



**EC-LINC**  
An initiative of CSSP



**Parent Leader  
Network**  
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# FROM STORY TO POWER, A GUIDE

LET'S CREATE CHANGE WITH OUR STORIES!



**Center for the  
Study of  
Social Policy**  
Ideas into Action



## STORYTELLING IS FOR **EVERYONE**.

Storytelling is a powerful tool that leaders can use to create change. Because you're both a parent and a leader, you're already a storyteller.

We tell stories every day. Do you explain to your kids why they should finish their breakfast? That's a story. What do you and your child discuss when they draw you a picture? That's a story too. Do you read your child a bedtime story? That's a more obvious story. Do you say to yourself, "I'll try again tomorrow" after a long day? That's your inner voice telling a story. Do you tell a teacher, "No, *this* is who my child is" when you have tough conversations? That's a story you usually tell, but shouldn't have to, when you're challenging structural racism.

We're all storytellers because we have life experiences. While storytelling is for everyone, this specific story guide is for:

- All primary caregivers—including biological parents, adoptive or foster parents, and relatives like aunts, uncles, and grandparents—to help you advocate for your child and for change in early childhood systems.
- Parent allies, or anyone in early childhood systems who wants to support parents as they advocate for change.

### ACTION!

Let's inspire parents, communities, and systems change with powerful storytelling.

# YOU'RE ALREADY STORYTELLERS BECAUSE YOU'RE LEADERS.

Dear parent leaders and allies,

As always, thank you for your dedication, wisdom, and deep commitment to changing early childhood systems—and for making the world more inclusive and just for today's, tomorrow's, and future generations.

You have courageously lived through, navigated, and fought to improve systems—and all the while, you're showing up every day to ensure other parents don't have to endure the same barriers that structural racism insidiously inflicts on parents and children. Your work is transforming systems that prevent parents, especially parents of color, from being leaders in their children's healthy development and early learning.

But you don't need to hear from us why you're leaders. It's time for the world to recognize your POWER too. That's why we're providing this "story guide," which has simple tools that make it easier to share your story and build your capacity as leaders and changemakers.

You're already storytellers *because* you're leaders. Your voices and lived experiences change systems that aren't working for your community—and this guide demonstrates actionable ways you can advance your [Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership](#) with storytelling.

Thank you for continuing to support each other, advocating for parent voices that often get silenced, and stepping into a leadership role. As civil rights icon John Lewis [said](#) before his passing, you're answering the highest calling of your heart each day, and the world is better for it.

Sincerely,



Arthur Argomaniz  
Parent Leader Network (PLN)



Patsy Hampton,  
Early Childhood Learning and Innovation  
Network for Communities (EC-LINC)

# HOW TO CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE WITH STORYTELLING

### Overview—What to Expect

Stories create meaningful change because they instill a shared sense of belonging—especially if they’re emotionally resonant, empathetic, and reflective of our shared humanity. Stories can help us better see ourselves, each other, and the changes that need to happen in systems.

That’s why an effective, transformative way to tell a “changemaking” story is to bridge:

- An Individual Story
- A Community Story
- A Systems Change Story

Harvard lecturer Marshall Ganz called this approach “[The Public Narrative](#)”—but cultures and societies have long used this method. For example, enslaved people in America often used [storytelling](#) to preserve their personal stories that were violently stolen from them. Each story connected to an “us,” or their communities and elders—and the ways of the world.

Their stories resisted oppression by asserting their humanity against society’s dehumanization. A lot of parent leaders’ work aligns with this approach to storytelling, too.

### LEVELS OF STORYTELLING



Storytelling is really important in my work as a parent leader, to inspire other parents in the community . . . we share the challenges they are facing, as well as culture, background, and lived experience.

Stories make that connection clear (and help me help agencies to understand the real life challenges and stresses that parents are facing every day).

**If we stand together, we make multiple stories being told.”**



—Huong Vu  
PLN Parent Leader, Boston, MA





Storytelling has been a great tool for me, and really helps people see the “aha!” moment, the “Why” of what we do.

I’ve learned that storytelling has been a big part of making connections in the community.

