



JUNE 2025

Partners For Change

*A Guide for Organizations
on Engaging Family and Parent
Leaders in Early Childhood Systems*

About this Guide

Purpose

This Guide provides ideas, strategies, and approaches to inspire and challenge early childhood organizations, nonprofits, and community groups to promote parent and family leadership within early childhood systems. Throughout this guide, we use the word **“parent”** or the phrase **“parents and caregivers”** to include any adult in a primary caregiving role for a child, including birth and adoptive parents, grandparents and other kin raising children, stepparents, foster and resource parents, chosen family, and others who play that critical role for children.

Audience

This Guide is written for the variety of organizations that make up the **“early childhood system.”** We use the term early childhood system to refer to the network of services and organizations that reach children from prenatal development through age 8 and their families. The early childhood system includes policies, programs, services, and infrastructure. It includes all child and family-serving systems—such as early learning, health, housing, economic development, and transportation. In some communities, the early childhood system is very connected and organized, while in other communities it is less organized and may be experienced more like independent programs and services.

This Guide is for anyone who recognizes the critical importance of early childhood development and wants to engage families and support parent leadership to improve the well-being of children.

Background

This Guide was created by the [Center for the Study of Social Policy \(CSSP\)](#), a national, nonprofit organization that works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children, youth and families thrive. CSSP collaborates with leaders, communities, and public systems to conduct research, develop public policy ideas, and put those ideas into action.

This Guide was developed for the [Early Learning Nation Collective \(ELN\)](#), a collaborative of seven national organizations, including CSSP, working with over 500 local leaders in 50 communities. The ELN Collective fosters and supports local decision-making to improve the health, school readiness, and well-being of children, prenatal through age 8. The ELN Collective is supported by the [Bezos Family Foundation](#).

This Guide references and builds on prior CSSP initiatives to improve early childhood systems and advance equity. It was informed by the [EC-LINC \(Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities\) Community of Practice](#) for family engagement staff. These staff represent a variety of early childhood systems building and family-serving organizations dedicated to improving their approach to partnering and collaborating with parents and families. The Guide also benefits from the expertise of parent leaders across several initiatives including the [Early Learning Nation Collective](#) and the [Parent Leader Network](#).

Please see the Resource List at the end of this Guide for additional relevant materials.



Why Family Engagement and Parent Leadership Matter

Engaging parents is essential for creating systems that are responsive to families, children, and communities. Organizations that embrace family engagement and prioritize parent leadership lay the groundwork for equity, inclusivity, and community-driven solutions in early childhood systems. Parent leaders contribute invaluable lived experiences and perspectives that shed light on often overlooked factors that impact child and family well-being. Their insights enrich organizational decision-making and help ensure that programs and services genuinely reflect the needs and aspirations of the families they serve.

Family engagement and parent leadership exist along a continuum—beginning with parents as their own children’s first teachers. Engagement can develop into active participation and volunteering in early childhood programs. The next stage for many parents is to go beyond engagement in one specific program or activity to wider advocacy and leadership roles that promote broader systems change. By investing in parent leadership, organizations can improve their own programs and also create pathways for workforce development and civic engagement. Parents who take on leadership roles develop skills, confidence, and opportunities to become advocates and change agents, advancing both organizational missions and the well-being of their communities.

Parent leaders are connectors, fostering trust and mutual understanding between families and professionals. This bridge-building strengthens collaboration, enhances the relevance of initiatives, and deepens the impact of early childhood systems. Engaged parents often extend their influence beyond early childhood spaces, driving broader community initiatives and contributing to policy reforms that benefit all children and families.

Recognizing parents’ lived experiences as essential to decision-making creates opportunities for creating solutions together. Family engagement practices should promote:

- Mutual respect and inclusivity
- Clear communication and opportunities for feedback
- Collaboration and power-sharing

When developing engagement strategies, organizations should actively reduce or eliminate barriers and increase accessibility. This includes language, digital, and disability access, as well as attention to historic exclusion and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and other identities. Organizations should also provide multiple avenues for communication, ensuring that parents can engage in ways that suit their preferences and comfort levels.

“Shared power means moving beyond tokenism and creating real space at the table—where family voices not only inform decisions but shape them. Partnership is about trust, mutual respect, and recognizing that community expertise is essential to systems change.”

AMANDA QUIROZ-GUAJARDO
LOCAL LEADER ON THE ELN COLLECTIVE
STEERING COMMITTEE



Roles and Opportunities for Organizations

Organizations play a critical role in ensuring parent and caregiver voices and perspectives are embedded in their operations, policies, and culture. To establish a strong foundation for equitable family engagement, organizations can:

Get buy-in and support from organization leadership and throughout the organization. Executive commitment, as well as staff and financial support, are essential to take intentional steps needed to move beyond traditional models of family engagement toward deeper, sustainable partnerships. Recognize and promote parents as leaders in creating equitable and community-driven solutions.

Make a critical assessment of current practices. Look at current strategies to engage families and assess what's working and what isn't. Identify systemic barriers and actively work to remove obstacles that prevent meaningful family involvement. Talk with parents directly about their experience and start the process of trust-building and transparency. Families are more likely to engage when they see that their voices are valued and impact decision-making.

Develop clear and accessible communication channels that foster open dialogue. Ensure that engagement opportunities are culturally and linguistically inclusive, as well as adaptable to different family needs. Prioritize authentic relationship-building by creating spaces where families feel heard and respected. Provide multiple opportunities for feedback and demonstrate a genuine commitment to continuous improvement based on family input.

