

EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

TRAILBLAZING TRANSITIONS

SUMMARY REPORT



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Age 13, Flathead Nation

November 5–6, 2025
Fairmont Hot Springs, Montana
Hosted by Zero to Five Montana & Bright
Futures Birth-to-Five





Rocky Boy Circle of Strength

Introduction

Transitions in the early years, such as moving from home to an early education program or from preschool to kindergarten, are pivotal moments in a child's development. These shifts influence a child's sense of security and sense of belonging. For tribal communities, transitions also provide an opportunity to honor cultural identity, intergenerational knowledge, and community strengths.

The *Trailblazing Transitions Summit* brought together eight tribal community teams from across Montana, comprised of elders, educators, parents, and early childhood leaders for two days of connection, cultural grounding, and collaborative planning. Co-hosted by Zero to Five Montana and Bright Futures Birth-to-Five (B5), this first-of-its-kind gathering centered Indigenous knowledge, community wisdom, and demonstrated the power of local, culturally grounded approaches to early childhood transitions.

Through storytelling, crafting, shared meals, dancing, and hands-on activities, each team brought its vision of supporting transitions to life. The summit created a space for honest reflection, relationship-building, learning, and actionable planning rooted in language, culture, and lived experience.

Summit Purpose & Background

The Bright Futures Birth to Five grant has supported a three-year statewide effort focused on strengthening early childhood transitions across Montana. During this time, many partners, communities, and programs have come together to share ideas, align efforts, and lift up what is working for children and families.

Two successful transition summits were held earlier in the grant period, each contributing to the shared foundation and momentum that brought us to this point. For the third and final summit, Zero to Five Montana and the Montana Early Childhood Tribal Coalition were thrilled to partner with Bright Futures Birth to Five to design and facilitate a gathering created specifically *by and for* tribal communities. This summit was intentionally centered on tribal voices, strengths, and community wisdom, offering a dedicated space for reflection, planning, and culturally grounded approaches to early childhood transitions.

Since no convening of this kind had been held before, there were many hours of planning, consultation, and brainstorming. As preparations came to a close it was determined that the *Trailblazing Transitions Summit* would be designed to:

- Create a collaborative environment for tribal community teams
- Elevate Indigenous language, culture, and community wisdom
- Strengthen cross-system partnerships
- Support teams in developing transition action plans
- Build statewide relationships rooted in trust and shared purpose



Fort Peck Tribes Head Start

These objectives built upon long-standing tribal advocacy for more culturally grounded, community-led spaces that strengthen early childhood systems across Montana; spaces where Indigenous experience and expertise guide policies and programs.

The summit included partners like Head Start who share these objectives. Head Start programs emphasize early learning through play, creative expression, and guided activities that include “the cultural and language heritage of each child and family in relevant ways.” Head Start programs engage families as their child’s first and most influential teachers and formally support child and family transitions when the child is ready for the next step, whether that be Head Start, kindergarten, or another early childhood program (Head Start, 2025).

Who Participated

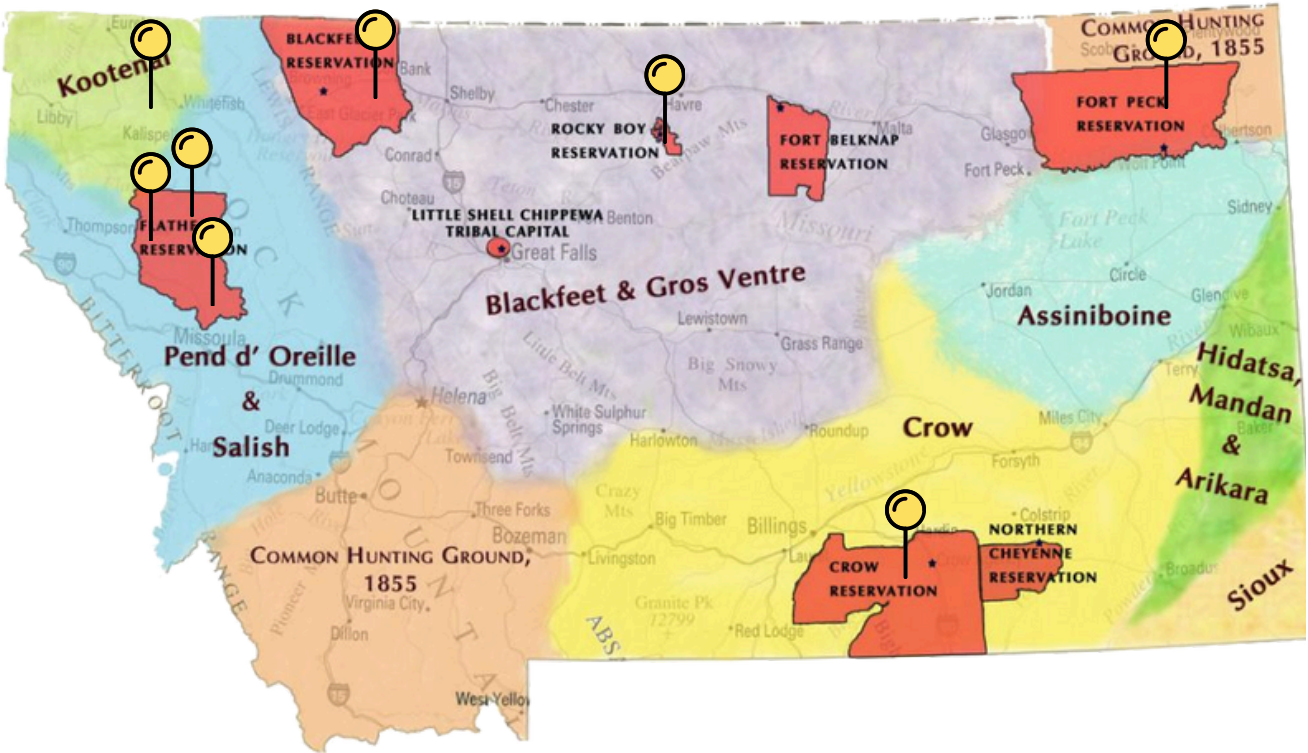
A total of 45 people attended the summit, which included the eight community teams representing tribal communities, early childhood programs, and local partnerships. Each team was unique and included:

