

aRPy Ambassadors Strengthen State Systems through Professional Development and Mentoring

April 21, 2025

<https://ectacenter.org/about/impact-2025-arpyp.asp>

In 2016, the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center developed and piloted the [aRPy Ambassador Program](#). The "RP" in aRPy stands for recommended practices, as in the [Division for Early Childhood's \(DEC\) Recommended Practices](#), which range from Assessment to Teaming and Collaboration.

Historical Context of the DEC and the RPs

[The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children](#) is the professional association for early childhood special education. DEC provides guidance on early intervention and early childhood special education [Recommended Practices](#) (RPs) related to better outcomes for young children with disabilities or delays, their families and the personnel who serve them.

The latest version of the DEC RPs (2014) was compiled and validated through volunteer efforts of DEC members and researchers in the field of early childhood special education and represents the highest standards of practice. DEC provides a [detailed history of the DEC RPs](#) and a description of the latest revision process is on their website.

Evolution of the aRPy Ambassador Program

When the DEC RPs 2014 version was published, ECTA was charged with developing resources to promote the use of the Recommended Practices. These [Practice Improvement Tools](#) guide practitioners and families in supporting young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays or disabilities across a variety of settings. They include performance checklists, practice guides, illustrations of the practices and guidance materials.

As the Practice Improvement Tools were being developed, it was clear that a method for promoting awareness and use of the tools would be critical to connect with the adults directly caring for young children with disabilities. The aRPy Ambassador Initiative was established to help share information about and promote the use of the DEC Recommended Practices (RPs) using the Practice Improvement Tools developed by the ECTA Center. The Ambassadors include faculty from institutions of higher education, state IDEA Part C and Part B, Section 619 staff, Parent Training and Information Center staff, Regional Parent Technical Assistance Center staff, and Community Parent Resource Center staff.

ECTA recruited and supported a cohort of 15 professionals to become the first aRPy Ambassadors. An Ambassador:

- Brings awareness to the existence of the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices (RPs)
- Understands who the RPs are intended for
- Shares information about the materials and products that support implementing the RPs

Over the last eight years, ECTA has expanded their resources, tools and products that support the Ambassadors work in promoting the RPs. ECTA staff have strategically expanded their partnership with [DEC](#) and [Parent to Parent of Georgia](#) to co-facilitate and grow the Ambassador program. It now includes family Ambassadors and technical assistant (TA) and professional development (PD) Ambassadors. To date, 41 aRPy Ambassadors represent 32 states and two territories. Since its inception, six cohorts (2016–2023) of Ambassadors have been recruited.

A 2024 case study interview revealed some of the reasons Ambassadors participate in this program were to:

- Promote the use of the RPs by practitioners
- Support families' understanding of the RPs
- Foster application of research to practice
- Gain ideas from working with the network of Ambassadors

The Journey: Benefits of Program Participation

In 2023 and 2024, ECTA sent a community of practice (CoP) survey to Ambassadors to get feedback on their experiences in the program. 40 surveys were sent in 2023, and 36 were sent in 2024.

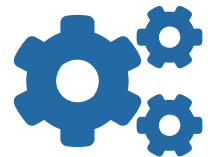
Across both years, 94% or more of respondents "Agree" or "Strongly agree" they gained supports related to program outcomes:

- I have gained knowledge and skills.
- I feel more confident and motivated to do Ambassador work.
- I have developed new relationships with colleagues.
- I feel supported in my role and feel I can turn to CoP members for assistance.
- I have access to resources and information not easily obtained from another source.

Impact of the Work

ECTA's external evaluator, the [Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation \(PIRE\)](#), conducted case study interviews in fall 2024 to better understand the impact of this work on the Ambassadors and their spheres of influence. Qualitative impacts noted by case study participants include:

Embedding RPs into State Systems for Improved Outcomes



"They've [RPs] been a big help to our systemic improvement work and not just SSIP... [For example, there is] the provider handbook, which is really one of the only things that guides provider behavior in our whole early intervention system, [where the] the Recommended Practices are listed, called out, and used as a reference... The Recommended Practices get woven into the creation of new policies, procedures, or processes..."

