diversity of the state. In-depth interviews were conducted in 1997-1998 and again in 1999-2000 with key representatives of over 200 agencies that provide services to young children and their families. Agency representatives reported on their collaborative working relationships with other agencies, rated the performance of their local service system and Partnership, and identified what they perceived to be the “main problems” facing young children and their families in their locality. The analysis uses formal statistical tools of “network analysis” which provide an objective way of detecting the presence and direction of relationships between organizations in a community (Borgatti et. al, 1999; Krackhardt et. al, 1994).

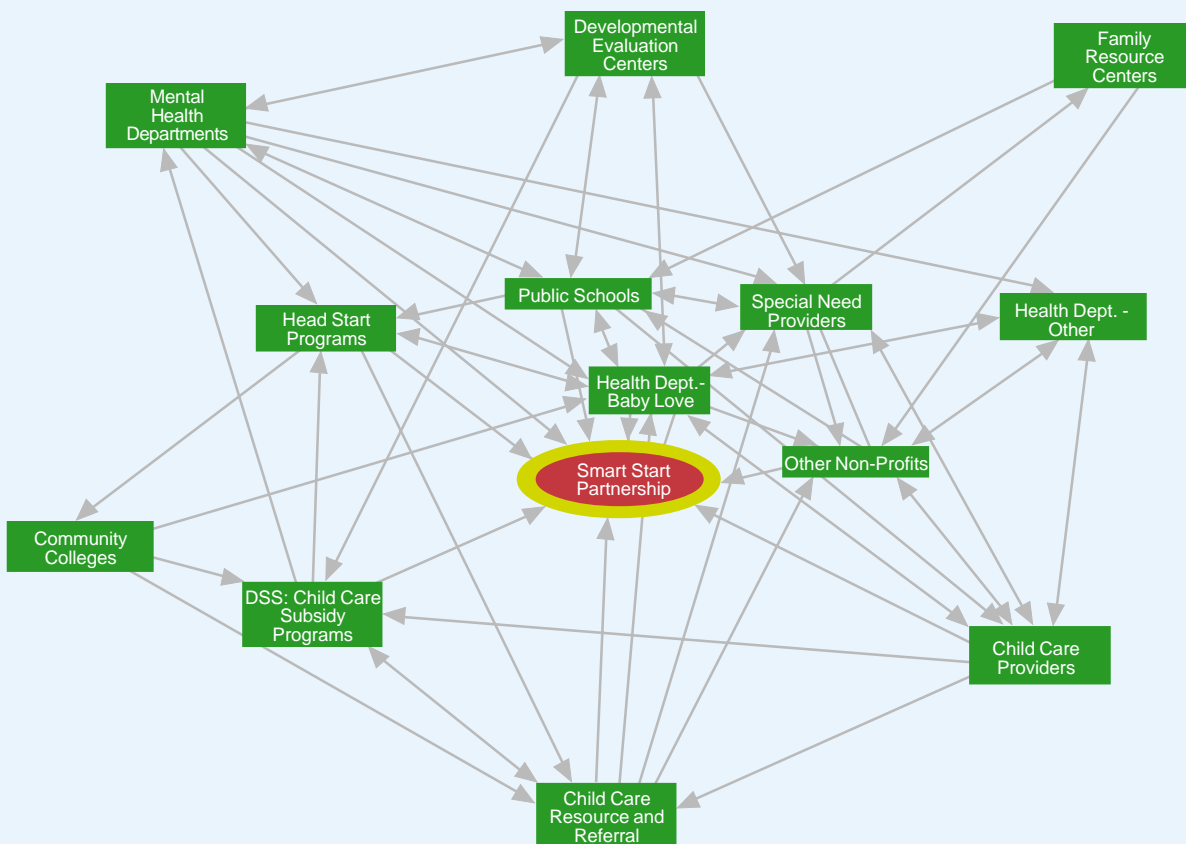
Partnerships Are Central in Local Service Systems

Network analyses of thousands of collaborative relationships indicate that Smart Start Partnerships have generally become central actors in their local service systems that target the needs of young children and their families. The figures to the right show the movement over time of the Partnerships from a marginal to a more central position within local service systems. Local collaborative networks varied in complexity. Only the organizations and relationships that were most prominent across all of the service systems are represented in these figures. However, the increase in the centrality of Smart Start Partnerships was the most consistent and statistically significant change found across all the systems that were studied. This newly central position has enabled Partnerships to facilitate collaborative work between a variety of agencies and community organizations that previously did not work closely together.