- Tribal elders and cultural knowledge keepers
- Early childhood educators and administrators
- Parents and caregivers
- Community advocates

The diversity of voices created a dynamic network of perspectives and expertise that strengthened both local and collective learning and solutions. Along with the community team members, staff from Zero to Five Montana and the Bright Futures B-5 were there to support and facilitate the gathering.



Little Chickadee Learning Lodge-Crow Nation



Community Teams

- Rocky Boy’s Circle of Strength
- Lincoln County Leaders
- Little Chickadee Learning Lodge
- Blackfeet Head Start
- Flathead Early Childhood Collaborative
- Snqweylmistn
- Fort Peck Tribes Head Start Pre-K Program
- CSKT ECS

Summit Agenda Highlights

Over the course of two powerful days, participants engaged in a series of experiences that blended cultural grounding, creativity, reflection, and community storytelling. Each activity was intentionally designed to honor Indigenous knowledge, strengthen relationships, and support teams in bringing their transition visions to life.

Braiding Our Stories – Elder Panel

The summit hosted an elder panel that set the tone for the gathering. Elders shared stories layered with truth, history, humor, and lived experience, reminding us that transitions are not just systems work, but deeply human and cultural journeys. Their teachings grounded the room, offering guidance and encouragement as teams began shaping their action plans.

Lights, Camera, Transition!

This hands-on activity invited teams to step into creativity while mapping the realities of transitions in their communities. Using props, visuals, and storytelling, teams named their successes, challenges, and opportunities. Laughter filled the room as people moved around, designed scenes, and literally “shined a spotlight” on what matters most for their children and families.

Craft Exchange

Participants crafted handmade items to exchange as gifts. This practice reflected reciprocity, generosity, and connection. It served as a reminder that every community brings something unique and beautiful into the shared space, and that gifting strengthens relationships across nations.

Cultural Grounding Practices

Both days incorporated cultural practices that anchored the work in Indigenous teachings, moments of reflection, acknowledgment, and connection. These practices reminded participants that culture is not an “add-on” to transitions, but the center of every successful approach.

Collaborative Dialogues with B5 and Tribal Partners

Teams engaged in meaningful conversations with Bright Futures B–5 and other partners, sharing wisdom, asking questions, and exploring opportunities for statewide collaboration. These dialogues made space for honesty, curiosity, and relationship-building across systems.

Team Action Planning

Teams spent focused time weaving together their strengths, hopes, and priorities into clear, actionable transition goals. These conversations were rich with collaboration and community members building on each other’s ideas, identifying who to bring to the table, and ensuring actions were rooted in culture, relationships, and local knowledge.

Storytelling, Songs, and Dancing

Throughout the summit, spontaneous singing, storytelling, and dancing rose up in the room. These moments grounded participants in identity and community, creating joy, belonging, and shared cultural pride. The energy shifted each morning with our opening song, thanks to Erika Koskela. Spirits lifted, people gathered closer, and the whole space felt unified. Special thank you to Erika for grounding in a good way each day.

