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Early Childhood Development and Community Safety: Mobilizing Communities for Action

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A Community of Practice at the Intersection of Early Childhood Development and Community Safety

The Cradle to Community Project, a partnership between Prevention Institute and CSSP with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, engaged representatives from cities and counties in PI's UNITY network and CSSP's EC-LINC network. Over 50 leaders and practitioners from 21 communities came together in March 2016 to create a vision for thriving communities that promote positive development from "cradle to community." At this initial convening, communities discussed opportunities and challenges in realizing that vision, and identified the need for more promising practices and policies at the local level.

The participating communities shared a sense of urgency and excitement for the potential impact of this work. However, they were unsure about where to start. In response, and as an integral part of the Cradle to Community Project, CSSP took the lead in developing an **Action Learning Lab (ALL)** and invited communities from both networks with emerging partnerships, ideas or initiatives that link early childhood and violence prevention to engage with each other in peer learning and action. The purpose of the Action Learning Lab was twofold:

1. Support UNITY and EC-LINC communities to mobilize emerging partnerships and take action with the dual goal of making communities safer and optimizing development for young children; and
2. Create a community of practice to support local work by learning from peer communities, identifying challenges and solutions at the policy, practice and systems levels, and sharing tools and resources.

Action Learning Lab Communities:

- Alameda County, California
- Boston, Massachusetts
- Denver, Colorado
- Flagler and Volusia Counties, Florida
- Kansas City, Missouri
- Kent County, Michigan¹
- Los Angeles County, California
- New Orleans, Louisiana
- Ventura County, California

Each community formed a core team that represented community violence prevention and local early childhood system building efforts, as well as other stakeholders such as parents, public health, law enforcement and municipal government. As part of the Learning Lab, the teams participated in interviews with CSSP and five interactive webinars. Each webinar focused on a specific topic (reflecting areas of joint interest identified in initial interviews), was facilitated by CSSP and PI staff and was structured to provide communities peer to peer coaching as well as introduce them to tools and resources that may be helpful to their exploration and planning. Topics included opportunities for joint action, identifying shared outcomes, using data to make the case, building partnerships and presentations from the communities about their local efforts.

In addition to participation in these cross-community discussions, each team was asked to plan and take action locally in their communities. The Action Learning Lab concluded with a June 2017 convening of participating communities in Oakland, CA. At this closing convening, communities discussed the challenges and successes they experience on the ground, strategies to integrate parent, community and system stakeholders into their efforts and their future work to mobilize and take action to connect early childhood and community violence prevention to jointly promote safe, thriving communities for families and children.

The experiences of the participating communities over the course of the eight months of the Action Learning Lab (October 2016 to June 2017) provided important insights into the initial actions that communities can take as well as many issues and questions to consider. This summary report documents the key themes of the ALL, as well as considerations for future work at this intersection.

Starting Points

During their initial interviews, participating communities identified several potential starting points within their own systems and initiatives where they could begin a dialogue or take early action to promote both community safety and optimal child development, including:

- Local conversations about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), toxic stress and work to address trauma can provide opportunities to discuss how community safety positively impacts child development.
- In their place-based strategies, community safety and trauma are priority issues for parents and partner organizations. In many cases, local community organizers and neighborhood groups are already working to improve their community

¹Kent County, Michigan participated in the June 2017 convening.

conditions. Early childhood advocates can actively engage and support these local leaders and groups by providing access to services and can also expand strategies to focus on civic engagement, capacity building and strengthening social capital as they partner to identify and implement new practice and policy strategies.

- Many communities are currently involved in collective impact strategies where different sectors are coming together to work from cradle to career, providing a space to have meaningful dialogues about the community-level and underlying factors that promote community safety and optimal child development.
- Partnering on two generation strategies can provide an opportunity to use policy levers to improve economic mobility, the health of both parents and children in pediatric practices, food security, and access to healthy, stable housing in communities.
- Within each sector's direct service strategies, there are opportunities to integrate and collaborate. For example, home visiting programs can partner with violence prevention practitioners to outreach and provide support to fathers of young children who may be at risk for violence and violence prevention programs can include younger siblings, parents and extended family.

While communities identified multiple initiatives and activities they could leverage at the local level, they also identified a least two challenges to launching work at the intersection of community safety and child development: first, they had no new funding or staffing for this work so leveraging existing resources was essential; and second, while there were multiple efforts underway on which to build, generally these were not coordinated in a way that would make it easy to collaborate, expand and sustain a broad coalition.