Offer options. Think about a variety of ways that parent leaders can contribute to and benefit from organizational activities. Committee participation, presentations, events, behind-the-scenes logistics, recruitment, policy development, advocacy, fundraising—are just some of the ways parents can get involved. Recruit and develop relationships with a group of parents with different interests and skills, so as to not rely on just one or two parents to do it all.

Create leadership pathways. Create leadership opportunities for parents to actively participate in shaping policies and programs. Invest in leadership training and capacity-building efforts that empower parent leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to engage at all levels—from local program development to broader systemic advocacy. Establishing decision-making structures that include parent voices is vital to achieving meaningful collaboration. For example, this could be setting up parent advisory councils, co-designing initiatives, or integrating parents into governance and hiring processes.

By embedding family leadership into organizational structures, agencies can create a culture where families are recognized as experts and co-creators of early childhood systems.



Strategies and Steps

Implementing meaningful family engagement and parent leadership requires a structured and intentional approach. The following strategies provide a foundation for organizations to use in building authentic partnerships with families, ensuring that their voices are valued, and strengthening early childhood systems through shared leadership.

Strategies	Steps
Review Mission, Values, and History	Align organizational mission and values with the goals of families and communities. Ensure family engagement is intentional, authentic, and rooted in community needs.
Set Clear, Measurable Goals	Establish engagement goals that align with organizational priorities and community needs. Use these goals to ensure accountability and meaningful outcomes.
Allocate Resources	Ensure that there are sufficient funds available to cover stipends, childcare, transportation, translation, meals, accessibility accommodations, and other needed supports for parent participation.
Support Family Involvement	Partner with families to support their children's learning and development. Acknowledge families as their children's first teacher and engage them in educational, recreational, social, and community building activities.
Shape Programs and Services	Center family perspectives in shaping engagement practices. Work with families as active partners to co-design programs and influence operations. Develop organizational capacity to support family engagement and leadership.
Change Policies and Systems	Strategize to promote family leadership and engage families as experts and partners in early childhood systems change. Support families as leaders and advocates in shaping policies and improving systems to reflect community needs.

Strategies	Steps
Challenge Racism and Discrimination	Commit to confronting all forms of racism and systemic barriers that impact parent leadership. Look at the composition of your board and staff and determine if they reflect families served. Identify ways your programming can be responsive to participants' culture and to parent leadership. Provide training for staff on understanding bias and racism, affirming lived experiences and different identities (including gender identity and sexual orientation), and promoting inclusion and belonging.
Recognize Parent Leadership	Recognize that all parents can be authentic leaders and partners in improving early childhood systems in a variety of ways. Value and include parents in leadership roles from the beginning.
Create Career Pathways	Provide opportunities for parents to develop marketable skills and transition into staff, professional, and leadership roles within your organization and for other career paths.
Facilitate Internal Reflection	Create opportunities for staff to share experiences and insights from engaging with families. Use these discussions to identify strengths, challenges, and areas for growth. Reflect on past engagement efforts to refine strategies.
Communicate Alignment and Build Trust	Be transparent in sharing how family engagement strategies align with mission and values. Reinforce commitment to collaboration through ongoing dialogue with families and stakeholders.
Empower Parent Leaders	Recognize parent leaders as valuable contributors to program development and policy change. Leverage their lived experiences to strengthen organizational impact and advocate for better services and resources for young children.

Call to Action

This Guide challenges organizations to embrace families as partners in leadership and change. True equity in early childhood systems requires more than just inviting families to participate—it demands a commitment to embedding their voices at every level of decision-making. By adopting these strategies and values, organizations can co-create inclusive systems that amplify family leadership, drive systemic reforms, and build thriving communities.

The approaches outlined here are not one-size-fits-all; they offer a starting point for organizations at various stages of their family engagement journey. Whether an organization is just beginning to integrate parent leadership or is refining long-standing engagement efforts, these strategies provide a foundation for deeper collaboration. Building equitable family engagement is an ongoing process—one that requires intentionality, reflection, and continuous partnership with families.

To take action, organizations must move beyond viewing family engagement as a programmatic effort and instead embed it as a core value within their culture and systems by:

- **Creating sustained leadership opportunities** for parents through advisory roles, mentorship programs, and paid leadership positions.
- **Investing in training and capacity-building** so that families have the tools and support needed to lead effectively.
- **Building accountability measures** that ensure family engagement is not a checkbox activity but a meaningful, ongoing partnership.
- **Strengthening cross-sector collaboration** to connect family leadership with broader systems-change efforts in early childhood policy and practice.

Now is the time to commit to transforming early childhood systems through authentic, equitable family engagement. Families are experts, leaders, and essential partners in creating a more just and effective early childhood landscape. By taking bold steps toward shared leadership, organizations can shape policies and practices that reflect the needs, strengths, and aspirations of the communities they serve.



Resources

Here are some additional resources that may be interesting and helpful as you work to improve early childhood systems to benefit organizations, families, and communities.

CSSP

[Early Learning Community Action Guide and Assessment Tool](#) (2024)

[Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#) (2024)

[Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#) (2018)

[Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems: Phase Two Navigating the Ripples](#) (2019)

[The Making Connections Experience with Resident Engagement and Leadership](#) (2016)

External Resources

[Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#)—National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers

[Strengthening Partnerships: A Framework for Prenatal through Young Adulthood Family Engagement in Massachusetts](#)—Massachusetts's Department of Education

Suggested Citation

Hernández, R. E. (2025). Partners For Change: A Guide for Organizations on Engaging Family & Parent Leaders in Early Childhood Systems. Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/a-guide-for-organizations-on-engaging-family-parent-leaders-in-early-childhood-systems>.

