

# RIPPLES OF TRANSFORMATION:

## FAMILIES LEADING CHANGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

### A Family Engagement Toolkit for Providers and Program Leaders

Commissioned by First 5 Alameda County with a grant from the Center for the Study of Social Policy  
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- Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN)
- Family Resource Navigators
- Help Me Grow Family Advisory Committee

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- Childrens Services Council of Palm Beach County
- Family Resource Navigators
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- Institute for Community Peace
- Parent Voices Oakland
- ReadBoston

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2016, the U.S. Departments of Education and Human Services declared that “Strong family engagement in early childhood systems and programs is central – not supplemental” to promoting children’s healthy development and preparing them for school.<sup>1</sup> With *Ripples of Transformation*, we applaud this statement and take it one step further: **family engagement in early childhood is a core strategy to advance equity and community empowerment.**

*Ripples of Transformation* is designed to inspire, challenge and support leaders in early childhood – primarily administrators and program staff – to embrace and move toward a vision of families as agents of change in their children’s lives, communities and early childhood systems. Drawing on the experiences shared in parent focus groups and interviews with agency staff, this toolkit takes us on a journey through social services offices, hospitals, community organizations, citywide and countywide collaborative initiatives. It shows us the ways we as program and agency leaders can form powerful partnerships with diverse families.

*Ripples of Transformation* expands the concept and practice of family engagement from a separate strand of programming to an integrated, continuing stream of opportunities for parents to be leaders in their families and communities, as well as in policies and systems. It extends family engagement from the preschool classroom, where most resources have been focused, into early childhood systems of care, including family support, children’s health and mental health. By empowering families to shape systems – as decision-makers, advocates, partners and providers – outcomes improve for both families and systems.

<sup>1</sup>Sourced from [Policy Statement on Family Engagement: From the Early Years to the Early Grades](#)

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

*Ripples of Transformation* is organized around the concept of family engagement as a continuing stream of opportunities for families. Like steps along a journey to leadership, the toolkit is divided into three main sections:

- 1. Engaging with their children:** Families enhance their role as the child’s “first teacher” through learning about their child’s development, building a network and getting support for basic needs and parenting challenges.
- 2. Shaping programs and services:** Families partner with organizations to inform decisions, participate in planning and delivery of services and develop their leadership.
- 3. Influencing policies and systems:** Families use their voices and experiences to advocate for improved, family-centered, equity-driven systems, programs and services.

Each section provides the reader with:



**Examples** of the leadership journey from parents and caregivers



**Strategies** representing innovations and best practices



**Resources** to prepare your program to effectively engage families



**Stories** from families and organizations in diverse communities.

The final sections explore best practices for measuring outcomes and issue a “call to action” for leaders in early childhood.



# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TO LEADERSHIP CONTINUUM

## FROM FIRST TEACHER TO POLICY ADVOCATE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

Rather than a specific destination, family engagement in early childhood programs is a journey. Some families begin and progress through a series of opportunities, gradually becoming leaders and advocates. Others begin their engagement as already experienced leaders. Still others may cycle in and out of opportunities as their life circumstances change. Both families and early childhood systems of care benefit when there is a continuing stream of opportunities for families to engage and take on leadership roles.

“Telling one parent about their civil rights is really like telling 10 or 20. There is a ripple of sharing information.”

Parent Leader, Family Resource Navigators

### ENGAGING WITH THEIR CHILDREN

### SHAPING PROGRAMS & SERVICES

### INFLUENCING POLICIES



Better Systems

Better Programs

Better Opportunities

Better Outcomes

IMPACTS

Special thanks to the families of Family Resource Navigators, Help Me Grow Alameda County, Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network and Alameda County Behavioral Health Services.



# 1. FAMILIES ENGAGING WITH THEIR CHILDREN

"I am the expert on my child!"

## FIRST TEACHER

One of the first roles families play as their children's First Teacher is learning about their needs for optimal health, accessing resources, and advocating for their care. Chanda knew there was something wrong with her daughter, but she couldn't get answers. After doing her own research, she connected with her local child care resource and referral agency where they evaluated her child, offered parenting classes, and helped her connect to the Regional Center, where she was able to receive support for her child's special needs.



"I was getting depressed because I didn't know any other parents who were going through the same issues."