As participants grappled with these challenges, they also prioritized the following questions for further exploration over the course of the Learning Lab:

- What are our shared goals and outcomes (across the violence prevention and early childhood sectors)?
- How do we ensure equity is at the center of strategies to promote the well-being of children and families?
- How do we partner with parents and community residents to understand the issues and implement solutions?
- What data do we need to inform our implementation or to make our case?
- Who are the partners? What is our message? What are specific actions to take?

Findings from the Action Learning Lab

Community violence prevention and early childhood system leaders have many shared and complementary goals.

While each field has its own unique knowledge base, history and stakeholders, ALL participants from both fields were aligned around goals to ensure that all children grow up healthy and ready to learn, families have supportive social connections, jobs and opportunities are available and accessible, and communities are safe and thriving. They recognized that disparities exist for many of these outcomes and that they must aim to not only improve the overall outcome but also reduce the gaps by race and class. It may seem that these fields would work with different populations (young children vs. youth) and employ different strategies. Existing work in the violence prevention or community safety arena has focused primarily on teenagers, older youth and gang reduction efforts while in early childhood systems, much of the local work has focused on children, parents and school readiness. When violence is addressed by the early childhood field, that work has typically focused on intimate partner violence and child maltreatment, though the impact of community violence is recognized as detrimental to positive child development. However, when ALL participants used a population-based, prevention-oriented, life-course approach, it was natural for leaders from both violence prevention and early childhood to draw connections between their goals. For example, increasing kindergarten readiness sets a child on a path to graduation; increasing jobs and opportunities benefits the parents of young children, as well as youth at risk for violence or residents who were formerly incarcerated; and some youth at the core of violence prevention efforts may also be parents of young children.

Equity is a key component of both solutions and strategies for both sectors.

Participants identified that the topics of poverty, power dynamics and institutional racism have to be recognized and addressed in order to make communities safer so that all children have the opportunity to develop optimally. In addition, they noted that strategies to link prevention of community violence and promoting healthy early child development have the potential to address racial and socio-economic inequities for children, families and communities. Communities participating in the lab emphasized the importance of explicitly addressing structural inequities through an inclusive, resident-driven approach, engaging in dialogue about racism and its impact, and using data to understand inequities and ensure accountability. They spoke of the necessity of raising these issues and having conversations within their own organizations, as well as with other organizations and creating trust and transparency in communities for

conversations with residents. As many communities are participating in local collective impact initiatives, the Action Learning Lab explored how those initiatives could advance equity in outcomes for children and families, and also how the collaborative process itself could integrate an equity approach into each part of the model. For example, many participants play the role of a backbone agency and reflected on questions of their own readiness to address equity, the composition of their steering committees, and how decisions are made.²

Moving from shared goals and outcomes to strategies and solutions, the ALL participants found Prevention Institute's *Taking Two Steps to Prevention* tool a helpful framework to identify the root causes and structural factors that influence outcomes for children, families and neighborhoods. By asking communities to consider how the environment shapes behavior and the impact of historical and present day discriminatory policies and practices, early childhood and community safety leaders found more common ground. Shifting from services and individual programs, they identified partnerships, and strategies to impact community and system level practices and policies such as community capacity building through place-based initiatives, addressing family and community food insecurity, and ensuring access to healthy, safe and affordable housing.

Youth and parent participation and leadership are essential elements of joint efforts to improve ECD and community safety.

As early childhood and community safety leaders strive to improve outcomes and address inequities for children, families and neighborhoods, the people most affected - youth and parents - must be involved as key decision makers from the beginning. Meaningfully working with community residents means engaging them as active and equal partners in identifying, adapting, implementing and evaluating alongside other stakeholders from government, health, non-profit and business communities. It often requires a cultural shift for organizations from simply recruiting and engaging residents in program delivery or soliciting their feedback to authentically sharing and building the power of residents, parents and youth as equal partners. This shift not only results in better, more effective strategies; it contributes directly to promoting health and well-being of children, families and neighborhoods through strengthening social cohesion and civic engagement, increasing community capacity and expanding roles for residents as agents of change.

Throughout the ALL process, participants sought to improve their parent and community engagement and partnership approaches by learning from past mistakes and testing new strategies. For example, as communities started to tackle the underlying factors that influence thriving communities, they also engaged in conversations

about systemic racism with youth, parents and partner organizations. Their processes need to include building trust, ensuring skilled facilitation, and being flexible enough to change course. Some of the participating communities described the need to counter- "planning fatigue" among community residents by identifying early opportunities for communities to take action, connecting activities to the larger community-defined vision and diversifying outreach strategies to include new and diverse resident voices.