Before the PLN, I was at a standstill with education. I did technical school twice, and I was really just trying to figure out how to be a better parent with my employment. I started off with “Daddy and me” fitness. We were doing like yoga, just, you know, stuff around the house. Then we started outreach at a breastfeeding class, like, “Hey, you’re a father, you wanna be involved?”, and next thing you know, I’m in California with all of our dads. We were super excited. There was 10 sites, we hit the ball rolling, and then Covid hit.

Fast forward, I was volunteering as a mentor, and then I became mentor director as well as a case manager with fathers, and storytelling and taking pictures was part of my success. Starting off grassroots, to COFI kind of transcending to my job of learning how to do outreach.

... at the end of the day, we are all investing in our community and just trying to make a change.”



—Brandon Lavin

PLN Parent Leader, Palm Beach County, FL

We invite you on a journey of self-exploration and empowerment—one that you steer. Don’t worry about remembering frameworks or terminology—just show up as you are, and take with you whatever information you find useful. This guide is designed to fit storytelling into your everyday life while strengthening the muscle of the next generation of leaders to continue this important work.

“... We won’t see the results we want unless we continue to build our power as parents.”

—Lisa Melara

PLN Parent Leader, Boston, MA



Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative Parent Leaders at the 2023 PLN Summit in Santa Ana, CA

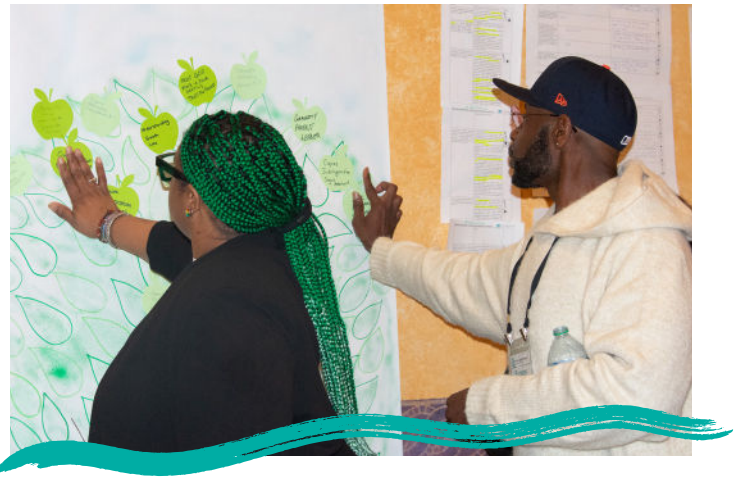
## Start with Your Individual Story.

Creating change with storytelling starts by telling your individual story. Throughout history, systems and institutions have often used storytelling, stereotypes, and harmful caricatures to maintain the status quo. But remember, systems that exclude others were made in the image and stories of the humans who created them. These creators told stories and public narratives that made power appear exclusive. We restore our power (or illuminate power we never lost), by owning and sharing our unique stories that shape who we are—including the triumphs and adversity that define us.

### Here are some questions to help you shape your individual story:

- What stories from your past make up who you are?
- What values and experiences led you to becoming a parent leader?
- What do you care about, and where did you learn to care about it? Did you encounter a system that changed you, or revealed something that wasn't right? Did you use your voice to change it? How did you feel?

Crafting an individual story is especially powerful for parent leaders because parenthood can feel so personal and vulnerable. Sharing our lived experiences helps build trust with other parents and allies in systems change—because others can see themselves in your story. Individual stories speak the language of emotion—the language of the heart. More than teach us how we “should” act, they inspire the courage to act.



*“Hearing families’ stories is so important. It helps me be a better parent, a better advocate and a better person.”*

**—Elizabeth Szczepanek**

PLN Parent Leader, Ventura County, CA

*“No other way to do this work than to personalize it. The manifesto can be personalized to your own story.”*

**—Lynnett Robinson**

Parent Leader, Volusia and Flagler Counties, FL

## YOUR TURN: HERE'S AN ACTIVITY TO HELP YOU CREATE YOUR INDIVIDUAL STORY:

Answer the question, “What was your best (or worst!) day as a parent navigating a system for yourself or your child? What made it the best (or worst!) day?” You can write in a notebook, stick your response to a wall with sticky notes, draw a picture, gather photos, or add notes in your mobile phone on your way to school drop-off (whatever inspires you, or is easiest).

