**Transcript of CPIR’s Webinar:**

**Act Early Ambassadors 2021**
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Hello, my name is Julia Abercrombie. I'm a behavioral scientist with the CDC's *Learn The Signs. Act Early* program. And I'm so happy that we have the opportunity to share with you an overview of *Learn The Signs. Act Early*, our Act Early ambassadors and state team, and talk with you a bit about how this work can involve US parent centers.

So, first of all, Learn The Signs. *Act Early* is CDC's effort to improve early identification of children with developmental delays and disabilities, including but not limited to autism. And we do this by promoting developmental monitoring or tracking which shelters of children and families can get connected to the early intervention, other services and support that they need. And we do this through our health education materials, that you are likely familiar with, our milestone checklist and the other resources that I'll show you in a moment. And then we foster the integration of those materials into early childhood programs through our Act Early initiatives, like the ambassadors. And we are always continuously improving with research and evaluation.

Simply put, we describe our program as helping parents and other caregivers to learn the signs of typical development, and we encourage them to act early on concerns. So, when we talk about typical development, that means ***milestones***. And when we say act early, that means we want families to talk with their doctor, ask for developmental and autism screening, and get a referral to a specialist as soon as possible.

And here are those materials that I just mentioned. We have **milestone checklist** available online and through our **milestone tracker app** that you can see pictured on the slide. We have **free trainings** for early educators and healthcare providers, **children's books**, a photo and video **library** of all the milestones from two months to five years of age and much more available on our website. And all of the materials are **in English and Spanish and a variety of other languages**.

And very helpful is that these are all in the public domain. You can reproduce them, and we will allow agencies to add their own logos and contact information so that those can be printed and provided to communities.

I mentioned our Act Early ambassadors, and this is one of main strategies we have for helping to get these resources out the door and into the hands of families who can use them. And we are so happy that we have an ambassador in every state now. We have one in DC and also in three territories. And so, these are folks who sign on for two to three years to serve as the ambassador to their state or territory. They receive a very small stipend to do this work. So really, we're just capitalizing on their existing passion for young children and helping them to reach their full potential.

**You can find the contact information for the ambassador in your state or territory at the link here**, [cdc.gov/ActEarly/Ambassadors](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/ambassadors-list.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Factearly%2Fambassadors%2Findex.html).

Every year we ask the ambassadors to give us a report on their activities. And I just wanted to provide this breakdown where you can see the percentage of ambassadors who are working with these various early childhood programs, with a high of 78% of ambassadors reporting that they're working with childcare, down to 41% who are working with WIC.

So, when COVID-19 hit our communities, CDC was trying to think of a way to leverage the Act Early Ambassador network that we have existing, that had a large footprint across the country, and think about how we could use this network to help support early identification during the pandemic. So, we know that there were many challenges presented to early identification that began in 2019 and lasted all the way through 2020. So, we came up with the idea to support this Act Early response to COVID state teams. And the purpose was to bolster four steps of early identification, which we defined as:

* developmental monitoring,
* developmental and autism screening,
* referral, and
* then receipt of early intervention services.

And you can see the map here and the locations where we have an Act Early response to COVID-19 team this year. So, the project goals. So, these are, these state teams are led, again, by our Act Early ambassadors or co-led by them. And their goals for the project were to leverage this team and engage them to conduct a needs assessment of the current challenges to early identification and then develop a work plan to address those challenges and to also implement strategies to improve resiliency in very young children and their families. And this was funded by the CARES Act funding. And we received about $4 million. So, each state team would receive about $94,000 to do this work. And they were funded for one year so their activities are projected to wrap at the end of August this year. When each team submitted a plan for their activities, they included who they were gonna include on their state team and who they plan to work with.

So, this slide shows you a breakdown of different state level and other level programs. You can see that many were planning to work with Title V and Part C and disability advocacy groups, childcare, et cetera. And especially, for you all as parent centers, so, we did not require that the state teams work with the family advocacy organization but many of them, 81% of the state teams in their initial plans did in fact say they were going to do this, as well as work with the UCEDDs and LENs.