## PARTICIPANT

Workshops and support groups help families build a network. Not only do these networks help families to be more confident, they can also be vital for accessing services from complex, bureaucratic systems. One parent voiced a common sentiment: "Everything I learned, I learned from other parents."<sup>2</sup> Another parent, who immigrated to the U.S., spoke about how learning sparks a desire for personal growth: "The process of seeing and learning the educational system in this country gave me a hunger for learning more."

<sup>2</sup>The quotes illustrating each "ripple" are from family members who participated in focus groups.

<sup>3</sup>The names in these examples have been changed.

# FAMILIES ENGAGING WITH THEIR CHILDREN

## STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

Engaging families in their children's healthy development has received the most focus in the early childhood field. Evidence-based best practices include:

### HOME VISITING PROGRAMS

such as the one portrayed in [this video](#) about the Arkansas Home Visiting Network, support pregnant women and new mothers to develop confidence and meet immediate needs.

### PARENT CAFES

such as the [Love is Not Enough Parent Cafe](#) offered by [Strengthening Families Illinois](#), allow families to have their own conversations about keeping their families strong through the [Protective Factors](#).

### PARENTING CLASSES

enhance parents' knowledge and skills to promote their children's learning and development, while also empowering them to achieve their own educational and professional goals. One example is [AVANCE's Parent-Child Education Program](#), a reknown two-generation program summarized in [this video](#).

### PARENT-CHILD ACTIVITIES

such as library storytime, parent-child aquatic classes offered through parks and recreation departments and community-based play groups like those offered through [Room to Bloom](#) Family Resource Center in Oakland, California, provide a safe place for isolated families to bond, learn and have fun together.

Organizations can use these proven best practices as a launching point for families to enter a continuous stream of opportunities to grow their leadership by:

1. **Developing leadership pathways** that support family engagement and leadership

2. **Building relationships** to consistently support families and staff in new roles

3. **Strengthening organizational capacity**



## COMMUNITY STORY

Men are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system and less likely to get connected to services when they need support. Gary Thompson, a manager at the Alameda County Department of Public Health, wanted to break this cycle. "The role as a father is meaningful beyond the child. It is improving the future," he said. In 2012, Thompson helped launch the [Fatherhood Initiative](#), which provides male-centered services primarily to non-custodial fathers reentering the community from the justice system and in need of support with health, parenting and life skills. Fathers can access a variety of services, including "Daddy Boot Camp" parenting workshops, comprehensive case management, and support to build healthy co-parenting relationships with the child's mother. In 2013, the Fatherhood Initiative partnered with First 5 Alameda County to form [Fathers Corps](#), a nine-month learning community for male service providers working with families. Father Corps is now funded by Alameda County as a part of an ongoing strategy to develop gender-specific services for men.



# FAMILIES ENGAGING WITH THEIR CHILDREN

## DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS



### Strategy

Engaging families with their children is often the first step on a Leadership Pathway.

- A Leadership Pathways is an intentional sequence of opportunities for families to learn, grow, and practice their leadership and advocacy skills.
- Not every family will desire or be able to take every step along the path.
- Some families will come in as leaders. Some will only want to participate in one-to-one interactions or in a few playgroups or workshops.
- Program leaders should create a continuing stream of opportunities for families to develop their leadership, from workshops, parent cafes and formal leadership training to opportunities to co-create and lead programs and advocate before legislative bodies.



### Resources

- **Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors** curriculum, available in both Spanish and English and informed by popular education, promotes school readiness, family well-being, and advocacy. In 10 sessions, it engages families in learning about brain development, key aspects of early childhood development, early literacy, numeracy, bilingualism, health, school attendance, civic engagement, parent leadership, goal setting, and planning for family success.
- **Be Strong Families** offers Parent Cafe trainings to organizations across the country to connect families and reinforce the **Strengthening Families Framework**. Parent Cafes, small group discussions designed to tap into family strengths, are facilitated by trained parent volunteers and can serve as a gateway to family leadership development.
- **A toolkit by the Center for the Study of Social Policy** outlines strategies for programs and parents to grow and sustain family engagement.

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS



### Strategy

- In the focus groups conducted for this toolkit, families most often cited relationships with staff or other parents as the main reason they continued their involvement.
- Make sure to build in time and processes for staff to get to know families and their stories. It's also important for families to bond with each other.
- In workshops and playgroups, allow time and activities for families to develop relationships.
- Make sure to provide interpretation to allow families from all cultures to learn from each other.



