GUIDELINES
For program implementation

During this unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic, Children's Institute connected with Primary Project teams nationally and across New York State to learn about their successes, challenges, adaptations and future strategies in supporting students and families. Stories from program coordinators, supervisors, and child associates illustrated teams' flexibility, innovation, creativity, and intentionality.

Children's Institute gathered resources, learned from information in the field, and developed these guidelines to support implementation of Primary Project.

Use this information in collaboration with the program's Best Practices Rubric within the context of your district/school building. It is our hope that this guide is a catalyst for decisions and the creation of solutions that preserve program fidelity.

The guidelines are outlined within the six (6) core components of Primary Project.

1. **Focus on children for the short-term:**
   - Primary Project is intended to provide support to students in pre-K through third grade. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, districts/schools determined which grades to serve as part of their continuum of support to students. Depending on districts/schools reopening plans and students' needs, schools may choose to serve the same grades, narrow or widen the scope of service within the population served.

2. **Screening and selection:**
   - Due to increased risk factors for many students and families related to COVID-19, universal screening is paramount in identifying and documenting the needs of students this year. Screening data determines potential candidates for Primary Project and informs school based mental health professionals about students' needs for other tiered supports. Primary Project, a Tier 2 intervention, will serve an essential need for an anticipated increased number of students this school year.
   - When schools abruptly closed in March 2020, several programs were just beginning to serve a new cohort of students. For some children, only a few sessions had occurred. A recommendation is to consider those same children for re-connection and services shortly after the start of the school year. While this may be a viable option for all schools, it may be particularly advantageous for those starting the school year remotely.
   - Best practices indicate screening after 4-6 weeks into the start of the school year and with at least two methods for screening students. One method typically includes the use of a standardized tool. Many schools have used the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS) or an alternate screening tool used to assess students' social and emotional needs. With extended time spent at home, parents/caregivers may be in the best position to provide insight into their child's social and emotional development as they enter this coming school year.

Therefore, schools may consider adding the [Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS)](#) as a screening tool and pre/post measure.

- Consider adjusting your parent permission documentation to include both in-person and remote sessions. Refer to your respective district's policy pertaining to delivery of virtual sessions and specific permission that may be required for provision of virtual sessions.

3. **Use of child associates as direct interventionists**

- The focus in Primary Project continues to be on the *importance of relationships*. Child associates are specially trained in child centered play techniques and have unique and admirable skills when it comes to relating with young children. Whether in person or virtual sessions, the same beliefs of unconditional positive regard, allowing the child to lead, and "trusting the process" remain present. Trust your skills, your abilities, and the playful nature of children.

    Considerations for virtual sessions with students:
    - Primary Project teams should reference district policies around the delivery of virtual sessions and specific technology platforms that may be used.
    - To allow for successful sessions, we recommend that teams pre-plan with parents/ caregivers prior to visits. Topics of discussion may include the time of the play sessions, an assessment of whether the child has access to technology, confirmation of an accurate e-mail address to send the virtual link and ensuring the child has a place with a few expressive toys available to access during the time
    - Embrace flexibility! While a virtual session may start one way, the child may take the session in a different direction. For example, the tour of where they live and introductions to their pets all create opportunities for connection. We can use the same skills of active listening, tracking, empathy, reflecting feelings and yes, there may still be some limit setting. Additionally, 30 minutes may not necessarily be the norm. Virtual sessions may need to be shortened. Even as adults, we become fatigued with screen time.

    Consideration for playroom sessions (in school):
    - Rather than toys displayed and available for children to play with freely, Primary Project teams may wish to consider the idea of "play boxes." Play boxes, assigned to individual children to limit cross-contamination, may be shoebox size boxes or bins that include small items that span across all three categories of toys for the playroom (real life/ nurturing, acting out/aggressive, and creative expression).

4. **Use of school-based mental health professionals as supervisor, consultant and leader**

- This core component is more important than ever to advocate for the program and its service to young students at this critical time. The supervisor meets with the child associate to discuss the unique social and emotional needs of children participating in the program during the pandemic. Supervisors are critical in supporting and protecting the child associate's role. They serve as a guide, resource, and support for child associates and possess the mental health expertise to advance child associates in their work with students. Ongoing supervision, whether in person or virtual, is vital to supporting child associates and in addressing programmatic concerns.

- Mental health professionals will manage what may be an unprecedented rate of needs in children's school and learning adjustment. Contact with caregivers such as the initial engagement about program should be coordinated by the supervisor, in collaboration with the child associate. A supervisor's likely increased level of support to students should be balanced to ensure that the integrity of the program is not compromised. Primary Project will serve an essential service in your school's multi-tiered system of support for children.

5. **Use of ongoing outcome and process evaluation**
- Data collection and evaluation support Primary Project teams' understanding of the program impact on students served and in making program improvements. Schools may want to continue gathering data related to demographics, pre/post data, and summary of sessions including: frequency, length of sessions, number of weeks, and delivery format (virtual or in person). District/school funding and reporting requirements will inform data needs.

6. **Integration into school and community**
- Primary Project teams should develop clear plans for implementation, including provisions for in-school and remote service delivery, and communicate these clearly with parents/caregivers/ teachers. Letters, flyers, updates on school websites, Primary Project newsletters, etc., may serve as communication outlets to keep both school staff and parents informed.

In the coming weeks, Children's Institute will provide additional information regarding web-based Primary Project training as well as monthly opportunities for Primary Project teams to connect virtually. We invite you to connect with other schools and Children's Institute through our Facebook page and the Primary Project web page for additional resources and updates.

Please continue to reach out to your program consultant as needed. Your consultants (Lynn, Mary Carol, and Shelley) are available to meet with you virtually to provide support and assistance as your plans are developed. Primary Project has been in existence over 60 years. This year, and the changes that accompany it, simply add to its already rich history!