I mentioned that they had to do a needs assessment. This took the form of a survey that CDC helped states to collect. And so, 349 partners or key informants across the 43 state teams participated in this. And you can see that the majority indicated that COVID-19 did highly impact early identification and the numbers of children that were served in their respective programs. So, what we, a bit, what we expected to find there. And they we also had some qualitative data from open-ended responses about what those barriers were and I've listed some of them on the slide here. So, a final report is forthcoming but here's just an initial snapshot for you.

So, as you are thinking about your next steps, here's some contact information. If you have questions, where you can email ActEarly@cdc.gov. Again, the link where you can find your ambassador and also an AUCD link where you can find the contact info for those state teams and also a summary of their work plans.

So now, I'm gonna turn it over to two of our Act Early ambassadors, who are gonna tell you some more examples of how parents centers are working with the ambassador and the state teams. And so, I'm gonna hand it over to Lisa Sanderson, our ambassador. So, Lisa carry it away. I'm gonna stop sharing and let her.

**Lisa Sanderson** |South Dakota Parent Connection

- Thank you, Julia. And hello, fellow parent centers. Let me share my screen. And oops, there we go. That should be better now. Pardon that. So, I am with South Dakota Parent Connection, our state's PTI and also I have been the Act Early ambassador since 2018 and have been involved in supporting the Learn The Signs. Act Early campaign long before I became the ambassador. And so, Julia has already showed you some of these. I typically have this when I am working with organizations and partners because it's very popular and utilized in our state but people do not recognize the name, *Learn The Signs. Act Early* or Act Early. But once they see the materials, they often will say, oh, yes, I know what that is. We're using that in our program. And so, you may also be using this in your program, as we already saw from the ambassador data, many ambassadors are working with parent centers.

I'm gonna talk with you about maybe some opportunities for parent centers, how to apply this. If you're not already partnering with your ambassador or you want a greater partnership, there's no better time than today. While the impacts of COVID have been significant across all steps of early intervention, this has also created great opportunity to collaborate and partner because we all need to work together right now to stand up and assist families against the impact and mitigating measures that COVID has brought. And so, please reach out to your ambassador. Ask how you can assist their outreach, how you can assist them with their goals and what are those goals and how might they be able to help you, as a PTI, reach your goals and expand your outreach as well. And then share data. Just like we have to collect and report data, the ambassadors do as well. So, a great opportunity for a two way partnership there to to collect and share data across your programs.

Now, we utilize the robust materials available through the Act Early campaign in newsletters and publications and social media and website and in trainings and in individual assistance. And so, those materials can be sent to families to support orientation to typical child development, support their concerns, and provide some materials that help to document and substantiate their concerns. So, when they go to that doctor, when they go to birth to three or the school, they have a concrete record that demonstrates why they're concerned and tracking those milestones. And checking off those Act Early factors really empowers families to have their concerns addressed seriously.

Now, we use it in other ways as well. And I'm gonna give you an example that we used, that we actually used here at parent connection. So, the story behind this is we had a lovely family come to us for help. They were desperate. They have two little ones, a four year old son and a two year old daughter. And this little boy who is four has autism spectrum disorder and pretty significant. And while this little guy and his younger sister had been successful in a childcare setting for over a year, that childcare provider closed. And this is also an immigrant family and mom, the family are English language learners. English is not spoken in the home. And so we, have some additional complicating factors for this little guy. Now, when I met with the family, it was during the summer. He was getting early intervention services but they were in a break. And so, it just so happened that that the sister, the younger sister was in childcare and mom had asked if they, if the childcare provider would take both her children. And they had said, well, we don't have any openings in the four to five room. And, you know, perhaps due to cultural differences, perhaps due to language barriers, mom or dad were not able to say, you know, he has autism. Maybe we can look at how he might fit. They just, they just took that answer. We don't have any openings in the four to five year old room. The sister was doing well in that facility, in that childcare provider but the little guy had three unsuccessful childcare placements in two weeks and that's when mom came to us just desperate for help. Also other issues at the parent center, you know, mom was on the no childcare, mom was calling in sick to work. She was having issues and problems at work.