### Resources

- **Head Start and Early Head Start** website includes a rich array of resources on family engagement, including detailed rubrics for [developing "relationship-based competencies"](#) for staff and supervisors.
- **Brazelton Touchpoints Center**, which champions proven child development strategies based on families' strengths, offers a comprehensive professional development platform with a [menu of options](#), from participatory, online workshops to individual and community level training. Staff of organizations can also become certified Touchpoints trainers.
- **Parent Cafes**, referenced above, support families to build relationships with each other.

## BUDGETING FOR ENGAGEMENT

Your budget is a direct expression of agency values. In addition to professional development resources, make sure that the budget provides for sufficient staff to facilitate engagement activities and support services -- translation, meals and child care and, if possible, transportation and stipends -- to enable easier family access.

# FAMILIES ENGAGING WITH THEIR CHILDREN

## STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY



### Strategy

Becoming an organization that skillfully engages families in all levels of programing and decision-making takes preparation, resources and a shift in culture. This should not be an overwhelming process, but rather an opportunity for staff to fine tune small but significant actions to connect families to learning, to each other and to services. Strategies include:

- **Assessing** your organization's strengths and weaknesses
- Providing staff with **professional development** opportunities to strengthen cultural and relationship-based competencies.



### Resources

The following resources highlight tools for organizations to assess strengths and challenges and begin to identify opportunities for professional and organizational development.

- The **Nationally Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services** (CLAS) Standards provide a good blueprint for organizations seeking to advance equity, improve quality and help eliminate disparities.
- The Center for The Study of Social Policy (CSSP) developed **self-assessment tools** to help early childhood organizations evaluate how well staff are encouraging and supporting families to build the **protective factors identified in the Strengthening Families approach**. There are separate versions of the tools for center-based early childhood education, family child care, community programs, and home-visiting programs.
- **A report by the National Association for the Education of Young Children** shares how 15 early childhood education programs put six principles of effective family engagement into action. Also available are **tools and resources**, such as an organizational self-assessment tool and a family survey.
- **Fathers Corps**, an initiative in Alameda County, developed **Father Friendly Principles**, which have been adopted by government and community-based agencies to better serve male family members.



## LESSONS FOR AGENCY LEADERS

More than any training or program, relationships motivate families to continue on the leadership journey.



## PARENT STORY

When Lycia's son got in trouble with the justice system, her household expanded dramatically. On top of raising her two eldest children, she began taking care of her son's four children, all under five years old. At her wits end, a friend connected her with BRIDGES, a family support program offered in several neighborhoods in Palm Beach County, FL. Lycia went through Triple P, a series of parenting workshops designed to reduce stress and increase confidence in parenting. "Before, it was, 'Shut up!' 'Go to your room!' 'No!' It was non-stop. It was crazy." Lycia learned from her parenting coach, Nayeli, that to change her grandchildren's behavior she needed to change how she interacted with them. "It's about taking a moment to really turn around, face them and listen to what they are saying," Lycia said. "It works because they know someone cares and there is someone who is going to listen. It makes a world of difference."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Sourced from the Childrens Services Council of Palm Beach County BRIDGES program: [www.cscpbcc.org/lycias-story](http://www.cscpbcc.org/lycias-story)



## 2. FAMILIES SHAPING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

"I first felt like a leader when I started providing support to other families."

### VOLUNTEER



Volunteering allows families to "try on" new responsibilities and begin to see themselves as agents of change. Volunteer roles can be formal, but can also be organic, an extension of a parent's development as a leader. For example, at her children's school, Maricela saw that Spanish-speaking children were being taken out of the classroom when they 'misbehaved.' She organized with other Spanish-speaking parents to provide more support for native Spanish speakers in the classroom. "It could have kept happening if I or another parent was not in the classroom."



### PARTNER

Partnering means doing with families, not doing for them. Aditi, quoted above, experienced that shift in a Project Leadership workshop with [Family Resource Navigators](#), in which families are supported to implement their own ideas for improving their communities. Families can also play a powerful role providing peer education and mentoring as partners in early childhood systems. A Family Partner at Alameda County Behavioral Health Services, LaNiece, supported one parent to start a Parent Cafe at her child's school. "She did it herself -- I'm there to help her take the first steps."

