Equity in Early Childhood Systems

A Community Action Brief

Why does this matter?

The earliest years of children's lives present a tremendous opportunity to set them on a trajectory for lifelong health, well-being, and success. The relationships and environments that children experience in their early years—from nurturing relationships with their caregivers to healthy nutrition and opportunities to play—are critical to supporting their healthy physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development.

Unfortunately, these opportunities are not equally accessible to all young children in our society. Inequitable access to opportunity persists in communities across America, including in the form of uneven investments in public infrastructure, school systems, and family support services. The persistence of racial segregation in America's neighborhoods and discrimination in society has resulted in pervasive disparities in outcomes for infants and toddlers by race, family income, disability/ability level, language spoken at home, and immigration status.

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What can or should communities be doing?

Achieving the outcomes we want for all young children requires an intentional focus on equity. That means understanding the current conditions in your community that contribute to disparities among different populations, and how those conditions affect families. A well-functioning early childhood system allows leaders and stakeholders to look across the programs and services that make up the system to assess and improve how well these are meeting the needs of the community's entire population of young children and their families.

Early childhood system leaders are in a position to influence practice within direct-service programs, including through service delivery policy and practice. They can be a voice for children and families who are most often affected by systemic issues like discrimination and racism. For instance, child care programs can provide classroom teachers with training on social and emotional development and techniques to manage challenging behavior in the classroom to eliminate child care expulsions disproportionately experienced by young boys of color. In an effort to help babies and toddlers who are dual language learners (DLLs) get ready for school,[1] child care and preschool programs can support the home language of young DLLs, alongside their English language development, by addressing the shortage of linguistic diversity in early learning settings—and by implementing an intentional approach to language use in the classroom so that use of languages is carefully planned and executed across classroom activities.
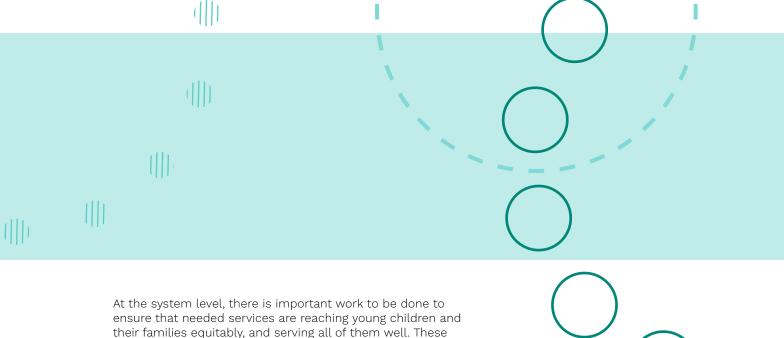
Advancing equity will likely raise some issues that can seem to be outside of the core responsibilities of an early childhood system—for example, addressing homelessness, or equitable access to safe play spaces. Early childhood system leaders can't solve these problems on their own, but they can work in ways that raise the likelihood that elected officials, other community leaders, and members of the community will act on them.

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[1] Dual language learners are defined as "children who have a home language other than English and are learning two or more languages at the same time, or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language." Referenced from U.S. Departments of Education & Health and Human Services (2017). Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs. Retrieved from: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/dll_guidance_document_final.pdf.

At the system level, there is important work to be done to ensure that needed services are reaching young children and their families equitably, and serving all of them well. These activities take place in 10 domains described below.

1 Data
Are your community's data routinely disaggregated by race, ethnicity, neighborhood, and other relevant factors? Is attention paid to gaps and disparities that are revealed in your early childhood data analysis?

2 Policy analysis
Are proposed policy and practice changes analyzed for the differential impact they may have on children and families in specific neighborhoods, racial or ethnic groups, or on families with children with disabilities? Are parents at the discussion table to design solutions that will work for them and their neighbors—or at least to give feedback on proposed changes?

3 Access and quality
Are high-quality services for children and families located equitably throughout the community and/or accessible from all areas within the community? For example, are there neighborhoods with insufficient access to high-quality early care and education? Are there public transportation options or other supports for families that need to travel to access needed services?