And so, we did what parent centers do. We really got around the whole problem and sought to help. I called that childcare provider with the sister and said, you know, I just wanna kind of visit back. You know, we have a four year old but he has autism. And so, the four or five year old room may not be real appropriate for him. If we can get some more information for you, if we can work with you, would you consider providing care to this little boy and, you know, at least give it a trial and bless their hearts, they were good to go with that.

So, I spent a lot of time with the mom, sometime with that little boy and we really try to get information to provide the childcare provider because we wanted that little boy but we wanted those childcare providers to be successful as well. So, we used the checklist. And I started back with the one year old 12 month checklist for this four year old little boy so that we can identify what his strengths were but also where his supports were. So, you've been looking at that for a mile, you can, for a while. And so, you can see that, you know, maybe about half of the milestones but his physical development is his strength. Now, we also did the 18 month old checklist. You can see, you know, just one of the language communication milestones, you know, movement, physical development, again, that's his strong suit and a few of the other milestones from that. We did the two year old checklist. None of the language communication milestones were met. Most of the physical development and just a few of the other areas. We did the three year old checklist. Again, physical development is his strength, language, communication, none of those and just, you know, a half or maybe one and a half of the other milestones. And then the four year old checklists where nothing, we were not able to indicate he mastered any of these.

Now, this, if we had just done the four year old checklist, this would have told those providers nothing about how to help this child but by having this packet available for them, they were able to make some determinations about what support this little guy needed, what was an appropriate setting for him. They determined that he would be best served in the three year old room and they were prepared for him. It also helped the family look back at milestones and have an idea of what they could be shooting for and going back and working on, going back to the 12 month old and starting to help him develop some of these skills.

Now, we use this checklist and other ways as well. In fact, I'll be doing the training next week with our Tribal Head Start, Early Head Start program. And each of the families will get an appropriate checklist. And so, for part of the early development review with families, we're gonna walk them through that checklist. On the back of the checklist, has activities. Talk about, you know, if their kids have not mastered a skill, what they can do at home, what Head Start can do to have a concentrated effort to get them across the finish line. And if that concentrated effort is not helping or any of those red flags are marked, real appropriate to go to the next step, as for developmental screening and the different places that they may be able to do that. And so, my work plan as an ambassador was early care systems, educational systems, and our state department of health systems. Those are listed and we have many great partners, including our Tribal Early Education programs. When we had the COVID response expansion, we have all those existing partners and plus we've been able to add on many more in the and this has been very exciting. We have a lot of other people stepping up.

And we needed a coordinated, consistent messaging on child development and early intervention across the state. We don't have one existing in South Dakota. And everyone is on board to using the Act Early materials, as that coordinated, consistent messaging. We can also integrate the family resilience messaging throughout all of our work we're doing. And here, as a parent center, family resilience and support is what we do everyday. So, great opportunities there to do this work. And we will be customizing materials. And in fact, I'm gonna give you an example of what we did here. We are printing in South Dakota for the first time ever a coordinated printing campaign. We had eight funders on board to participate in that. And so, you can see our funders get to have their logo. And as a parent center, we can help with the messaging to be sure it's parent friendly and easy to understand. And so, you can see this is actually parts of two pages. And so, the bottom is something we created specific to South Dakota to add to these books on where families can go for help. And you might see that last bullet is parent connection, their parent center for free information, resources and support. So, there again, we get our message out. We are here helping to support families.

And so, you know, what are *your* next steps to partner with your Act Early ambassador? And as a parent center that is a member and an ambassador myself, I am happy to answer any questions, brainstorm ideas with you. We are all in this together. And now I will print it over to Deepa, to have another another view of parent center and ambassador relationships. I'm gonna stop my.

