Authentic Family Engagement in Family-Centric Early Childhood Systems Building

Conversation Starters on Building More Equitable Early Childhood Systems

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Child Trends and Start Early have partnered to better understand what early childhood systems builders need to build and support more equitable systems. We define an early childhood system as a comprehensive, cross-sector, and coordinated set of policies, services, and supports for young children (prenatal through age 5) and their families. At the heart of this work are the following central questions: What makes an early childhood system successful? If families are placed at the heart of systems building and improvement, what do systems need to do differently? How can systems know they are making progress toward more equitable policies, programs, and outcomes?

The briefs in this series, called Conversation Starters, define a new framework for early childhood systems that center families' experiences and raise key considerations and next steps for implementing the framework.

Overview

Many early childhood systems builders have rightfully identified that family engagement is a powerful way to improve the equity of their initiatives, programs, and outcomes. Often, this engagement involves gathering input from families and infusing their voices and experiences into needs assessments and strategic plans; in some cases, systems builders must include families in ongoing systems improvement initiatives. In a companion piece, we offer a framework for systems builders to co-define *with families* what it would mean for their system to be "family-centric."

Early childhood systems are at many different stages in terms of their readiness and capacity to engage families, use their input to yield meaningful changes, and co-design systems with families. Systems builders often reach out to technical assistance providers, wondering how their peers are working to gather and use families' voices. There are many lessons to be learned from systems across the United States and there is a growing need to share resources and approaches for successfully implementing a family-centric approach to building state and local ECE systems. Several questions can guide this work: What does it take to move beyond merely gathering families' input to instead fully center families' experiences as hallmark of system operations and as the approach for defining a systems' success? How does engaging families as systems builders or systems co-designers support the development of more equitable systems? In this piece, we

How we learned from systems

From 2021 to 2023, we spoke to state early childhood systems' representatives, researchers, family advocates, and technical assistance providers from across the country to understand how their systems were working to promote equity and center families' experiences, and what resources systems builders may need to engage in such work. To augment these discussions, we listened to recorded interviews and reviewed more than 25 early childhood systems frameworks, toolkits, and action plans from multiple organizations, states, and communities across the country.

Those discussions, interviews, and documents became our source material for this piece.

highlight some lessons learned from systems that are working to center families' voices and experiences as they build and improve their early childhood systems.

Key Ingredients for Success in Centering Families' Experiences

The "ingredients" highlighted here represent four critical elements of success for strengthening the influence of families' voices in a family-centric early childhood system.

Key ingredient #1: Stronger connections with grassroots community-based organizations

Many early childhood systems have recently pivoted to an explicit focus on centering families' experiences and have designed strategic plans that target family voice as a key source of information for decision making. As they pivot, systems should first identify the groups already working with families: the grassroots community-based organizations (including faith-based and neighborhood-based organizations) that focus on centering families' experiences and developing parents as community leaders. These organizations hold wisdom about families' needs, but also about authentic family engagement as the centerpiece of systems change work. These community-based organizations bring momentum, expertise, and credibility on many aspects of family engagement:

- **Community-based organizations are knowledgeable about the best ways to gather and maximize family engagement at various levels**. Through conversations with technical assistance specialists and family advocates, we heard clearly that systems must be respectful of families' time, labor, and willingness to provide input and feedback. That is, not every family wants a high level of involvement with systems building, but families do want opportunities to provide input and multiple options for involvement. Community-based organizations can help systems plan for these varied levels of engagement to ensure their success.

- **Community-based organizations have experience developing authentic and actionable feedback loops between families and the institutions that serve them.** Systems builders and technical assistance providers told us that one ongoing challenge is building actionable, sustainable feedback loops between families and systems builders. Community-based organizations are well-positioned and experienced in facilitating these feedback loops and are able to provide critical translation of systems jargon to language that more directly resonates with families' experience.

- **Community-based organizations can** serve **as the face of family engagement**, rather than a local or state agency. Families may not be comfortable discussing their experiences or input with government agencies or service providers. As such, community-based organizers may be better hosts of engagement sessions, such as town halls, community cafes, or facilitated conversations.

Our conversations illuminated the importance of developing authentic, strong relationships with community-based organizations as systems co-designers; however, we also heard that simply inviting community-based organizations to the decision-making table does not guarantee success. For that, we turn to key ingredient #2.