"To be asked, 'What is it you want to do to influence change?' -- that was a big transformation!"

## FAMILIES SHAPING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



### STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

In order for family engagement to be truly transformative, organizations must be ready to work with families as partners to co-create programs and policies. This requires fundamental shifts in attitudes and structures, from the leadership to the front-line staff. These are the key strategies for shaping programs and services with parents:

- Developing values and principles that support family engagement and leadership
- Building capacity to consistently support families and staff in new roles
- Sharing power with families, even if their actions challenge "business as usual"



### LESSONS FOR AGENCY LEADERS

Engaging families IS systems change, shifting how policies are decided and services are delivered.



### PARENT STORY

"I live close to the [hub agency], but I didn't know what was happening there. I only knew that there was a daycare here because I could see all the kids come in and out. They asked me to do some volunteering for the Arabic classes for the kids. Since then I improved a lot. I know a lot of people; I have this network now because of [the agency]. I've been teaching Arabic classes every Friday for 3 years now. My husband and I are doing this as volunteers to teach the kids the culture and religion. The [hub agency] is like my second home...when I come here I feel like I'm coming home. And here, through the events and workshops, we learn a lot about how to help kids. I used to be very shy to face people, and now I can face and talk to them very easily. And I'm helping other families now."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Thrive in 5. 2016. Boston Children Thrive: A Toolkit for Parent Engagement and Leadership Development. Available at [thrivein5boston.org/resources](http://thrivein5boston.org/resources).





# FAMILIES SHAPING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

## DEVELOPING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES



### Strategy

Whether overtly or implicitly, everything an organization does is an expression of its values. Taking the time to involve stakeholders in a process of adopting or strengthening organizational values and principles is a foundation for building a culture of respect, inclusion, and equity. Values and principles should be simple, clear, and powerful statements that everyone in the organization can understand.

#### Sample organizational values and principles for family engagement:

- We believe in engaging families based on their strengths.
- We believe in the primacy of parent, family, and community voice.
- We believe in and foster co-creation and co-ownership of solutions.
- We acknowledge that there are institutional, systemic, and structural barriers that perpetuate inequity.
- We commit to transparency and to sharing accountability for the results we seek.<sup>5</sup>

### Resources



#### Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders

The Annie E. Casey Foundation published this planning and assessment tool in August 2016 to help guide organizations and schools to plan efforts to engage families. The tool includes a self-assessment divided into four “domains.”

1. Building a culture of respect, inclusion and equity.
2. Coaching parents on their competence and confidence.
3. Listening to and collaborating with parents.
4. Partnering with other organizations and communities to serve the whole family.

## BUILDING CAPACITY



### Strategy

**Engaging families takes time, resources and additional skills, including:**

- Staff who are trained to support parents in their new roles; ideally, it is part of one or more staff members’ job description
- Funds to support family engagement activities such as translation, child care, meals, incentives and stipends
- Time and capacity to engage in collaborative learning and decision making with families
- Investment in the practice of continuous reflection and learning from our efforts



### Resources

- [National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement](#)
- This self-assessment tool is based on the Head Start family engagement framework. The tool identifies “Markers of Progress” for implementing family engagement practices that are integrated, systemic and comprehensive.

## WHAT IS CO-CREATION?

To co-create is to involve all stakeholders in creating solutions and priorities for an organization. Co-creation starts with an organization asking stakeholders, “what matters to you?” It is not bringing families in at the end of a process and asking, “what matters to you about our priorities?” In co-creation, everyone has the same information and everyone is trusted and respected for the experience they bring to the process.

<sup>5</sup> *Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders: A Self-assessment and Planning Tool for Nonprofits and Schools* (August 2016), The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

# FAMILIES SHAPING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

## SHARING POWER WITH FAMILIES



### Strategy

What do we mean by power? Unlike authority, which is the ability to wield power based on a position, such as elected office, power is a person’s ability to influence or shape events or decisions, regardless of his or her position in society. Here are some guidelines for truly sharing power with families:

- Provide ongoing support, mentoring, training and hands-on opportunities for families and staff.
- Allow parent leaders the flexibility to develop and implement their own priorities and projects.
- Commit to having difficult conversations about how dynamics of race, power and privilege are expressed within your organization, and how these dynamics might affect outcomes for families.
- Avoid creating “token” leadership positions that isolate and disempower families; for example, instead of adding one family member to your board, recruit a cohort representing a certain percentage of seats.
- Share information, like data, with families. Do not withhold it because it might be “too hard” for families to understand.
- Be open to criticism. Do not shut down families if they are not on board with every decision the agency makes.
- Recognize that processes and decisions may take more time in order to authentically share power with parents.