**Deepa Srinivasavaradan** | New Jersey’s Act Early Ambassador, at SPAN

- Thank you, Lisa. Thank you, Lisa. And let me share my screen. Hello everyone, my name is Deepa Srinivasavaradan and I'm excited to join Julia and Lisa today to share a little bit about how ambassadors can collaborate with the parent centers. I work at the parent center in New Jersey, the SPAN Parent Advocacy Network. We have a mission to empower families and inform and involve professionals and others interested in healthy development and education of children to enable them to become fully participating and contributing members of our communities and society. I put this mission in here because I feel that it resonates really well with the mission of the Act Early campaign and SPAN being a non-profit, family led organization that is federally funded by the US Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs. It also houses the Parent Training and Information Center, the start project, the Family WRAP program which also includes the Parent to Parent, Project CARE, Family Voices, New Jersey Inclusive Childcare Project, Family Strengthening, Violence Prevention, Transition to Adult Life, et cetera. I'm just naming some of these just so you get an idea of what, what an organization SPAN is. Because of the opportunities to house all these programs, we have the opportunities to cross collaborate and do a lot of things collaboratively. We also house the National Parenting Center, the Center for Parent Information and Resources, the National Transition Parenting Center Race, the Regional Region A Parenting Center Need Pack and Regional RSA Parents Center, REAL Transition Partners with the Federation for Children with Special Needs include NYC, Stockbridge and the Parent Network of West New York. We are an umbrella organization that focuses on education, health, mental health and human services and parent leadership across systems. And so, we can truly say that SPAN is a one stop for families.

And so, through our work at SPAN, we have all these different state partners. Some of these partners you may be also working with in your states or you may have other partners also. So, having access to all these partners through SPAN was really very helpful for me, when I started out as an Act Early ambassador I was able to easily collaborate with a lot of them because of the connection that already existed. So, SPAN provides a lot of opportunities and platforms for me to share, Learn The Signs. Act Early. So, all of these partners that I listed in the previous slide, many of them overlap between these two stakeholder groups, Infant Child Health Committee and the Community of Care Consortium. So, these are stakeholder meetings that can mean about quarterly every quarter in our state. And these partners are always available. And I have the opportunity as the Act Early ambassador to share an update at the Infant Child Health Committee which is a stakeholder group of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, Office of Early Childhood Services, which houses the Help Me Grow, Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems CoIIN, Home Visiting, Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five and Strengthening Families. I also serve as the state parent lead for all these initial early childhood initiatives within the Office of Early Childhood Services at DCF. And so, it becomes a natural opportunity for me to be able to share, Learn The Signs. Act Early at all of these meetings. For the Community of Care Consortium, I lead the Early and Continuous Screening work group with along with the professional. So, that also is another forum that I'm able to share this information. So, you can easily see how I'm building on SPAN's existing partnerships. So, with the Title V and big programs at the Department of Health, SPAN has a wonderful relationship. We support them with all the Title V block grant activities. And so, the image that you see on the right is the Big Shopper app and they have been able to embed the CDC's milestone tracker app into their, into their app. The Boggs Center is our University Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities and our Leadership in Education and Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program. So, they have a partnership with SPAN to assist them with recruiting family mentors, to be matched with trainees. So now, we have been able to expand on that partnership and include Learn The Signs. Act Early as one of the things in my scope of work to be able to share that information with all the trainees and possibly, recruit some LEND trainees to work on projects related to Learn The Signs. Act Early.

And I'm also able to develop new relationships easily with the help of SPAN. A lot of our partners are looking to work on family engagement. So, their automatic inclination is to reach out to SPAN which is our parent center in New Jersey. So, we are able to then expand on that relationship and build on Learn The Signs. Act Early. For instance, our Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, we are working on a project to improve autism awareness. And when they reached out to SPAN, I was connected to them. And we were able to submit a project proposal and receive funding to work together. So, I'm not going to go to the other partners but I'm just trying to give you some examples here of how we can build on existing partnerships and develop new partnerships. I also serve on multiple projects at SPAN. For instance, I already mentioned the partnership for awareness role that I'm leading. I'm also the Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices ambassador. I already mentioned that I'm the state parent lead for our Help me Grow, ECCS CoIIN and Home Visiting. I'm also the southern region coordinator for our Family to Family Health Information Center. I participate on the New Jersey American Academy of Pediatrics, Early Identification and Referral for Autism ECHO to provide the family perspective and also infuse Learn The Signs. Act Early. I collaborate with multiple SPAN projects, for example, the New Jersey Inclusive Childcare Project. We collaborate a lot to offer trainings to childcare resource and referral agencies and childcare programs in our state. We have the special education volunteer advocates. I'm collaborating with them because they already have a pool of parent leaders that they're training to become those special education volunteer advocates and giving them information about Learn The Signs. Act Early. And empowering them with that information is really helpful so they can act as those parent champions within the communities.