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4 Investment

Are system leaders intentional about investing directly in the neighborhoods where children and families have less access to quality services? Are funding processes accessible to smaller, grassroots organizations and those led by people who represent the communities they serve?

5 Professional development

Do organizations and direct service providers within the early childhood system have opportunities for professional development on topics such as implicit bias, cultural humility, and partnering equitably with parents? Do service providers have access to coaching and consultation to help them better serve the children and families in their programs? Are career pathways and professional development opportunities available to help increase the knowledge and diversity of the early childhood workforce?

6 Leadership

Is there racial diversity within the leadership of the early childhood system and its key stakeholders? Is the leadership committed to addressing issues of equity and justice?

7 Partnership

Is the early childhood system connecting and partnering with leaders in other sectors to address drivers of inequity and disparity that are outside of the early childhood system? Is the early childhood system partnering with community organizations focused on equity, inclusion, and justice?

8 Communication

How well does the system communicate the importance of equity, to service providers, decision makers, families, and the community as a whole?

9 Incentives

To what extent does the early childhood system incentivize or promote programs and services to take concrete action in their own programs or neighborhoods?

10 Equity agenda

Has the early childhood system articulated an equity agenda? Have leaders identified specific things the system will focus on to advance equity?

Community Examples:

The Alameda County (California) Department of Education implemented an 18-month "Emerging Leaders Fellowship for Race Equity," supporting early childhood teachers from diverse backgrounds to build their leadership and management skills. The fellowship was developed based on an analysis of the early childhood workforce that found that while classroom teachers reflected the make-up of the community they served, center directors did not. The fellowship was designed to provide leadership coaching to the community in an effort to level the playing field.[2]

In Boston, the DRIVE initiative is working to increase rates of developmental screening for young children to better target their efforts to ensure that children are on-track developmentally prior to school entry. Boston's "peer-to-peer parent screener" model is an innovation designed to reach young children and their parents not using formal child care, by hiring and training parents from a range of cultural and language backgrounds to administer developmental screenings in their neighborhoods and communities and connect families to services when needed.[3]

The state of Illinois passed legislation in 2017 that limits the ability of early care and education centers or preschool programs to expel children from their programs. Driven by data showing extremely high expulsion rates for children of color—and for African-American and Latino boys in particular—advocates successfully lobbied for a change to child care regulations to ensure that teachers and centers were working with parents to address challenging behaviors, rather than expelling children who were deemed to be "disruptive." Early care and education programs receiving funding from the State Board of Education must now take action to prevent expulsion by managing a child's behaviors in the classroom (including accessing early childhood mental health consultation and other supports as needed) and working with the family and the child's primary care provider to address developmental concerns.[4]

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[2] http://www.buildinitiative.org/TheIssues/BUILDingStrongFoundations/tabid/223/PostID/2099/The-Alameda-County-Emerging-Leaders-Fellowship-Building-a-National-Model-for-Racial-Equity-in-Early-Care-and-Education--.aspx
[3] DRIVE Initiative: https://unitedwaymassbay.org/our-impact/supporting-young-children/drive/
[4] http://earlysuccess.org/blog/illinois-prohibits-early-childhood-expulsion-landmark-legislation; http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/100/PDF/100-0105.pdf

Additional Resources

The *Early Learning Community Action Guide* includes concrete examples of action steps communities can take to better support early learning, including a focus on equity.[5]

The *Early Childhood System Performance Assessment Toolkit* includes an assessment for early childhood system leaders to assess how well the early childhood system uses strategies to advance equity in each of ten domains.[6]

The **BUILD Initiative** has a set of issue briefs related to diversity and equity in early childhood systems.[7]

Race for Results: Building a Path to Opportunity for All Children from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.[8]

The Policy Statement on **Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs** helps early childhood programs and states promote the development and learning of young children, birth to age five, who are dual language learners.[9]

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[5] This resource is currently being revised and will be published in the coming months. Please see www.CSSP.org for more information.

[6] This resource is in the process of being created and will be published in the coming months. Please see www.CSSP.org for more information.

[7] http://buildinitiative.org/TheIssues/DiversityEquity.aspx.

[8] https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-2017raceforresults-2017.pdf

[9] https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/dll_guidance_document_final.pdf