Don't worry about how your response looks. Remember to create a safe space for yourself to explore these questions. Own your story—whatever it looks like.



THE COMMUNITY STORY IS THE  
“CANVAS,” AND YOUR INDIVIDUAL  
STORIES ARE THE PAINT.

### Build a Community Story.

To build your story more, connect your individual story to others in a “community story.” A “community story” is a broader story that highlights the common thread between lived experiences and values within a community. A community can be where you live, work, spend free time, share identity, and more. The Parent Leader Network is a community, for example, of parents working together to change systems at the local, state, and federal levels.

Just as our individual stories connect our past to the futures we’re creating or our dreams—community stories imagine a “community dream,” as renowned poet Langston Hughes said in his poem [“Freedom’s Plow.”](#)

The community story is the “canvas,” and your individual stories are the paint.

#### Here are some questions to help you build a community story:

- What values and experiences do we all share?
- What strengths and resources do we already have as a community?
- How can stories and systems center parent leaders more so that parents can see themselves working in early childhood systems?

Sometimes you tell a “community story,” and other times a community tells this story together. As parent leaders, you may tell a “community story” to speak

*“Para mi ser un líder es alguien que ayuda a personas que ellos no quieren o no pueden hacer aglo, hablar o defender y ayudas a alguien a decíerle o enseñarles el camino a tomar decisiones. **Todos somos lideres y enseñarles a nuestros hijos a ser lideres.***

*For me, being a leader is someone who helps people who do not want or cannot do it, speak or defend and you help someone to tell or teach them the way to make decisions. **We are all leaders and teach our children to be leaders.”***

**—Lorena Rivas Toribio**

PLN Parent Leader, Santa Ana, CA

on behalf of—or with—parents who don’t have the capacity to do so, or who get silenced. Community stories also build momentum so that your message can reach more people. For example, if you tell a story about getting your child into preschool, other parents can likely relate to it. When more parents see themselves in your story, together you advance a purpose that’s larger than yourself (like making early childhood education accessible).





### Create a Systems Change Story.

Now that you have individual and community stories, you can use them to build a systems change story. A systems change story is a story you tell with the goal of creating lasting change. This story outlines the actions people can take now so that systems can live up to shared values. “Systems” include education, maternal health, mental health, food security, social services programs, and more. What change do you want to see in the world? Do you want to eliminate the barriers that parents of color face accessing affordable and quality childcare and preschool? Do you want schools to serve healthier lunches? Are you asking for parks to be safer and greener? Do you want to see more mothers and fathers get support during a mother’s pregnancy?

These kinds of stories often help us understand and reconstruct systems of power, expose what is or is not working, and offer solutions that imagine new possibilities and futures. Good systems change stories are different from technical documents like reports because they encourage empathy, change hearts and minds, resonate for a long time, and motivate action.

#### Here are some questions to help you create a systems change story:

- What action do we hope others take now that aligns with our shared community values?
- For example, if you could ask a family-serving agency or system in your community to make a change, what would it be?

Based on your individual and community experiences, how would you like systems to value and include parents in decision-making? How can systems make it easier for parents, who often don’t have a lot of time in their day, to support their children? (i.e., a new cultural norm)

### EXAMPLE OF HOW INDIVIDUAL, COMMUNITY, AND SYSTEMS CHANGE STORIES COME TOGETHER TO FORM ONE CORE STORY:

“Children are my world.” That’s what Lydia, a parent leader from Multnomah County in Oregon, said when she decided to become a voice for children in her community. Lydia has courageously stepped into rooms to say, “I’m here, and I’m going to be heard” — because no one had advocated for her growing up.

Lydia’s not alone. She discovered that in urban, rural, and suburban communities throughout Boston neighborhoods, the South, Midwestern counties, and across the vast West Coast—parents also wanted their children to have an unwavering voice that says, “I believe in you.” So in 2019, parents across the country came together to plan how parents—especially parents of color, who navigate inequitable systems that often silence them—could have an empowered “seat at the table” to decide their children’s futures.

A voice became a [Manifesto for Race Equity and Parent Leadership](#) that then became a movement. Across the country, parents and other caregivers came together to create the Parent Leader Network and have been changing early childhood systems in local communities, states, and on national levels to end systemic inequities. Now, “My voice matters” isn’t a slogan or meme you passively read—it’s a change agent that prevents systems from silencing parent voices.

