

WHY YOUNG CHILDREN ACT OUT: RESPONSIVE SUPPORTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS



Capstone Project for Georgia 2Gen Academy

Families with young children facing behavioral and emotional challenges often lack adequate support, dealing with long waitlists and limited access to culturally responsive services. This leaves caregivers overwhelmed and isolated, hindering their ability to access timely care and advocate for their children. Family peer support is essential to bridge these gaps, offering culturally responsive, relationship-based assistance that empowers caregivers and enhances their children's social and emotional development.

The Need for Responsive Family Peer Support ¹

1 in 10

children (age 0-5) experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges

23%

of children (age 2-5.5) in clinical settings met the criteria for a mental disorder

Critical

Early childhood is a critical period for brain development, making early support essential

Caregivers of children ages 2-8 with behavioral health needs report the following:

72% report difficulty getting appointments

39% report cost as a barrier

38% report limited local availability

Caregiver stress also impacts child outcomes.

Many are managing behavioral concerns while balancing work, transportation, child care, and multiple service systems alone.

Peer Support Network Models Matter for Caregivers of Young Children

- 1 They Reduce Isolation and Provide Emotional Support ^{2,3,4}**
Parents of young children with behavioral or developmental challenges often feel overwhelmed, judged, or alone. Peer support directly combats these experiences.
- 2 They Improve Parents' Ability to Support Their Child's Development ^{3,4}**
Young children depend heavily on caregivers for co-regulation, routines, and behavior support. Peer support strengthens parents' skills in these areas.
- 3 They Help Families Navigate Complicated and Fragmented Systems ^{1,2,6}**
Families of young children must juggle services from early intervention, childcare, pediatricians, mental health providers, and sometimes child welfare. Peer supporters help bridge these systems.
- 4 They Increase Access to Early Intervention and Mental Health Supports ^{1,2,5}**
When caregivers feel supported and confident, they are more likely to seek services and follow through.
- 5 They Strengthen Protective Factors for Children and Improve Outcomes ^{2,3,7}**
Positive parental mental health and supportive family environments are foundational for early childhood development.
- 6 They Address Gaps in Behavioral Health Capacity for the Birth-5 Population ^{2,6,8}**
Young children's behavioral health needs are often underserved due to workforce shortages and lack of specialized programs. Parent peers can fill these gaps.
- 7 They Reduce Stigma and Normalize Seeking Help ^{2,3,4}**
Parents may feel embarrassed discussing behavioral struggles in young children. Peer support normalizes these experiences.

