

Strategic Relationships

Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide

2023



CHILD CARE

State Capacity Building Center



Early childhood systems building in states and territories requires Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Administrators and their staff to build strong, trusting relationships with those who are affected by the state and its systems. Building relationships may seem like a straightforward task. In reality, it requires a serious investment of time, discipline, and humility to develop relationships that will help lead to successful systems that work to achieve and increase equitable access to opportunities. This chapter of the Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide is about building and sustaining strategic relationships in the context of systems building, inclusion, understanding the value of strategic relationships, and initiating and sustaining strategic relationships. This guide also provides quick tips for CCDF Administrators and resources.

The **State Capacity Building Center's Capacity Building Self-Assessment Tool** shares indicators in Dimension 2 to help assess engagement within states and territories.

Strategic Relationships and Systems Building

Developing relationships is a key aspect of systems building. State leaders have a critical responsibility to determine, develop, and sustain necessary strategic relationships as part of achieving intended systems reform, including explicit consideration of racial equity in decisions for policies, practices, programs, and budgets.¹ Strategic relationships set the foundation for the design, implementation, and improvement of an early childhood and school-age system.²

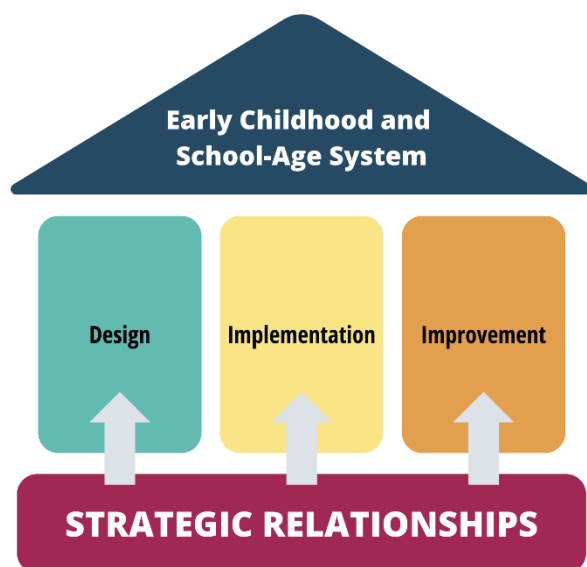


Figure 1. The Foundation of Early Childhood and School-Age Systems

There can be no system without the people who inhabit it and take the actions that bring it to life. Put differently, how the system works arises from how we work; how people think and act together shapes how the system works as a whole.³ Diversifying your network of relationships is essential to being strategic in what system you build and for whom. It is a skill that benefits your collective efforts. Groups that are inclusive of individuals who reflect the community at large or the population served by a particular program are high-value assets. These groups can leverage their diverse experiences and expertise to better identify who will benefit from or be burdened by your systems-building decisions.

Underlying all systems building efforts is the most pivotal systems building concept—building and sustaining strong, trusting relationships. The term “strategic relationship” is

defined as an “agreement between two or more entities to conduct specified activities or processes to achieve specified objectives.”⁴ More than that, strategic relationships are an important part of our development and how we learn about others as much as they are about getting something done together. Strategic relationships are about being resourceful for others while also asking for things that you need. This allows you to create connections with people at multiple levels. For example, this can mean having a strategic thought partner with

¹ Nelson, J., & Brooks, L. (2017). *Racial equity tool kit: An opportunity to operationalize equity*. Government Alliance on Race and Equity. <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/resources/racial-equity-toolkit-opportunity-operationalize-equity/>

² Senge, P., Scharmer, C.O., Jaworski, J., & Flowers, B. S. (2004). *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, organizations, and society*. Doubleday.

³ Senge, P., Smith, B., Kruschwitz, N., Laur, J., & Schley, S. (2010). *The necessary revolution: How individuals and organizations are working together to create a sustainable world*, p. 169. Crown Publishing Group.

⁴ Lead Generation World. (2019, September 4). *Building strategic relationships for success*, para. 3. <https://leadgenerationworld.com/building-strategic-relationships-for-success/>

whom you think out loud—confidentially—about early childhood policy, implementation, or equity and focus on strategic guidance and tactical advice. Once you build a relationship, it becomes an “existing relationship.” Like all relationships, it needs specific sustenance to be strategic.⁵