Parent leaders fight so that their children can look out onto the world and see nothing but possibilities reflected back—a world in which their parents will always be in their corner advocating for them, no matter what.



# HOW TO MAKE THE STORYTELLING PROCESS EQUITABLE AND ETHICAL



### What is inequity?

Inequity is when not everyone has what they need to be successful. An “inequitable system” means a system isn’t acknowledging or addressing the fact that not everyone starts at the same place, faces the same challenges, or has the same needs. People often describe an inequitable system as unfair or unjust.

“My community wrote a letter to the mayor of Boston to address concerns of inequity about how many documents from schools and programs for our children are not translated into a language they understand.”

—Huong Vu

PLN Parent Leader, Boston, MA

“I see myself as time goes on being a strong advocate, pushing for change more. At the end of the day, where I’m from, we see people pushing for change, but **you don’t see a lot of our faces in the community.**”

—Shanequa Mosley

PLN Parent Leader, Kent County, MI

### Make storytelling equitable and ethical.

Equity in storytelling starts with ensuring everyone has power and agency over how they want to tell their own story. For example, if you’re telling a story about poverty in a specific neighborhood and its impact on childbirth and nutrition, ensure people from that neighborhood are telling their own stories (such as [this example](#) of “rattling the windows” testimony from activist Amy Hutchison). Prioritizing equity in how you tell stories makes storytelling more impactful, just, and authentic.

“... challenging racism is part of people’s everyday lives. And it affects more than just people of color -- there are systems rooted in racism that affect all of us. It’s important for us to understand the layers and foundations of our systems, if we are seeking to make change.”

—Sanaa Sharrieff

PLN Parent Leader, Guilford County, NC

### ETHICAL STORYTELLING CENTERS THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

- **Trust**—Cultivate trust by investing in relationships.
- **Respect**—Ensure that those with lived experience in the issue that they’re addressing have storytelling and decision-making power.
- **Dignity**—Honor people’s experiences. Ensure they’re heard and valued for both their experiences and expertise.
- **Healing-centered**—Create safe, supportive, judgment-free, and confidential spaces.
- **Equity**—Acknowledge your own position, power, and relative privilege—and seek to reduce power dynamics when sharing stories.
- **Active, courageous listening**—Give your full attention, and be open to understanding different perspectives and experiences.

"I know that our voice counts and we are here to support each other."

—**Lorena Rivas Toribio**

PLN Parent Leader, Santa Ana, CA

**Equitable and ethical storytelling makes a difference. Here are examples:**

Telling a "community story" that focuses on communities' and families' strengths (their powerful individual stories, community staples, resources, etc)—using ethical storytelling—increases participation. This approach is sometimes called "asset-based" framing.

"Sometimes, **agencies will jump directly to the negatives** of the work, which prevents parents from **feeling valued** in the work. This is about **feeling respected and listened to**, by peers and staff. Welcoming all opinions helps encourage dialogue/brainstorming from other parents—and helps parents feel up to stepping in as leadership into the group."

—**Rocio Guzman Paredes**

PLN Parent Leader, Santa Ana, CA

### "Windows and Mirrors"

Some people use the term "windows and mirrors" when referring to equitable storytelling. "Windows" are stories (individual, community, or systems change stories) that show you the lived experiences and perspectives of others without judgment. "Mirrors" are stories that show ourselves and our communities authentically. It's important for everyone to immerse themselves in both "windows" and "mirrors" to better understand each other and to make storytelling more inclusive against harmful, untrue stories. Your mirror matters—and it provides a window for someone else.

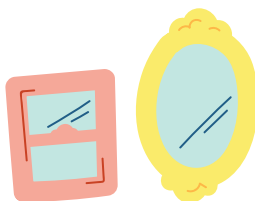
Even if you don't remember this term (unless the visual of windows and mirrors helps you), the meaning behind it should live on. Let's all create more spaces where you can learn about someone's authentic lived experience, while also sharing your own. Through authentic storytelling about ourselves and each other, we better understand our shared humanity, which creates healing, unity, and the momentum to create change as a result.