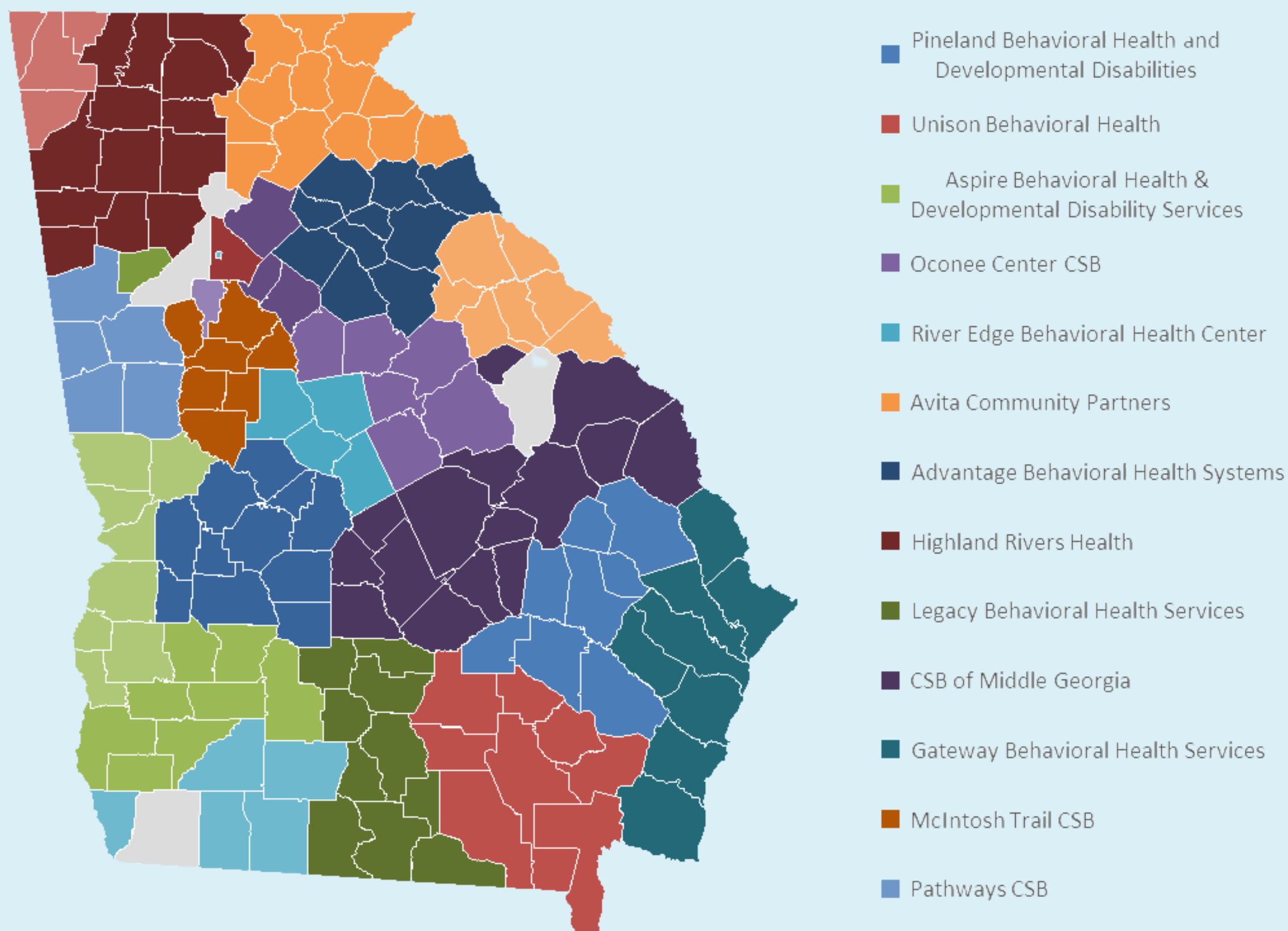
References

- ¹ CDC (2024) - National study examining barriers to accessing mental health services for young children (ages 2-8) in the U.S.
- ² SAMHSA (2017) - Overview of family and parent peer support roles, services, and benefits within behavioral health systems
- ³ Jahagirdar et al. (2026) - HOPE study highlighting how peer support improves caregiver wellbeing, connection, and parenting confidence
- ⁴ Warren Center (2026) - Insights on how parent support groups reduce isolation and build community among families of young children
- ⁵ Egan et al. (2026) - Systematic review of the SPACE model, demonstrating effectiveness of parent-focused interventions for child behavioral challenges
- ⁶ Carelon Behavioral Health - Example of a certified family peer support model integrated within systems of care for children and families
- ⁷ Kim et al. (2026) - Study on early intervention providers, emphasizing caregiver-implemented strategies and real-world implementation challenges
- ⁸ UCL Social Prescribing (2026) - Best practice guidelines for building coordinated, community-based support systems for children, youth, and families
- ⁹ NCTSN - National resources outlining trauma-informed approaches to supporting children and families experiencing stress or adversity

Georgia's Community Service Boards (CSBs) serve as the primary provider of behavioral health, mental health, disability, and addiction support services for both children and adults. CSBs collaborate with the Georgia Parent Support Network (GPSN) to train Parent Certified Peer Specialists (CPS-P), who share their lived experiences to assist families. There is a significant opportunity to enhance this existing training program to better align with the needs of families of young children facing behavioral and emotional challenges. Additionally, pursuing Medicaid funding can help ensure the sustainability of these efforts, providing adequate support for young children in need.



Community Service Board (CSB) Coverage in Georgia



Medicaid Funding: The Single Ask

- The Certified Peer Specialist-Parent (CPS-P) credential is currently not recognized by Georgia Medicaid as a reimbursable certification, which prevents providers from billing for CPS-P services delivered through peer support networks.
- Georgia Medicaid should formally evaluate the Georgia Parent Support Network (GPSN) CPS-P training and certification program to determine whether it meets existing Medicaid reimbursement standards for peer support services.
- This policy change would not require the creation of a new funding stream, as it involves administrative recognition of an existing credential rather than the development of a new service category or benefit.
- The recognition process for CPS-P can follow the same review and approval pathway previously used to authorize the Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network (GMHCN) peer specialist certification for Medicaid reimbursement.
- Once the CPS-P credential is officially recognized, providers will be able to deliver and bill for services using existing Medicaid infrastructure, enabling immediate integration into current service delivery and reimbursement systems.

The Framework: Critical Components for a Strong Peer Support Network

- ✓ Recruit and Train Peer Supporters With Authentic Lived Experience in Early Childhood Behavioral Challenges ^{2,3,6}
- ✓ Develop Standardized Certification, Competencies, and Ongoing Professional Development ^{6,7,8}
- ✓ Offer Multiple Modes of Peer Support (1:1, Groups, Phone/Text, Community-Based) ^{2,3,4}
- ✓ Embed Peer Support Into Early Childhood Systems (Early Intervention, Childcare, Pediatric Primary Care, Home Visiting) ^{1,2,6,8}
- ✓ Provide Trauma-Informed, Developmentally Appropriate Support Tailored to Birth-5 ^{5,9}
- ✓ Prioritize Cultural Humility, Trust, and Family-Centered Relationships ^{2,3,4}
- ✓ Ensure Stable Funding, Infrastructure, and Program Sustainability ^{6,8}
- ✓ Use Data, Evaluation, and Continuous Quality Improvement ^{3,8}

State Agencies & Organizations to Leverage:

