

Building Evidence for Family First Programs and Services: *Child First*



Background

The [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) incentivizes child welfare approaches that prioritize keeping kids safe and families together. This legislation authorizes federal reimbursement to states for the delivery of evidence-based programs and services that prevent the need for foster care. In October 2022, the Administration for Children and Families approved Colorado's bold [Five-Year Family First Prevention Services Plan](#) (Colorado's Plan) to maximize prevention investments in child welfare that help Colorado's children, youth, and families thrive, together.

The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to serve as the [Family First Evidence-Building Hub](#). In this role, the Colorado Lab ensures strategic investments in evidence building for Family First programs and services. The Hub coordinates evaluations that are designed to both meet Colorado-specific learning goals and advance [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#) (Clearinghouse) evidence designations.

Why Child First?

[Child First](#) is an evidence-based mental health home visiting program that partners with families, infants, and young children from pregnancy through age 5. The intervention serves families experiencing multiple challenges such as extreme poverty, maternal depression, domestic violence, substance use, and homelessness. Child First supports caregivers and their children in processing the stresses and traumas in their lives while enhancing healthy patterns of interactions between them. Stakeholders identified Child First as a complementary program within both the [in-home parent skill-based and mental health service arrays](#) positioned to meet the more intensive needs of Colorado's youngest children and their families. Child First currently has five affiliates serving 24 counties in Colorado.

Evidence Building for Child First

Child First is in Colorado's Plan and designated as a "supported" program by the Clearinghouse. Aligned with Step 5 on the [Steps to Building Evidence](#), MDRC is conducting a multi-state randomized controlled trial (RCT) with the goal of building evidence toward a "well-supported" designation.



This study assesses the impact of Child First on child safety, child well-being (behavioral and emotional functioning), and adult well-being (mental or emotional health, substance use or misuse, economic security, and housing stability) outcomes.

The study seeks to replicate findings from an [earlier RCT of Child First](#). This evaluation began in October 2022 and is expected to be completed in December 2027.

This evaluation is being conducted by MDRC on behalf of CDHS, under the coordination of the Colorado Lab's Family First Evidence-Building Hub. As MDRC was leading a Child First RCT in Connecticut and North Carolina, the Hub leveraged this opportunity to add Colorado to the study.