"My son had developmental problems when he was starting school, and still couldn't talk. When it came to advocating in school and medical settings, I had to push in order to be listened to. **It's so important to speak up for what you need. It helps other parents realize they can do the same.**"

—**Rocio Guzman Paredes**

PLN Parent Leader, Santa Ana, CA



### YOUR TURN.

- How can you bring principles of Ethical Storytelling into your work as a parent-leader?
- What are some stories you would like to see more of, as part of the community or systems level story for systems change? Maybe these are "windows" that will help policymakers better understand the challenges parents are facing in your community, or "mirrors" that can encourage other parents to share their experiences by showing them that they are not alone.
- Asset-based framing questions to reflect on:
  - What are your strengths?
  - Describe a time when an agency, system, or person made you feel valued and respected.

# WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR STORY



## What to do with your story

You have connected your individual story to a community and a systems change story to form one core, powerful story—maybe it’s a short story that’s only a couple minutes long, or maybe it’s a paragraph or a longer reflection. Now it’s time to share your story.

People share stories at the dinner table, in a parent-teacher meeting, on a call with organizational partners, during a conference speech, throughout a campaign, and more. You decide where and how to share your story, depending on your goals.

Below are some important parts of a strategy to share your story (often called a “communications strategy” or plan). Advocacy campaigns, for example, combine all of these parts into a “roadmap,” a plan that maps out how these parts get implemented over a set period of time (weeks, months, years).

### KEY MESSAGES

If your goal is to create systems change, one way to start is by turning your story into key messages—ideally three to five points. Key messages are a brief, concise summary of the most important information you want people to understand—and they convey why people should remember this information. “People” can mean any “audience” you want to reach.

“Look for the people and organizations who welcome you, who value your story, and partner with them on your work. In my community in Boston, many organizations are starting to practice family engagement by adopting the parent leadership model and forming parent advisory groups so that parent voices are included in any decisions they make.”

—Huong Vu

PLN Parent Leader, Boston, MA

## CONSIDERATIONS THAT STRENGTHEN YOUR KEY MESSAGES:

- Do your key messages offer a surprising fact or dispel a common myth?
- Do your key messages have local appeal that makes the topic feel “close to home”—but are relatable enough to resonate with people everywhere?
- Are your key messages timely (meet current needs or on people’s minds)?
- Is the language that you’re using simple and free of jargon?
- Is there a place or situation where people will be more receptive to your message? (e.g., at a community event, preparing for the start of school, etc)

### AUDIENCE

To find your audience, remember your “community” and “systems change” stories. What other communities share your values? Who in the systems that you’re changing should hear your story? (e.g., A director at a nonprofit, government agency staff member, teacher, policymaker, funder, or other decision-maker) Your key messages should consider your audience’s needs, values, motivations, daily lives—and how change will affect them. How do you want this audience to feel after hearing your story? What message will motivate this audience to act, while honoring your story?

Honoring your story is important—because systems often try to write your story. For example, as the [Child Care Law Center points out](#), policymakers



often tell stories about how equitable education is an “investment” that pays off later—implying that the benefits aren’t about your children or their current well-being. Instead, reframe the story around the values of our shared humanity: Children have the right to quality, affordable education.

## KEY MESSENGERS

Are there key “messengers,” or peers and professionals (whom audiences trust) from within the community, who could help you reach more people with your message? Bring them into your storytelling journey.

## Where to Share Your Story

After you craft key messages, decide how they come to life—and where to share them. The “where” you share a story is often called a “channel.” Examples of channels include social media and other online platforms, in-person or virtual events, media stories, and more.

Choose a channel that your specific audience uses or trusts most. Consider adapting the key messages to different audiences and channels (e.g., key messages for funders, key messages for community partners, key messages for families—same messages at their core, but with added nuance for each audience’s needs). A social media post is shorter, direct, and shareable (e.g., with compelling images). Speeches or op-eds for media publications are a bit longer and will lean more into the “heart” of your core story.