### Resources

- [Thrive in 5 Boston](#)  
The powerful story of Boston Children Thrive (BCT), an ambitious, citywide parent leadership initiative is captured in a [Toolkit for Parent Engagement and Leadership Development](#), which provides materials, detailed strategies, and lessons learned about Thrive in 5’s parent leadership model.



## COMMUNITY STORY

Thrive in 5, a unique partnership between the city of Boston and United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, launched an ambitious systems change initiative with parent leadership as a core strategy. The initiative, called Boston Children Thrive, worked to strengthen communities’ capacity to support school readiness, build the quality of existing services, and meet community needs through expanded and new programs. Boston Children Thrive created an intentional [parent leadership pathway](#) to ensure that programming was driven by families. Community-based organizations became neighborhood “hubs,” sponsoring family-friendly events and hosting monthly meetings of a School Readiness Roundtable, where families could participate in planning, deciding priorities, and even allocating funds for programming. Families who wished to grow their leadership were hired as Parent Partners, part-time, flexible, stipended positions for outreach, screening, and peer education. Advanced leaders could apply for \$3,000 grants to lead their own family-centered projects. Although Thrive in 5 has formally ended, many agencies are maintaining key components, structures and practices.

## FAMILIES EXPRESS THEIR POWER BY:

- **Advocating**  
“When parent leaders speak out, their voices carry the authority of lived experience. They understand how gaps in social, health, and educational services limit their children’s future in critical ways.”<sup>6</sup>
- **Organizing**  
“[Parent leaders] learn to work with parents across boundaries of education, race, income, language, and culture.”<sup>7</sup>
- **Making Decisions**  
“It isn’t enough to allow parents to be at the table. We brought officials, providers, parent leaders, and others together, where we could talk through the challenges and barriers. With all the stakeholders at the table, we could come to concrete solutions.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Sourced from *Capturing the Ripple Effect Developing a Theory of Change for Evaluating Parent Leadership Initiatives* (2016), The Annenberg Institute.  
<sup>7</sup>Sourced from *Capturing the Ripple Effect Developing a Theory of Change for Evaluating Parent Leadership Initiatives* (2016), The Annenberg Institute.  
<sup>8</sup>Sourced from *Capturing the Ripple Effect Developing a Theory of Change for Evaluating Parent Leadership Initiatives* (2016), The Annenberg Institute.



# 3. FAMILIES INFLUENCING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS

“Being a leader is to have power, to decide...what do I think for my community, not only for my daughter.”

LEADER

Leadership means different things to different people. For some, leadership begins as a result of participating in a program or system: “I started helping other parents and inviting them to become leaders.” “I was asked to join a school committee.” For others, leadership emerges in response to life events: “I stood up to a bully at age five.” “I had to take care of my siblings at age 15, when my parents died.” “I became pregnant...and had responsibility for someone else.”



ADVOCATE

“If you want something in the system, you advocate so the system knows about the need.”

Every parent and caregiver is an advocate for their child. Advocating for systemic change gives policy “issues” a human face and ensures that policies are shaped by families’ experiences and needs. One parent relates: “I am representing others by telling my story on committees.” Another parent points out that to be an advocate is to move from a focus on “my child” to “my community”: “I raise my voice as a parent leader...not only for my daughter, it is for the other students, the other children, and even for the teachers and staff themselves.”



# FAMILIES INFLUENCING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS



## STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

By engaging with families as experts on and partners in their children’s healthy development, systems become more responsive to the needs of families, and families are more likely to get the services and support they need to thrive. To facilitate this level of engagement, organizations must:

- **Increase cultural responsiveness and commitment to equity** so that agency staff and decision-makers better understand, appreciate, and communicate with people whose culture and life experiences differ from their own.
- **Increase families’ voices** in advocacy, decision-making and delivery of services.