Prominent Organizations and Collaborative Relationships in 10 Local Early Childhood Service Networks, 1997-1998



Prominent Organizations and Collaborative Relationships in 10 Local Early Childhood Service Networks, 1999-2000

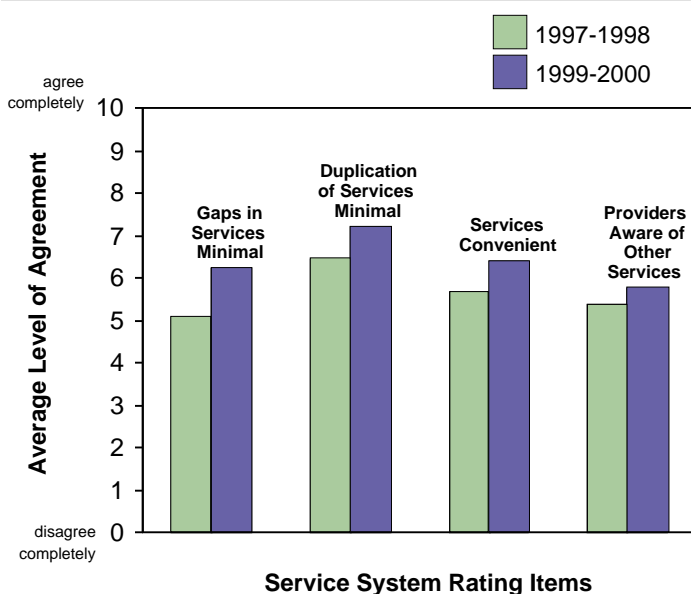


Partnerships Have Helped Improve Service Delivery

Local systems of services for young children and their families have begun to function more effectively since the implementation of Smart Start. The combined score on a scale of 13 service system ratings was higher in 1999-2000 than 1997-1998 in eight of the 10 Partnerships. More respondents in 1999-2000 than in 1997-1998 agreed that “gaps in services are minimal,” “duplication of services are minimal,” “services are in convenient locations,” and “providers are aware of other services.” However, there remains room for improvement. For example, a majority of respondents still disagreed with the statement, “children with serious needs don’t ‘slip through the cracks’ of the system.”

In service systems where Smart Start Partnerships became more central actors, service system functioning improved. Of course, not all service improvements can be attributed directly to Smart Start, but respondents reported that the Partnerships played a key role in these improvements, and their ratings of Partnership performance were high in both time periods.

Improvements in Service System Ratings (from 1997-1998 to 1999-2000)



Voices from the Field

*Smart Start Collaboration
and Service System Productivity*

We work more as a team, so we have fewer problems. Since Smart Start there has been increased communication around system issues relating to children and joint planning. It's been important to have common goals and objectives.

Schools, Exceptional Children Director

Smart Start allowed us to work out ways to reduce duplication of services.

Schools, Family Resource Project Director

The Partnership created a niche which strengthens the agencies and stops the competition.

Cooperative Extension Director

We have a better handle on what each organization does. There is more contact and more information exchange between agencies because of Smart Start. Now we know about joint goals, make better referrals, and there's less duplication.

Mental Health Department, Developmental Disabilities Director

A lot of this (improved productivity) is a direct result of the Smart Start initiative. Board meetings allow us to interact with people outside our organization. It's helped us realize these are community problems not a specific agency problem.

DSS, Child Protective Services Director

We are more aware of the services that are provided by other agencies and opportunities to work together.

Hospital Marketing Director

There is an increased awareness and collaborative effort that Smart Start has brought all of us. We have a focus on the children and the community. We now look at the whole child rather than DSS just looking at one thing, me just looking at child care, etc.

Child Care Provider

Collaboration has helped things become more family-focused.