Joint review and use of data across sectors can deepen understanding of community and systems problems and opportunities.

Community safety and early childhood sectors found that they each use different data for assessing, planning and implementing strategies. Bringing the data from both fields together with the lived experiences of youth and parents creates a deeper understanding of the strengths, challenges, and potential opportunities to take action. For example, using mapping to overlay perceptions of community safety with kindergarten readiness, and parents mapping the assets of their neighborhood, may open a new dialogue about what strategies to use, where to focus them and who to engage.

Communities recognized that youth, parent and resident engagement is essential for identifying, collecting and analyzing data in community assessment processes to ensure that those most affected are involved as decision-makers from the beginning. One caution emphasized by participating communities is that engaging parents and residents in conversations about data and community circumstances needs to be accompanied by subsequent meaningful action to follow. First 5 Alameda County in California is in the early stages of piloting opportunities for parent leadership by engaging parents in "data cafés", based on the Parent Café Model. First 5 Alameda staff explained that they are "rich with data" on early childhood, but that data is not regularly shared with parents as it is with other stakeholders in government, non-profits and education. Through the cafes, parents will work with First 5 Alameda's evaluation team to analyze school-readiness data in a jargon-free and accessible environment, share their findings and identify opportunities for action for both their families and the system.

As new partnerships are created in this work, there may be data that early childhood and community safety practitioners are not yet routinely using, such as from housing, law enforcement, health and economic development. Participants all shared that it is difficult to get timely and useful data at the community level, especially from those data sources that exist in different agency silos. In addition, bringing together data from diverse systems and sectors presents a challenge of abundance: how do we use the data effectively to tell a story? KConnect in

² Adapted from the Interaction Institute for Social Change <http://interactioninstitute.org/seeing-collective-impact-efforts-with-a-racial-justice-lens/>

Kent County Michigan is a collective impact initiative to “ensure all children have a clear path to economic prosperity through family, community and education opportunities.” Building on their experience convening and facilitating diverse stakeholders from education, health, business, and government, KConnect brings the data experts from those sectors into one room in a monthly workgroup meeting. They present data analysis questions that are important to the initiative’s goals and strategies and the group collaboratively thinks through ways to pool their diverse data sets to answer the questions and provide new insights into the problem and possible solutions.

Flagler & Volusia Counties, FL: Healthy Start of Flagler and Volusia counties in Florida enlisted the support of a local graphic designer to provide a visual illustration of the link between early childhood well-being, and the well-being of the community in an image that resonates with community decision-makers, particularly those in the business and municipal sectors. The infographic incorporates data on early learning, foster care placements, poverty and other areas to make a visual case for the upstream benefits of investing in early childhood development. The infographic will be used to “tell the story” about the importance of early childhood to new partners, for example, by illustrating to law enforcement partners how crime intersects with child removals by the child welfare system. Other communities will also be able to use the infographic, by incorporating their own data, and Cradle to Community participants from Flagler and Volusia counties shared the graphic designer’s contact information with other participants. This Cradle to Community infographic is part of what Dixie Morgese, the Executive Director of Healthy Start, described as a revitalization of previous collaborative efforts to connect community conditions and safety with early childhood outcomes by the local Thrive by 5 (tb5) Collaborative. The collaborative has been re-energized by the process of designing and using the infographic and has been able to attract new stakeholders that were previously difficult to engage, including the Chamber of Commerce and Police Department leadership.

Addressing the underlying factors to promote healthy child development and safe, thriving communities entails working collectively and collaboratively with new partners.

The Cradle to Community vision requires that early childhood and violence prevention leaders collaborate with one another and join new partnerships with public health, community and economic development, law enforcement and the business community. Communities found that the Cradle to Community Action Learning Lab provided an opportunity to begin to grow these cross-sector teams locally. Rather than building a new team, some participants identified opportunities to join existing meetings and governance councils that focus on community conditions and bring the voice and perspective

of the early childhood sector to those forums. For example, Volusia County in Florida has 16 municipal governments, a county government, 12 municipal police departments and the countywide Sheriff’s Office, making partnerships and communication very challenging for Volusia County’s *Thrive by 5 (tb5) Collaborative*. Rather than reaching out to individual contacts, they discovered through their planning that there are regular meetings of the Elected Officials Council for municipal and law enforcement leaders and thus began regular dialogues with the entire Council about the intersection of early childhood and community safety strategies.