Similarly, with our Empowering Women for Healthy Communities as well, they are training women around prevention of lead poisoning and fetal alcohol syndrome. So again, they are women in the community acting similar to community health workers. So, it's really helpful to train those folks that are already on the ground to also promote this information about Learn The Signs. Act Early. So, as you can see, my ambassador goals are to promote integration of Learn The Signs. Act Early into New Jersey's early childcare and education programs. And all of my work has been revolving around in that area. And the second goal is to also train, support and expand the network of the Act Early Parent Champions, which I'm also able to accomplish through my our partnership with all the state partners and programs. So for instance, even with my work as a state parent lead for the Department of Children and Families, I'm able to train parent champions for the work around early childhood comprehensive systems. So, another wonderful thing that happened was that we were able to work together with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families and come up with these developmental passports. If you can click on the image or the title of the slide, you can access a place where you can download these **passports**. They include information about what development monitoring and screening is. And they also have a tracker a well-child visit tracker and also a developmental health tracker. So, parents can easily keep track of what milestones they're, not the milestones really but if they are concerned and if they are accessing screening for their child and what type of screening tool is used and what follow-up information is needed, et cetera and what referrals are being made. So, this is a good companion to the milestone moments booklet that is offered by the CDC Act Early campaign.

Again, Julia and Lisa talked a little bit already about the Act Early COVID response project. Specifically for us, you know, we were able to strengthen the ambassador led state team because of all the partners we had and also bring in some additional ones. And our statewide system of focus is the Family Success Centers. Again, in our state, we have Family Success Centers across the state working to help build the resilience in families. Since they were already working on that, we found them as our natural partners for this work to promote Learn the Signs and also to build on the resilience of families. So, we have completed a needs assessment. We had 13 state team partners complete the needs assessment. And that's what Julia shared a little bit about. And we are now working on scheduling the Train the Trainer for the Family Success Centers. They will be parent led trainings. And we are also offering those trainings to other early childhood programs. As I mentioned, parents champion training is also another main focus. We have come up with electronic newsletters that highlight Act Early resources as well as any resources that building resilience. So, we have made it a quarterly newsletter and we have already sent out two of those out to partners, including the Family Success Centers. I was able to author an article with my colleague for this project. It highlights Learn The Signs. Act Early resources and resilience resources and it was published in the Exceptional Parent Magazine, which is a national magazine for families with children with special needs. Printing of Learn The Signs. Act Early materials has been possible through the funding from this project. We have been able to print the Baby's Busy Bay Books, similar to the *Amazing Me* and *Where is Bear* books that Lisa shared. These books are actually small board books for one year old children. And we have been able to print a large quantity and we are in the process of disseminating those books through our partners.

We are also happy to share that we have printed these parent engagement cards to help with building resilience and families. They provide strategies for families to help children with social, emotional and healthy wellbeing. So, these cards are based on New Jersey's birth to three early learning standards. And again, SPAN partnered with a couple of other partners in our state. And we were able to add just a small amount of funding from this grant to the larger pool and get this printed. So again, that was a wonderful opportunity and we are in the process of disseminating these as well. All of these resources that I just mentioned here are available at the website that I have listed at the bottom of the slide. So, as I mentioned, I already talked a little bit about the Baby's Busy Day and the parent engagement cards. So, these are the visuals for those.

So really, the **next steps** I would suggest is, if you're already not connected to your Act Early ambassador, please reach out to them and make those connections because you will receive access to all of these Learn The Signs. Act Early materials and some of the ones that they may have customized and printed for your state. You can collaborate with the Act Early ambassador and the state team to reach families with young children, to help improve the early identification efforts in your state. I, you may think that all of this has been really possible because I am housed at a parent center as an ambassador but really all ambassadors are wonderful. I know my team of ambassadors, they are all really really looking for all these opportunities to connect and make a difference. So, please do reach out to them and they will be really happy to share the wealth of information that they have access to to help you reach your goals as well. Thank you for this opportunity. And if you do have any questions, I'm always accessible. I have listed my email and phone number and you can call it or email at any time. Thank you.



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