

POLICY BRIEF

Early Childhood-LINC

a learning and innovation network for communities

ADVANCING EQUITY-DRIVEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

This policy brief explores how early childhood leaders can advance efforts to engage families along a continuum, from first teacher to policy advocate for systems change in early childhood. Building on a new model and toolkit, [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#), this brief recommends actions to program directors, agency directors, funders and policy makers.

Research tells us that family engagement is an essential strategy for children's educational success. Why not expand family engagement beyond the classroom, to empower families to advocate for equitable, family friendly early childhood services to ensure that all children and families have what they need to thrive? In 2016, a group of six early childhood organizations collaborating through the Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP) Early Childhood LINC cohort came together to answer a two-part question:

1. How can early childhood systems and programs increase the participation in and quality of family engagement efforts?
2. How can enhancing parent leadership improve early childhood policies and systems of care?

Over the last year, reports documenting the disproportionate suspensions of African American boys in preschool and evidence of racial bias in the classroom underscored the presence of structural racism in early childhood. Parent leaders and key informants who participated in this project further illuminated the ways in which these issues act as barriers to engaging families as partners, leaders and advocates. Working in partnership with families to change the public policies, institutional practices, cultural representation and other norms that perpetuate racial inequity in early childhood systems, family engagement can be a strategy to work toward reducing the impact of bias and structural racism that impact the outcomes of children.

Through focus groups with parent leaders and in-depth conversations with key informants representing family engagement efforts in the early childhood systems and community based programs, we learned about successful efforts to engage families on a deep level despite institutional barriers.

1. Families develop their leadership, which benefits their children and their communities
2. Programs are more effective in meeting the needs of families in culturally responsive ways
3. Systems are pushed to improve service and remove barriers.

Family engagement can be a strategy to promote racial equity in early childhood.

One of the factors motivating this project is the void of information related to family engagement leading to policy change at a systems level. Building on the extensive tools and resources relating to family engagement in center-based early childhood education programs, we sought to:

- Expand tools for family engagement in early childhood systems and community based early childhood programs
- Redefine family engagement along a continuum to enable program and agency leaders to assess their current efforts and set goals for growth
- Focus on strategies for organizations to develop pathways for families to expand their leadership to improve early childhood policies and systems.

WHAT WE LEARNED

In *Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems*, we defined family engagement not as a single strategy, but rather a continuing stream of engagement with opportunities for advancement of their leadership.

PHASES	Engaging with their children		Shaping programs and services		Influencing policies and systems	
ROLES	Participant	First Teacher	Partner	Volunteer	Policy Advocate	Leader
EXAMPLES OF ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES	Home visiting, parent-child activities, parenting workshops, support groups		Formal and informal volunteer roles, paid or stipended roles to educate and mentor other parents		Decision-making on boards or committees, leading and organizing other parents, providing testimony to government bodies	

Rather than a lock-step progression from one role to another, we learned that pathways to leadership functioned best when they were flexible, allowing families to enter at any point along the continuum and move in and out of intense engagement roles as life circumstances changed.

From the examples shared in *Ripples for Transformation*, we can point to several successful strategies for engaging families along a continuing stream of learning, partnership and leadership opportunities:

- Developing values and principles that support families as assets, partners and decision-makers
- Developing trusting relationships with families and supporting their leadership through multiple levels of training
- Strengthening organizational capacity to support parents in new roles, such as paid, part-time “family partner” positions and parent-led projects
- Sharing power with families, even if their actions challenge “business as usual”
- Increasing your organization’s commitment to equity
- Involving parent leaders as decision-makers on policies and budgets.

However, even at this program level, organizations do not have sufficient capacity to support families, a factor that is hindering progress. Challenges include:

- Lack of training for staff to reflect on and navigate through issues of race, power and privilege in relationship to families
- Staff that does not reflect the diversity of the community they serve
- Not enough time to support parents in their partner roles
- Structural barriers for families to have a pathway to staff positions, such as education requirements for employment
- Inadequate, short-term funding dedicated to family engagement
- Unrealistic outcomes and timeframes
- Difficulty shifting the organization’s mindset from “doing for” and “doing to” families to “doing with” families.

These challenges are further illuminated by examining early childhood systems through a racial equity lens, both to understand recently highlighted evidence of racial bias in early childhood and to understand the role agency and system leaders can play in mitigating and ultimately dismantling these systemic inequities.¹

Given these deeply rooted patterns, we believe that building capacity and best practices in the nascent field of family engagement will require additional support. Policymakers and philanthropists can play a key role by providing resources and flexibility to think more deeply, test new approaches and create a shared learning environment driven by a genuine appreciation for the role families can and should play in shaping the programs and systems in their communities.

¹ Gilliam, W., Maupin, A., Reyes, C., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F., (September 28, 2016). *Do Early Educators’ Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?* (Research Study Brief, Yale University Child Study Center). Retrieved from http://ziglercenter.yale.edu/publications/Preschool%20Implicit%20Bias%20Policy%20Brief_final_9_26_276766_5379.pdf; US Department of Education, Office (June 7, 2016). *2013-14 CRDC Data Highlights: A First Look* (Office of Civil Rights). Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCEMENT

To further advance best practices for family-driven systems change, we recommend the following action steps for three early childhood stakeholder groups:

1. **Program Leaders** (e.g., directors of community based organizations and government-funded programs)
2. **Agency Leaders** (e.g. directors of local, county and state agencies in the early childhood system of care)
3. **Philanthropic and Policy Leaders** (e.g. foundation staff and legislative staff who influence private and public funding for early childhood programs).

ACTION STEPS	EQUITY-DRIVEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE		
	Program Leaders	Agency Leaders	Philanthropic and Policy Leaders
Engaging with their children	Integrate family leadership and advocacy as a core strategy and value.	Create tools to guide organizations in shifting the structures, values and mindsets to facilitate a relationship of partnership and shared power with families.	Structure grantmaking to enable local communities the flexibility to scale up evidence-based family engagement programs.
Shaping Programs and Services	Disaggregate program data by race and ethnicity to gain insight into which groups are being served well and which are not. Engage families in analyzing data and proposing solutions.	Provide ongoing opportunities for professional development around cultural responsiveness and racial equity.	Provide resources to test specific family leadership and organizational readiness strategies over time; allow programs to additional time to build relationships with families and engage in developing the program.
Influencing Policies and Systems	Align organizational policies and practices with principles of racial equity, shared power with families and equitable access to quality programs.	Engage policymakers and early childhood systems leaders in frank dialogue about the need to address the impact of structural racism and implicit bias in early childhood. RESOURCE	Identify and work to eliminate barriers to family leadership and promote equity driven family engagement strategies that lead to systems change. RESOURCE





ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD-LINC AND THE RESEARCH TO ACTION PROJECTS

Early Childhood-LINC (a learning and innovation network for communities) is a network of 10 cities and counties across the U.S. that have come together with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to tackle some of the toughest issues facing young children and their families. EC-LINC communities “put the pieces together” across multiple systems (e.g., health, early care and education, family support and others) to ensure that every child in the community has an equal opportunity to succeed in life, right from the start. Together, they work to accelerate the development and spread of effective, community-

based, integrated early childhood systems.

In 2016, through funding from an anonymous donor, CSSP provided the opportunity for EC-LINC communities to collaboratively develop projects called Research to Action Grants – that is, research projects leading to action that improves results for young children and their families. To spread and accelerate learning beyond the EC-LINC communities, each of the four Research to Action Grants has produced a report to be shared nationally, including this one. More information on the Research to Action Grants can be found [here](#).



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