Participants found that language and vocabulary are important considerations in building partnerships across sectors. A member of a local chamber of commerce and new partner of an early childhood system stated that “early childhood folks speak a distinct language” and a new partner can get lost when that language gets too specific. It was an important statement for all participants to hear and recognize as a potential barrier to forging new partnerships. In all sectors there is jargon and, sometimes, the assumption that everyone understands what is being stated can get in the way of building new connections. Clear messaging or “elevator speeches” need to be crafted to describe the value and contribution of community safety and early childhood as they join new collaborative efforts in their community or invite new partners to their initiatives. These partnerships will be critical in realizing the Cradle to Community goals. Early childhood partners found that they may be limited by their funding sources or legislative mandate and may not be able to directly fund infrastructure, job training, or economic support. However, they could attract other partners to fill those gaps and “link arms with them” to provide community and family strengthening.

Partnerships of Law Enforcement and Early Childhood: There was much discussion about work that early childhood systems have done over time to alert and educate police officers on the importance of attending to the needs of young children and their families when responding to a call for help. Communities discussed actions including creating training videos for officers on how to interact with children, developing policies and protocols for attending to children when arresting parents, mapping the resources of local law enforcement agencies to inform linkages, and educating police chiefs and sheriffs on the consequences of witnessing violence at a young age.

Moving to action and considerations for future work

At the conclusion of the Action Learning Lab, participants identified early actions and plans for the future. Over the course of the ALL, participants grew their cross-sector collaborations. As examples, Boston worked with their Family Engagement Network to strengthen parent voice and with the Public Health Department to explore opportunities to build on their work in trauma informed care. First 5 Ventura County also partnered with their public health department, which has committed the time of an epidemiologist to help explore the community level data available to inform two generation policy initiatives in the county.

Other communities found early success in taking action on new initiatives or identifying existing efforts where they can make an intentional effort to promote community safety and optimal child development. Flagler/Volusia Counties in Florida established a new Family Space in the public health department, allowing for their family support resources to be co-located with a WIC clinic. In addition, they are engaging their Chamber of Commerce to identify new ways to support and expand opportunities for families. New Orleans successfully partnered with the Head Start Initiative to begin serving fathers who are at risk for violence. In their strategic plan, Alameda County First 5 will focus on place based strategies and father engagement and now see community safety as integral to their work going forward.

New Orleans, LA: The City of New Orleans incorporated a focus on supporting fathers in its Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS). GVRS identifies individuals at the highest risk for shooting or shotcalling (i.e. gang- or group-involved), and combines enforcement attention to these groups with connections to primary services like housing, electricity, and clothing assistance, among other supports. GVRS asks new clients whether they have any young children, and through this process, the City found that a lot of clients are young men who want to be good fathers but lack sufficient supports to carry out that goal. As a result, the City began partnering with Healthy Start, a community-based program for families, to offer fatherhood supports to these young men. Fatherhood supports through Healthy Start are now available for GVRS clients, those involved in other violence prevention efforts, and as of 2017, any community members who are interested. As a result of their participation in the Cradle to Community Action Learning Lab, City staff who coordinate these fatherhood supports began using the Parent Café Model to boost participation and retention of fathers. The model allows for structured conversations where fathers can discuss the challenges they are facing and seek support from their peers. The model has proven effective with the City's first cohort of fathers.

The actions and ideas that emerged from the Action Learning Lab demonstrate that there is great potential for transformation at the community level to ensure safe, thriving neighborhoods for young children and their families. However, there is still much work to be done and the challenges of garnering resources, getting buy-in and implementation continue to exist. Going forward, communities stressed the benefit of ongoing opportunities to work together in a community of practice to jointly learn, problem-solve, and share ideas and resources. Participating communities expressed the importance of “having the time and space to not just highlight our programs and successes, but really explore the challenges and difficulties that our communities experience. Hearing others’ struggles and solutions was very powerful.” Through joint learning and action, communities can gain support as they:

- Build their place based and collective impact strategies, ensuring deep, meaningful resident engagement and leadership that spurs policy and practice change in systems and communities.
- Identify and advocate for policy change on issues that support thriving children, families and neighborhoods, especially those that are not traditionally the focus of either early childhood or violence prevention such as community and economic development and family-friendly workforce policies.
- Fully commit to advancing equity throughout their strategies and build their capacities as backbone agencies to integrate equitable approaches into the planning, implementation and evaluation of initiatives.
- Bring new research to their communities to raise awareness and inform policy and practice.
- Expand their cross-sector partnerships and identify concrete funding and resources to devote to coordinating the efforts.
- Ensure that early childhood services are trauma informed and that violence prevention services support clients as parents and attend to the needs of young children.