Schools, Preschool Coordinator

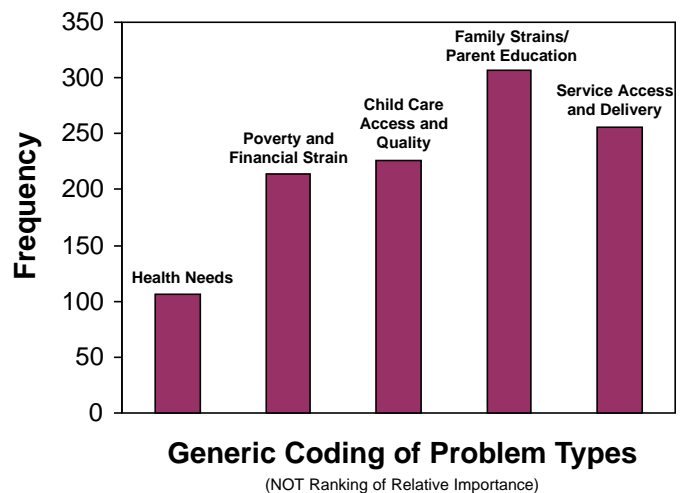
Complex Problems Require Continued Collaboration

Young children and their families in North Carolina face a range of complex problems. The chart below describes the types of problems agency respondents mentioned when asked to identify the “main problem” facing young children and their families in their communities. Rather than focus on a single problem close to their agency’s own mission, respondents frequently emphasized broad interconnected problems of poverty, work-family strain, parent education, and access to general services such as transportation and health care. While this validates the emphasis Smart Start has placed upon comprehensive planning and program development, it also underscores the increasing connection between Smart Start and policies of the public and private sector that affect labor markets, economic development, family stress and social services.

Smart Start Partnerships are only beginning to address these broader problems. Additionally, the long-term success of Smart Start will depend on the extent to which other policies enhance or undercut the well-being of

families with young children. However, as they have become more central in their local service systems, Partnerships have developed a unique role in building a collaborative response to these problems. Our data indicate that collaboration itself demands time and resources, and building bridges between agencies that are often narrowly constrained by state and federal requirements is difficult to sustain. The focus on collaboration is paying dividends for communities, families and children but continued support for this is necessary or agencies will easily return to their independent ways of doing business.

"Main Problems" Facing Young Children and their Families



Examples of Responses Regarding "Main Problems"

The problem is twofold. There aren't enough quality child care centers and the staff are not trained and compensated to make a living. Payscales aren't good. Dedicated people leave the profession.

Economic issues that cause family stress and prevent parents from accomplishing quality parenting. (They) don't have the time or energy to do quality or seek services for their family.

Lack of availability of services due to lack of transportation. The working poor are working more hours and have less time to attend to health needs.

Adequate, inexpensive childcare. We need more subsidies for parents who are working but on the border of poverty.

Many families are still medically uninsured or underinsured.

Families are facing financial hard times these days. Parents are working more and children are getting less consistent guidance of their early development and individual attention at home.

More Reports from the "Trenches" about Smart Start and Collaboration

*We have more meetings and therefore a
better working relationship. We know
each other better.*

Day Care Association Director

*We have developed a common understanding of what each of us is
trying to do to help families - what each agency has to offer, can
deliver, and how we can coordinate to maximize resources. We
have a common philosophy now. Even in a small community like
our own where we knew everyone by name and face, because of
Smart Start, we now work much more efficiently and are
impacting lives and making a difference.*

Health Department Director

*As we got rid of turfs we were able
to pick a collaborative vision.*

Community College, Job Link Director

*We know more about the services
that each agency can provide.*

Communities in Schools Director

References

- Borgatti, S.P., M.G. Everett, and L.C. Freeman. 1999. Ucinet 5 for Windows: Software for Social Network Analysis. Natick: Analytic Technologies.
- Krackhardt, D., Blythe, J, and McGrath, C. "Krackplot 3.0: An Improved Network Drawing Program" Connections, vol. 17(2):53-55 (Dec. 1994).

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Other reports on Collaboration and other aspects of the Smart Start Evaluation initiative are available at the Smart Start Evaluation Team web site, <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/smartstart>, or by contacting Marie Butts, telephone (919) 966-4295 or email <marie_butts@unc.edu>.

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