“Family engagement isn’t something we do; it’s something we are.”

– Carla Keener,  
First 5 Alameda County



## COMMUNITY STORY

Families in Alameda County were fed up with the Social Services Administration (SSA): the long wait times, glitches, rude staff members and lack of family friendly amenities meant getting services was unpleasant, even traumatic. Families organized by the grassroots group Parent Voices Oakland, supported by three forward-thinking county agencies -- First 5, Early Care and Education and Behavioral Health Care Services -- asked the county SSA director Lori Cox to fund The People’s Task Force. Made up of clients and former clients, the Task Force sought to better understand and improve the experience of families. Over two years, families engaged more than 500 clients through listening sessions, surveys, leadership trainings and planning meetings, presenting their findings quarterly to Cox. Task Force members recommended several changes, including providing on-site child care while families are waiting for appointments and hiring Parent Advocates who could support families to navigate the system. Now called the CalWORKS Parent Advisory Committee, the initiative built the first-ever “feedback loop” between SSA and the families it serves.

<sup>4</sup>Sourced from the Childrens Services Council of Palm Beach County BRIDGES program:  
<http://www.cscpbcc.org/lycias-story>



# FAMILIES INFLUENCING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS

## CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND COMMITMENT TO EQUITY



### Strategy

Honoring the role of families' culture, language, and experience in supporting their children's learning and development is fundamental to build positive relationships with families. Cultural and linguistic responsiveness also requires that staff recognize their own cultures and biases, and work to value people whose cultures differ from their own. A commitment to equity requires an organization to integrate racial equity into the mission, values and goals. Strategies include:

- **Hiring Parents:** Many organizations have created part-time paid positions for family members to expand access for isolated communities. For example: Thrive in 5 hired Parent Screeners representing multiple cultures and languages to conduct the ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire) screening during home visits or in neighborhood-based settings.
- **Sharing Data:** Disaggregating your organization's data by race and ethnicity can identify gaps in service and outcomes between different members of the community. Regularly sharing data with parent leaders can be an opportunity to co-create strategies to address inequities.
- **Committing to Equity:** The Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County is developing a racial equity framework to examine how factors such as structural racism and implicit bias influence policies and practices that shape our early childhood system of care. Some organizations, such as the Center for the Study of Social Policy, adopt a [Racial Equity Agenda](#).



### LESSONS FOR AGENCY LEADERS

Sharing power with families requires organizations to examine issues of race, power and privilege.



### Resources

Conversations about race and equity are complex and difficult. Well-planned, ongoing discussions can transform organizational culture. Managed poorly, they can do more harm than good. Organization leaders should consider getting outside support to prepare for this work.

- **[Racial Equity Institute](#)**  
This network of trainers, organizers and institutional leaders works with organizations to create racially equitable organizations and systems. Clients include school districts, health and human services agencies, law enforcement agencies and community-based organizations.
- **[Building Early Childhood Systems in a Multi-Ethnic Society](#)**  
This brief by the BUILD Initiative defines current gaps that exist in early childhood systems – by income, race/ethnicity, language, and culture – both in child outcomes and opportunities and how systems respond. The brief defines these gaps and offers recommendations for creating equitable systems that serve all children well.

**“Parents — and their particular experiences and realities — should be the guide for any organization looking to improve practices and policies and truly engage with parents as key partners.”<sup>11</sup>**

<sup>11</sup>[Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders: A Self-assessment and Planning Tool for Nonprofits and Schools](#) (August 2016), The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

# FAMILIES INFLUENCING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS

## INCREASING FAMILIES' VOICES



### Strategy

Families are experts on their own experiences. Without regularly listening and responding to families, policies and programs can be ineffective and even alienating to those they aim to help.

Core strategies include.

- **Leadership Training:** According to a recent report from the [Annenberg Institute](#) studying seven parent leadership programs across the country, the three most valuable components of parent leadership training are:
  - » **Coaching and support** from skilled staff, mentors, and other parents in the group.
  - » **Access to public officials** and other decision-makers in their community and state.
  - » **Knowledge of how government works** and how to make it work for their children.
- **Project Leadership:** At [Thrive in 5](#) in Boston and [Family Resource Navigators](#) in Alameda County, families get support to design and implement projects to address issues in their neighborhoods, often focusing on a specific language or cultural groups.
- **Decision-making:** To be meaningfully engaged, families must be at the table for the organization's significant decisions. Families involved in the [Boston Children Thrive](#) initiative attended monthly meetings at their neighborhood hub where they participated in decision-making around how to spend the funding allocated to their hub agencies.
- **Advising Systems:** Perhaps the most enduring example is [Head Start's Policy Council](#), a required program component ensuring that families have a voice in governance and program design. Many agencies serving families with young children have begun to follow suit.



