

Defining a Family-Centric Early Childhood System

Conversation Starters on Building More Equitable Early Childhood Systems

Maia Connors and Katherine Paschall

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

Early childhood systems builders in states and communities across the country are working hard to create cross-sector early childhood systems that are equitable, supportive, accessible, and of high quality for all children and families. This is a complex challenge that requires systems builders to first understand and adopt the perspectives of the children and families who navigate their system, and then adapt their mental model of what makes an early childhood system successful to this perspective. That is, rather than conceptualizing their system in terms of the programs it offers, the funding streams it includes, the people it reaches, and the long-term outcomes it produces, they must also begin to define their system in terms of how it *feels* to those it is designed to serve. We have observed that, with very few exceptions, the current approach to defining and measuring early childhood systems does not adequately help systems builders make the shift toward focusing on families' experiences. In this piece, we offer a framework for systems builders to co-define *with families* what it would mean for their system to be "family-centric." In a companion piece, we highlight lessons learned from systems working to center families' voices in their early childhood systems.

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.

Background

Fifteen years ago, the Early Childhood Systems Working Group (ECSWG), supported by the federal Administration for Children and Families and comprised of more than 50 national early childhood stakeholders, developed a consensus state-level early childhood framework and underlying set of core components. This effort to create a shared framework was critical to improve early childhood systems' efficiency and coordination. Indeed, since the framework was first published, early childhood systems-building work has flourished through a number of different initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels; many of these initiatives have developed their own definitions, frameworks, and toolkits to guide their work.^{1,2,3} As a result, a plethora of frameworks and approaches is now available as resources to those who engage in systems-building work. Most outline similar structural components and enabling conditions of early childhood systems, including:

- Cross-sector collaboration
- Communication and engagement
- Financing
- Quality standards and evidence-based practices
- Data systems and data capacity
- Leadership
- Policy

Over time, many initiatives have started to engage families to inform these “top-down” conceptualizations of early childhood systems. This is a vitally important step that has laid a strong foundation for early childhood systems builders to create systems that work well for the families they are intended to serve. However, one important piece is still largely missing in the resulting definitions and frameworks: *What does it look like when a system truly places families at the center?*

A Framework for Defining a Family-Centric System

Building on this prior work, we propose a grassroots framework to defining an early childhood system that not only centers families' experiences in the process of creating the definition, but also (importantly) in the definition of the system itself. We interviewed a technical assistance provider who noted, “We [often] want to talk about how dollars were spent, and then leap over four steps to look at outcomes,” such as children's kindergarten readiness. Still, what most families experience about a system is not the number of children it serves, whether it features interagency coordination, or its data system. The first benefits of that system that they notice are not their child's literacy or math skills. Instead, families experience access—and barriers—to a variety of services, programs, and policies that may or may not meet their needs, and which they may or may not be interested in taking advantage of.

We offer a definition of a family-centric early childhood system in which systems builders and families work together to describe what lies in between these initial inputs and long-term outcomes. The following guiding framework can help to structure those conversations:

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (2015). *Early Childhood State Advisory Councils Final Report*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ece/sac_2015_final_report.pdf

² Dichter, H. (Ed.). (2015). *Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families*. BUILD Initiative.

³ Human Resources Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau (2023, April). *Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS)*. <https://mchb.hrsa.gov/programs-impact/early-childhood-systems/early-childhood-comprehensive-systems>

A successful family-centric early childhood system is one in which families experience:

- Seamless availability of programs and services they need and prefer
- Supports that address families' physical, mental, and relational health
- Supports that are culturally affirming, linguistically supportive, and celebrate family strengths
- Opportunities to co-design and implement with systems builders and to make their needs and preferences have influence in other ways

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In short, a successful family-centric early childhood system is one that *practices* authentic and inclusive family engagement and *results* in positive, equitable, and supportive experiences for families. This kind of success will look different in each system. Together, systems builders and families can arrive at an authentic definition of their system by exploring what each of these statements means in their own community context.