A Space of Safety, Joy, and Trust

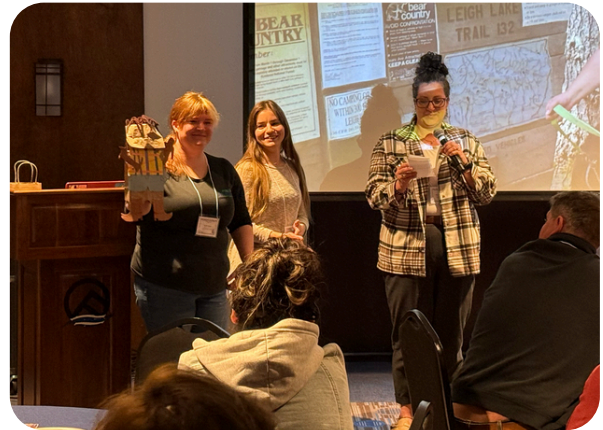
The Trailblazing Transitions Summit was unique, as it was crafted and facilitated by indigenous people from the Montana Early Childhood Tribal Coalition with care and thoughtfulness. Each activity was designed to ensure participants felt seen, welcomed, and supported, letting the deep knowledge and lived experiences of participants be honored. Teams had the space and time to share stories with wisdom, which is common practice in many Native cultures. They envisioned solutions and strengthened relationships across tribal nations by finding common strengths and challenges, and the summit was a place where joy, culture, and collaboration guided the work centered around young children and their families.

Community Teams' Transition Goals

Each team arrived with its own priorities, but all shared a commitment to strengthening transitions for children and families through culture, language, and community connection. During the summit, teams refined their action plan goals as follows:



*Minnetta Armstrong-Blackfeet Early Learning Center
Tom Camel-Flathead Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes*



Lincoln County Leaders

- **Blackfeet Head Start:** Increasing disability awareness and inclusion, ensuring transitions honor each child's abilities, strengths, and cultural identity.
- **Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes Early Childhood Services (CSKT ECS):** Deepening collaboration with the public school system to build culturally grounded transitions.
- **Flathead Early Childhood Collaborative:** Aligning closely with CSKT ECS; by the end of the summit, both teams merged their action plans, demonstrating powerful community partnership.
- **Lincoln County Leaders:** Strengthening and supporting what is already working in their community by building robust support around existing partnerships and practices.
- **Snqweymistn:** Supporting tribal children entering substitute care through the creation of cultural assessments and individual cultural plans during the licensing process.
- **Rocky Boy's Circle of Strength:** Expanding family engagement, introducing culture, honoring community and youth, and weaving Cree language and cultural practices into lessons, routines, celebrations, and community gatherings.
- **Fort Peck Tribes Head Start Pre-K Program:** Strengthening the home-to-school connection to ensure families are informed, welcomed, and supported through transitions.
- **Little Chickadee Learning Lodge:** Building program capacity and identifying resources and support systems to better support whole families, while incorporating more Crow language and culture into daily practices.

Key Themes Across the Summit

Several shared themes emerged during conversations, activities, and action planning:

1. Culture and Language as Foundations

Teams emphasized that strong transitions must honor children’s cultural identities, Indigenous languages, and community teachings.

2. Strengthening Cross-System Partnerships

Whether between Head Start and public schools or between tribal and non-tribal partners, collaboration was seen as essential.

3. Supporting the Whole Family

Family engagement, communication, and community belonging are key to effective transitions.

4. Navigating Systems with Cultural Integrity

Teams expressed the need for processes (especially licensing, IEP transitions, and school readiness) to reflect tribal perspectives and cultural continuity.

5. The Power of Gathering

Meaningful moments arose simply from being together: exchanging stories, songs, crafts, humor, and support across communities.



Flathead Early Childhood Collaborative & CSKT Early Childhood Services

Spotlight: A Moment of Partnership

One of the summit’s most impactful outcomes was the partnership formed between the Flathead Early Childhood Collaborative and CSKT Early Childhood Services. Their decision to merge teams showed the summit’s purpose in real time—collaboration, shared commitment, and community-driven solutions strengthening transitions for tribal children.

What Participants Brought to Life

Across the summit, creativity and community spirit shone through:

- Each day began with a sage smudge
- Beautiful handmade crafts exchanged as gifts
- Singing and dancing that lifted and grounded the room
- Elders sharing teachings and stories
- Teams mapping real challenges and identifying strengths
- Visions and action plans brought to life through collaborative energy

These moments reflected deep commitment to culture, children, and community.