Key ingredient #2: Leadership dedication and capacity

Leadership—and specifically, their capacity, power, and focus—sets the tone for the degree to which a system is family-centric. We conceptualize systems leaders as those with the necessary capacity and

authority to create change for early childhood systems. System leadership must also have the authority to change the system's organizational culture and influence the leadership of its participating agencies and organizations—sometimes called the "grass tops"—in order to develop commitments among these parties to move toward a more family-centric system. That is, leadership should build strong partnerships with community-based organizations and share power with families to inform system operations, and, ultimately, to shape the policies and programs that affect families.

In our conversations, systems leaders and technical assistance providers told us about past experiences with leaders who lacked the capacity to focus on early childhood systems building. Sometimes, these leaders were pulled in many directions because of their roles overseeing multiple human services departments. Other times, they led agencies or offices with insufficient infrastructure dedicated to early childhood systems building. And sometimes, they simply allocated more resources to other initiatives. Systems are successful when leadership buys into, is attentive to, and has the capacity to support family engagement. Ultimately, leadership is accountable for sustaining the feedback loops between families and systems decision makers.

Key ingredient #3: Formalized ways of collecting, sharing, and using information

Systems need sufficient capacity for collecting, sharing, and using information from families and for co-designing systems with families. There are many challenges to building systems with families and gathering their perspectives. We heard about the following three capacities in our conversations:

1. **Capacity for data collection, evaluation, analysis, measurement, and reporting**. Research partners can fill in gaps where data analysts at other organizations or government offices may be overwhelmed.

2. **Capacity to compensate families equitably for participating in systems building and improvement**. Families deserve to be compensated appropriately for their level of engagement in systems, but many systems identified this as a challenge for existing funding structures and conceptions of allowable compensation. Additionally, compensation can be considered income that jeopardizes families' eligibility for benefits. Legislative action, agency policy changes, and commitment from philanthropic partners may be necessary to resolve this challenge.

3. **Capacity to maintain transparency and feedback loops with families**. Our conversations indicated another unique feature of authentic family engagement: the ability to build sufficient capacity to maintain transparency with families and share with them how their input was used. Systems builders— both those with whom we talked and others whose plans we reviewed—are currently developing these processes and capacity, and we look forward to learning from their work in the coming months.

Key ingredient #4: Flexible funding to prioritize families' engagement and voices

There was clear consensus among the systems builders with whom we spoke that flexible funding— particularly funding provided by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5)—was vital to successful family engagement and equitable systems. When we asked systems builders what benefits they would wish for their system, nearly all mentioned sustainable, flexible funding.

Family engagement in systems building is rarely explicitly funded; it is also expensive, as systems building is a time-consuming and inductive process. Systems builders cannot lay out plans at the time of a grant application because they have typically not yet engaged families. Flexible funding, however, allows communities and states to engage families in a way that better facilitates innovations and breakthroughs.

Less flexible funding often requires communities and states to prescribe their family engagement approach up front, which can hinder innovation.

Implications & Next Steps

The systems we reviewed for this piece are going beyond merely gathering families' input: They are, instead, shifting organizational culture to priorities families' voices and experiences. This is a transformational shift in early childhood systems thinking, and we are only just beginning to understand the best ways to conduct this work and measure its impacts at a larger systems level. In our conversations, we heard the following insight from a systems builder: Rather than focusing on preparing families to engage with the system, prepare the system to include families as co-designers.

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The systems builders we talked to and the initiatives we reviewed have developed strong plans for centering families' experiences for systems improvement: These leaders are planning a variety of engagement opportunities, from listening sessions to partnering with parents as systems builders. While we heard some anecdotes of family engagement activities yielding actionable results, there remains a gap in the availability of measures to understand whether systems are becoming more equitable as a result of centering families' experiences in defining a system's operations and success. At this stage, we have several questions about how to design and measure the impact of family engagement in systems building:

- How can human-centered design principles inform our emerging family-centric framework, its operating principles, and its measures?
- How can systems builders know if they are truly engaging families in the design, implementation, and continuous improvement of the systems that are intended to support them?
- Do system-level improvements yield more family involvement? Do they yield more equitable access to services and support or more equitable outcomes for children and families?

Connect with Us

We hope to further explore this topic: Please join our conversation!

What questions do you have? Do you have insights on centering families' experiences as the cornerstone of your early childhood system? Our authors would love to hear from you: please email us at: familycentricsystems@childtrends.org.

Acknowledgments

Suggested citation: Paschall, K. & Connors, M.C. (2023). Authentic family engagement in family-centric early childhood systems building. Child Trends & Start Early. https://doi.org/10.56417/1593r3344j