Reflections on Bringing the Framework to Life

Systems builders agreed that they should define the success of their system in terms of families' experiences. Every one of our conversations affirmed the need to center families' experiences and ensure that the system is responsive to what systems builders learn from families. For example, many of our conversations touched on the recognition that one primary function of a system is to increase families' equitable access to programs and services. Many systems builders further articulated that an equitable, family-centric system actively investigates barriers to access, *as defined by families*. This simple shift is transformational: Many systems builders described how their way of thinking about even basic system functions (such as access) changed when they began to truly center families' experiences.

These systems builders also agreed that there are important logistical challenges associated with implementing this framework in practice. Applying the framework raises many hard questions: How do we gather information on what families need or prefer? Who funds this time-consuming work? And whose responsibility is it anyway?

Data infrastructure hasn't yet caught up to systems' needs. Our conversations with systems builders touched frequently on data, and on systems' capacity to collect, share, and use data collected from families. We heard about the work, resources, wisdom, and interest that has gone into developing data dashboards or other tools for sharing and using data. We also heard about the many formal and informal ways that systems have garnered input and feedback from families (including via surveys, advisory councils, and even chance conversations); in a few instances, we heard about "closing the loop" to share information back to families. In most cases, administrative data systems and mechanisms for gathering family input are not fully integrated, and many systems builders lamented their inability to fully understand or describe families' experiences using the data they currently collect.

Funding constraints have ripple effects. Unfortunately, many early childhood systems lack the funding they need to fully achieve their visions. Facing chronic underfunding, systems leaders may be forced to make choices about how to allocate limited resources—choices that, unfortunately, create barriers instead of addressing them. For example, leaders may choose to fund one type of program or service and not another, to locate funded programs in some neighborhoods and not others, or to construct application processes or enrollment criteria that are not required by the funder. The issue of funding emerged repeatedly in our conversations as a challenge for systems builders in trying to center families' experiences.

Coordinated or integrated infrastructure is essential. Rather than a single state or community system, we talked to many systems builders and technical assistance providers who described multiple uncoordinated (or loosely coordinated) systems that serve young children and their families. This type of siloed system begs the question, “Who is responsible for the early childhood system as a whole?” Many agencies, organizations, and individuals may label themselves systems builders, and many take on some systems-building and improvement activities. However, there is wide variation in the level of authority and amount of infrastructure that allows a system to truly be coordinated and comprehensive within a state or community. In a family-centric system, we expect that intentionally coordinated infrastructure is critical to the system’s ability to provide positive, equitable, and supportive experiences for families.

Implications & Next Steps

Definitions are powerful tools. In this piece, we have offered an approach to defining the success of an early childhood system in terms of how families experience it. For many, this represents a transformational shift in thinking about early childhood systems. For systems builders, adopting this approach will reflect not only a new way of thinking, but also new ways of operating—and possibly, new ways of designing and organizing systems themselves.

The systems builders we talked to for this piece each expressed a clear vision for the kind of system they were trying to co-create with families and for what they wanted families to experience when interacting with the system. Still, none of these respondents—not even those from highly regarded systems that are (deservedly) considered examples—felt that they had it all figured out. These systems builders continue to strive for new ways to make their systems more family-centric, equitable, and transparent. In addition, many felt that their existing ways of communicating about their systems do not adequately tell the story of families’ experiences.

We are only beginning to understand how best to engage in systems building and measure its impact. At this stage, we have the following questions:

- How can systems builders meaningfully engage families in defining the success of their system, and in ongoing system leadership, governance, and implementation?
- How can systems builders measure or document families’ experiences of their system and use that information as indicators of progress?
- How can systems builders build the data infrastructure they need to support their system’s goals?
- What systems characteristics and methods of operating result in positive, equitable, and supportive experiences for families?
- What are the levers for improvement that can help systems become more family-centric?

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.

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