## How to Sustain Your Story

Here are ways to keep stories alive across time and generations:

- Create a method for collecting stories in your community consistently, like a “story library” of interviews, videos, surveys, and more over time to see how your stories evolve. Continue hosting shared spaces.
- Similar to the “Create Career Pathways” commitment of the parent [Manifesto](#), help parents build their capacity for storytelling. (e.g., a leadership program that gives parents space to craft their story and accommodates their busy



## SELF-CARE SPOTLIGHT

In order to sustain your storytelling efforts as a parent leader, it’s also important to sustain your own personal capacity and wellbeing. As parent leader Brandon shares, it’s crucial to pace yourself in order to avoid burnout: *“Definitely take your time. I heard someone say once, you could cook a hamburger in the microwave, but that’s not gonna taste good! A lot of times you may feel like ‘I want to help change my community, I want to get this done . . . why is this taking so long, why am I in this meeting? What is going on?’ Just remember that this work is more of a marathon . . . continuing to show up is half the battle.”*

This can also look like taking breaks to check in with yourself, as you balance wearing many different hats (as a parent, and as a leader) – *“learning that like, okay, being on four meetings for the day and then trying to talk to my wife and kids, I need to go outside for a few moments and then come back in. Having a better understanding of myself, it helps.”*



schedules—and/or career opportunities that include professional development stipends for parent storytellers)

- Turn to your community network, like the “Prioritize Resources” Manifesto commitment but for storytelling (e.g., partnerships—who can you partner with to help create and share stories, or teach storytelling?)

## Reflection

After you share your story, pause and reflect on the outcome of your journey, campaign, or actions so far to help you continue building on them.

## YOUR TURN.

- Story Sharing: Take some time to reflect on a story you heard . . .
  - What impact did it have on you (and what channel was it on?)
  - Why do you think it had this impact?
- Reflection: In addition to the experiences and unique story that you are bringing to the table in your systems change work, you have the many strengths and stories of your community around you, too. Take some time to reflect on ways your community can help support and sustain your storytelling work.
  - “What do I need to create change?”
  - “Who can help me?”



## LOOKING AHEAD

# THE CONCLUSION IS . . . THERE IS NO CONCLUSION.

Good stories often have a conclusion that's open-ended with an immediate, or ongoing, call to action. How do you feel about your core story? What will you do next to create change? If you don't have the capacity to create change right now, what will make you feel more supported—or will simply encourage you to rest and/or create small changes in your life? Take a moment to reflect. Reflection doesn't have to include writing in a notebook. You can also just pause. Pauses and silences are often illuminating.



*In my journey as a parent leader and storyteller, I have learned to give myself more grace. Thinking that, oh, I should've done this or I should do this. But then thinking, I'm only working with the tools I have in my toolbox. That's why I try to get as much information and as much training that I can to go in my toolbox to help others to see it too. We only can work with what we know . . .*

*. . . and I want parents to know that storytelling is for everyone. It helps you connect with the audience when you are your authentic self. When you are telling your story and resonating with the crowd, it brings more of an embrace. They let you know you're human too."*



**—Shanequa Mosley**  
PLN Parent Leader, Kent County, MI





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## About the Parent Leader Network

The Parent Leader Network (PLN) provides a space for parents across EC-LINC communities to collaborate with and support each other, represent the parent perspective, and advocate for parent voice and leadership in early childhood systems. Harnessing the power of parents and giving them the space and support to share their expertise, wisdom, and knowledge ensures that we keep children, youth, and families at the center of our work.

## About EC-LINC

The Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities (EC-LINC) is developed by and for communities and convened by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. EC-LINC's mission is to support families and improve results for young children in communities across the country, with a focus on accelerating the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems. EC-LINC and the PLN are sister networks, each with their own guiding visions who collaborate to ensure all children and their families thrive.

## About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices. CSSP has proudly served as the backbone support to the PLN and EC-LINC from their establishment.

## Additional Acknowledgements

This storytelling toolkit is a joint collaboration between the PLN, EC-LINC, CSSP, and Health+ Studio. We are particularly grateful to the following parent leaders who have shared their leadership stories with us, including [Huong Vu](#), [Brandon Lavin](#), [Shanequa Mosely](#), and the many parent leaders who contributed to reimagining the Manifesto and who continue to drive early childhood systems change through storytelling.

## Additional Resources

- [Health+ Toolkit Library resources link](#)
- How to Communicate Effectively About Early Relational Health: What It Is and Why It Matters - [messaging guide](#)
- [Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership](#)



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