Blackfeet Early Learning Center

Honoring Culture in Convenings

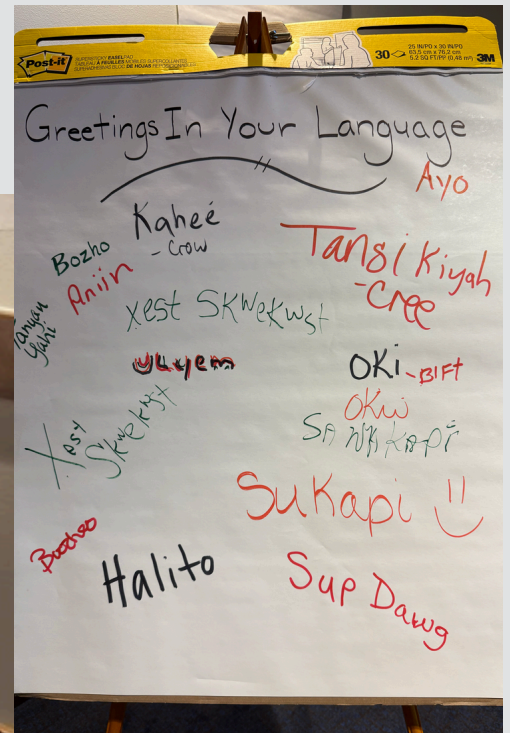
Each morning of the summit opened with a sage smudge that brought everyone together in focus and respect. Erika Koskela (Team Snqweylmistr) lifted the room with her song, offering a beautiful start each day, and we are grateful for the generosity she shared. Together, these moments set the gentle rhythm of the summit. Throughout the summit, participants crafted and exchanged handmade items, showcasing the creativity and care they brought into this space.

The room often shifted from quiet conversation to movement and song. There were shared moments of singing and dancing that lifted everyone's spirits while keeping the group connected to their traditions.

Elders played an essential role. Their stories and teachings offered context, history, and humor, helping everyone see how the work of today is tied to the generations before and after.

Building on that foundation, teams rolled up their sleeves and got practical. Ideas turned into visions, and visions became action plans as people worked together, adding their perspectives piece by piece.

By the end, what stood out wasn't a single moment but the way all of them fit together. The summit showed what can happen when culture is honored intentionally, when children are centered, and when community guides the way forward.



Special helper, Jessica from Ft Peck Head Start

Looking Ahead

The work of strengthening early childhood transitions does not end with the summit—it continues in each community. Over the next few months, teams will carry forward the goals in their Transition Action Plans, guided by their local strengths, relationships, and commitments to children and families.

Zero to Five Montana will continue to walk alongside teams, offering follow-up support whenever needed. A digital, fillable Transition Action Plan PDF has been shared with all teams to help track progress and celebrate milestones.

We encourage teams to stay connected through the Early Childhood Tribal Coalition, where shared learning, cultural wisdom, and collaboration will continue to shape this work statewide.



Erika Koskela- Flathead Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Closing Reflection

The Trailblazing Transitions Summit was more than a gathering; it was a reminder of the strength and brilliance held within our tribal communities. Teams brought their visions to life, created new partnerships, and centered culture as the heart of early childhood transitions. The relationships built will continue to guide and inspire the work ahead, uplifting the next generation with care, belonging, and community.

“Every story shared and every vision lifted at this summit moved us closer to a future where every child feels seen, supported, and welcomed. Thank you for showing what’s possible when we come together with purpose and heart.”

Lead Facilitator, Callie Parr | EC Tribal Coordinator | Zero to Five Montana

Gratitude & Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to:

- All eight community teams for their courage, creativity, and commitment
- Elders, language keepers, and cultural teachers
- The children who brought light into the room each day
- The Bright Futures Birth-to-Five team
- Co-facilitators Shelby Whelan, Callie Parr, and Melanie Sand-Snyder
- Presenters, including IECMH partners
- Fairmont Hot Springs for hosting

The summit was made powerful by the stories, songs, laughter, and vision shared by each participant. As the summit came to a close, it was clear that its strength came from the people who showed up and shared themselves so openly. We offer our sincere thanks to all eight community teams whose courage, ideas, and dedication shaped every conversation and activity.

We also honor the elders, language keepers, and cultural teachers who guided the gathering with knowledge that grounded the work in something deeper than a schedule or agenda. And to the children who joined us, thank you; your presence brought energy, honesty, and a reminder of why this work matters.



Facilitators- Melanie Sands-Snyder, Shelby Whelan, & Callie Parr



*Bright Futures-Kristi Tompers & Kathy Rich
Zero to Five MT-Shelby Whelan & Callie Parr*

Our appreciation extends to the Bright Futures Birth-to-Five team, whose steady vision helped bring this summit to life, and to co-facilitators Callie Parr, Shelby Whelan, and Melanie Sand-Snyder for leading with clarity and care. We also recognize the presenters, including our Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) partners, for offering insight and expertise that enriched the discussions.

Finally, we thank Fairmont Hot Springs for providing a welcoming space for everyone to gather.

What made this summit truly meaningful were the contributions of every participant—the stories told, the songs shared, the laughter that filled the room, and the collective vision that emerged. Each person helped make the experience what it was.



Snqweymistn- Flathead Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

STAY CONNECTED!

Join the Montana Early Childhood Tribal Coalition



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References

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