### Resources

Examples of successful strategies can inspire and inform your organization's direction. Some parent leadership organizations offer curriculum and training.

- **[Capturing The Ripple Effect](#)** explores the strategies of seven parent leadership training programs whose participants were able to systemic changes that benefit children in early childhood education programs and lower elementary grades..
- **[COFI - Community Organizing on Family Issues](#)**, a Chicago-based organization featured in the Annenberg Institute's report cited above, has produced a three-part [Training Manual on Family Focused Organizing](#).
- **[Families as Advocates and Leaders](#)**, a resource by the National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, provides a good overview of effective strategies.



### PARENT STORY

When Kendra's oldest child started school and her youngest was in preschool, "I got a survey that I didn't know all the answers to," she recalls. That challenge turned into an opportunity: an organizer from a parent organization, [PLAN](#), invited her to a parent meeting. "I started going to meetings to stay involved and learn. I didn't want other parents to have to learn everything by themselves like I did." Kendra went through every training program that the group offered. "The programs pushed me out of my comfort zone into the forefront where I had to start doing all the talking. My kids love seeing me at the schools and love going to the meetings." Supported by PLAN, she is on a parent-student advisory council for the district and chairs the governance committee at her children's school.



# MEASURING OUTCOMES

While family engagement in early childhood education has been elevated as a priority over the past decade, it is still too often seen as an “add-on” or an underfunded mandate. To move the field of early childhood toward an integrated approach to family engagement, we need to gather data and stories that show the transformative potential of family engagement strategies when they are fully resourced, continually improved, and sustained over several years. Here are some considerations when developing an evaluation of family engagement efforts:

## CO-CREATE WITH FAMILIES

Families can help design and even implement components of an evaluation process, helping to decide the focus of the evaluation, defining or validating questions, administering surveys and other tools, and making meaning from results.

## MEASURE OUTCOMES, NOT ACTIVITIES

Many organizations track families’ participation in activities, such as workshop attendance. Outcomes are the results of those activities: changed awareness, behavior, condition, or status.

## LOOK FOR OUTCOMES ON THREE LEVELS:

- Individual (for example, improved literacy)
- Organizational (for example, increase in staffing)
- Systemic (for example, changed policies or greater investment).<sup>12</sup>

## EVALUATION EFFORTS SHOULD CONSIDER:

- How the organization’s values are reflected in policies, culture, and everyday actions
- How well family leadership trainings promote individual, social, and political empowerment
- What changes were made as a result of input from families?
- How many decision-making meetings were held with a parent leader as a decision-maker?
- Who benefits and who is left out.

“People’s ideas about what outcomes matter in evaluation are part of their worldviews, which are shaped by White privilege and internalized superiority and racism, by training and life experiences, and by the credence they give to different ways of knowing.”<sup>13</sup>

– Sally Leiderman

## REFLECT, REVISE, REPEAT

Rather than a one-time or periodic evaluation, organizations can adopt a process of continuous reflection and improvement. “Reflective Practice” -- a process of continually learning from experience -- builds a culture among organization leaders, staff and participants to think about what’s working, what’s not working and why. How satisfied are families with their experiences in our programs and organization as a whole? What does the data tell us about who succeeds in this community? What changes could increase the impact of our programs? How will we know? Reflective practice can also allow organizations to address larger issues, such as the role of race, power, and privilege in driving organizational outcomes.



## LESSONS FOR AGENCY LEADERS

When choosing outcomes to measure, think about what we are defining as success and who is defining it. Is it what matters to families, or what matters to the organization?

<sup>12</sup>Sourced from <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Stop-Measuring-Activities-and/195903>

<sup>13</sup>Sourced from Harvard Family Research Project Evaluation Exchange

# CALL TO ACTION

As leaders in early childhood programs, we know that family engagement is critical for children’s educational success. Through the examples we lift up in this toolkit, we know that engaging families as partners, leaders and advocates can also improve programs and supports for families with young children and empower parents to take a more active role in communities, institutions and policy making processes.