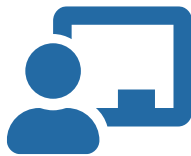
Embedding RPs into State Professional Development Systems



"We've created a fidelity tool of sorts with the [RPs] and it's taking folks from wherever they are and working towards improved fidelity to the Practices."

"One of the things that I've been able to do in my outreach, as far as doing training statewide, is I utilize a lot of the materials like the embedded instruction practice. I have an obligation to open doors and give ways for parents to be supported and that they [parents] can support what classrooms are doing. Classrooms can support what parents are doing. I have not found any tool that really does that as well as the Practices."

Incorporating RPs into College-Level Curricula



"Three of us working at higher education at different levels wrote a paper for...TED. It is the Teacher Education Division... We wrote a paper, practitioner-friendly paper, for one of their journals, and it's published... It talks about how we use RP tools in our college, in our courses... And last thing, right now, we are working on a paper for our [DEC] journal that asks, 'What can we do as higher ed to make sure people out there teaching use these tools in their courses... and [understand] how it works?' I also published a book chapter about RP tools on how my practicum students are using it as a self-reflection tool during their work with families."

Embedding RPs to Foster Family Engagement within Support Systems



"Our Part C Director invited me to participate in the Family Support Committee of our state interagency coordinating council [SICC]. I was able to talk about the importance of Recommended Practices. Something she wants to work with me is around creating a family advisory for the state and state interagency coordinating council so parents who are being selected to serve on the SICC can be oriented to the process. And I was able to say the Recommended Practices has been a part of that orientation so they can not only use it for their own families, but also in their role as members of the SICC..."

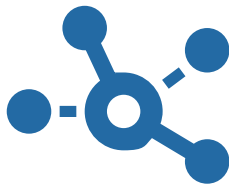
"...[W]e have something called the Early Intervention Clearinghouse and their primary job is to support early intervention families in their understanding the system. They send out a quarterly newsletter and I worked with them to create an article to let families know that the Recommended Practices were out there. Then we kind of followed up with, 'So if this is the Practice, what would that mean to me? Or what would that look like? Or how would that change my behavior?'"

Supporting Inclusion Efforts through Adaptation in the Classroom



"[A]nytime we make an adaptation in the classroom, it's not likely to only benefit the one child for whom we made it, but other children may benefit as well... Sometimes when I did a Recommended Practices presentation, it was couched in the sense of inclusion and really how Practices can support that [inclusion]."

Leveraging the Knowledge and Skills of the Entire Network to Access and Share Culturally, Linguistically, and Family-Friendly Materials for Parents and Providers



"During our DEC conference a family out of nowhere reached out to me saying they are living in Maryland and they are looking for EI services for their child; they don't know where to begin or what should they do... I was able to see the Maryland aRPy Ambassador at the DEC conference and she helped the family... with how to get access to EI services within their zip code. That's amazing. Do you think it's over? No, she emailed me a week later. 'Is there anything else I can do for the family?' I can use that example with my students, 'This is what family centered practice is, this is what supporting families is, this is what it looks like when we look at the RP resources Family Checklist.'"

Key Takeaways

The aRPy Ambassador program is favorably perceived by those engaged in this work. From case study findings, the Ambassadors:

- Gave positive feedback about the ECTA team's responsiveness and flexibility.
- Appreciated the network of Ambassadors and the capacity to leverage their collective knowledge, resources, and contributions.
- Appreciated the opportunity to learn from staff who work directly with children and families. This ensures that families' needs and perspectives inform state level efforts to apply the RPs to EI systems.
- Recognized that including Parent Training and Information (PTI) representatives in the cohort translates to a stronger connection to and partnership with state PTI Centers.

Suggested Citation

ECTA Center (2025). *aRPy Ambassadors Strengthen State Systems through Professional Development and Mentoring*. <https://ectacenter.org/about/impact-2025-arp.asp>

The ECTA Center is a program of the FPG Child Development Institute of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, funded through cooperative agreement number H326P220002 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the Department of Education's position or policy. Project Officer: Julia Martin Eile



Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education