In order to achieve the full potential of family engagement in early childhood, we must shift in important ways.

We call on:

**Local, state, and federal policymakers** to allocate resources that will enable local communities the flexibility to scale up evidence-based family engagement programs in ways that best meet the needs of families.

**Government agencies and systems** to create innovative ways for families’ voices to be heard and be responsive to families’ feedback, experiences and recommendations to improve systems.

**Philanthropists** to seed innovation and allow flexibility in the timing, outcomes and indicators of funded programs to allow organizations to partner with families to co-create goals and strategies.

**Organizations** to 1) explore the ways that structural racism and implicit bias shape both the impact of family engagement efforts and the outcomes for families and their children, and 2) realign values, practices and resources to promote a culture of equity, transparency and shared leadership with families.

We look forward to continuing to support the early childhood field to engage families as leaders and advocates for systems change.

<sup>14</sup>Gutierrez, Sandra (2013). *Parents as agents of change*. Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter, 5 (3). Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/publications>

“Imagine, for a moment, what our children’s future would be if we had a parent-friendly, strength- and evidence-based, sustainable system of family engagement that helped close the opportunity gap and ensure that all children have what they need to succeed.”

— Sandra Gutierrez,  
*Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors*





## COLLABORATING AGENCIES

### First 5 Alameda County – Lead Agency

First 5 Alameda County is an innovative public agency that helps young children grow up healthy and ready to learn during the most important time in their development. Our vision is that every child in Alameda County will have optimal health, development and wellbeing to reach his or her greatest potential. In partnership with the community, we support a county-wide continuous prevention and early intervention system that promotes optimal health and development, narrows disparities and improves the lives of children 0 to 5 and their families.

## Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County

The Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County is an independent special district established by Palm Beach County voters, who dedicated a source of funding so more children are born healthy, remain free from abuse and neglect, are ready for kindergarten, and have access to quality afterschool and summer programming. The Council's mission is to enhance the lives of children and their families and enable them to attain their full potential by providing a unified context within which children's needs can be identified and resolved by all members of the community. To achieve this, the Council plans, develops, funds, and evaluates programs and promotes public policies which benefit Palm Beach County's children and families.

## Connecticut Children's Medical Center

Connecticut Children's Medical Center is the only academic medical center in Connecticut dedicated exclusively to the care of children. In 2012, Connecticut Children's established the Office for Community Child Health (OCCH) as the coordinating entity for its community child health efforts. The Office oversees 15 community-oriented programs, including the Help Me Grow National Center, Easy Breathing, the Children's Center on Family Violence, and Connecticut Healthy Homes. OCCH aims to increase the capacity of the Medical Center to serve as a critical community resource by developing, supporting, and disseminating innovative and effective community-oriented programs and services that promote children's optimal healthy development.

**Denver Early Childhood Council**

At Denver's Early Childhood Council, we believe all children deserve access to high quality child care and early learning experiences. Every day we work with child care providers, policy makers and other partners to enhance the quality and availability of childcare and early education opportunities for children, because when children and their families – and those who serve them – are supported, our community is strengthened.

## First 5 Ventura County

First 5 Ventura County envisions a future where all Ventura County children thrive in healthy supported environments. Our mission is to promote school readiness through investments in health, early learning and family strengthening, benefiting children from prenatal to 5 years of age. At the heart of First 5 Ventura County are 11 Neighborhoods for Learning (NfLs), a community-based service system for early care and education. This nationally recognized place-based model has provided parents with high quality, locally based resources over the past 15 years. First 5 NfLs help families raise children who are healthy, nurtured, and prepared to meet their full potential.

## Thrive in 5

Launched in 2008 by the City of Boston and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, Thrive in 5 envisioned a city where the future of Boston's children should not depend on their zip code. Thrive in 5 aimed to ensure children from families of all races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, and languages had the opportunities and support they need for success in school and beyond. Thrive in 5, which ended as a formal initiative in 2016, catalyzed a citywide conversation and sparked new thinking about how the City coordinated and deployed resources so all children enter school ready to succeed.

NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.





## 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](#).