How Strategic Relationships Add Value

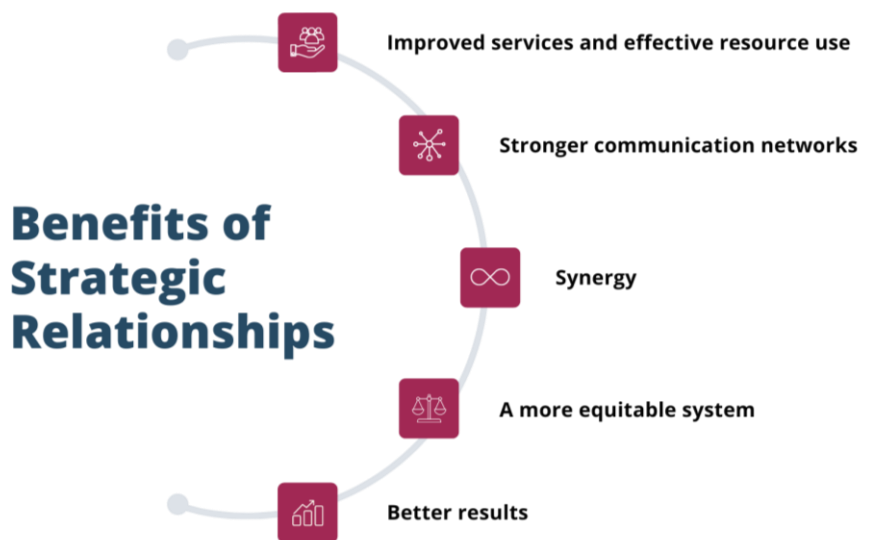
Benefits

Strategic relationships offer many benefits to state leaders and state systems building work. Strategic relationships can help improve services and ensure a more effective use of resources. Critical to systems building, they form the basis for synergy—when two or more individuals can work together to achieve a result that is better than what either could have achieved individually. As statewide systems for early learning are being rewoven in the context of school readiness, equal access, and higher quality, strategic relationships provide state leaders with a critical resource—a greater ability to use multiple talents, include diverse perspectives, and achieve more creative and collaborative possibilities that yield sustainable results. When strategic relationships are developed and sustained, this can enable organizations to respond nimbly to emerging opportunities and needs.

Strategic relationships are essential for effective state early childhood leaders to cultivate and maintain strong, diverse, and inclusive communication networks. For CCDF Administrators, these networks can include various partners: public officials, public funders, the provider community, philanthropic organizations, statewide associations, advocates, and families, inclusive of the geographic, cultural, and linguistic communities of the state. Cultivating a diverse set of relationships on an ongoing basis can stimulate collaborative problem-solving and implementation of more equitable systems because those closer to the implementation provide a better view of the “on the ground” impact of policies. Individuals who connect their strategic relationships in this “very down-to-earth, day-to-day way, make the world work.”⁶ These relationships and inclusive networks can yield sustainable progress to resolve specific issues or take strategic advantage of opportunities, allowing for bigger results that also mitigate unintended negative consequences and a smoother process to attain results.

Additionally, strategic relationships that are embedded in diverse networks “spread ideas and information ... [and] connect all the dots that constitute the vast apparatus of government and influence and interest groups.”⁷

Figure 2. Benefits of Strategic Relationships



⁵ Dayton, A. (2011, May 11). 3 powerful ways to nourish relationships to help business boom. <https://adriandayton.com/2011/05/3-powerful-ways-to-nourish-relationships-to-help-business-boom/>

⁶ Gladwell, M. (1999, January 11). *Six degrees of Lois Weisberg*, p. 52. The New Yorker.

⁷ See footnote 6.

Motivation

Before engaging in strategic relationships, it is important to understand what each party sees as the opportunities, challenges, and benefits of the relationship, as well as any assumptions or implicit biases that may be at play. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity defines implicit bias as follows:

The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily, without awareness or intentional control. This can be either positive or negative. Everyone is susceptible.⁸

These biases can work to our benefit (for example, survival and ease of life), and they can create harmful effects stemming from our behavior and choices (for example, creating inequities and stopping us from considering a range of options). For more information on how to mitigate implicit bias, please see the [“Leadership” chapter of the Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide](#) and review the article titled “Breaking Bias Updated: The SEEDS Model™” in the *NeuroLeadership Journal*.⁹

Figure 1 shares four questions that may be useful in exploring the mutual value of establishing or continuing a strategic relationship. Understanding the reason behind establishing and maintaining a strategic relationship helps make it successful and maximizes its impact on early childhood systems building. In general, following a strategic plan that outlines a shared vision helps ensure that the answers to these questions align toward a common purpose. If a strategic plan is not in place for the state or territory, the process of developing a plan can help engage diverse partners and form strategic relationships.

Figure 3. Exploring the Value of Strategic Relationships



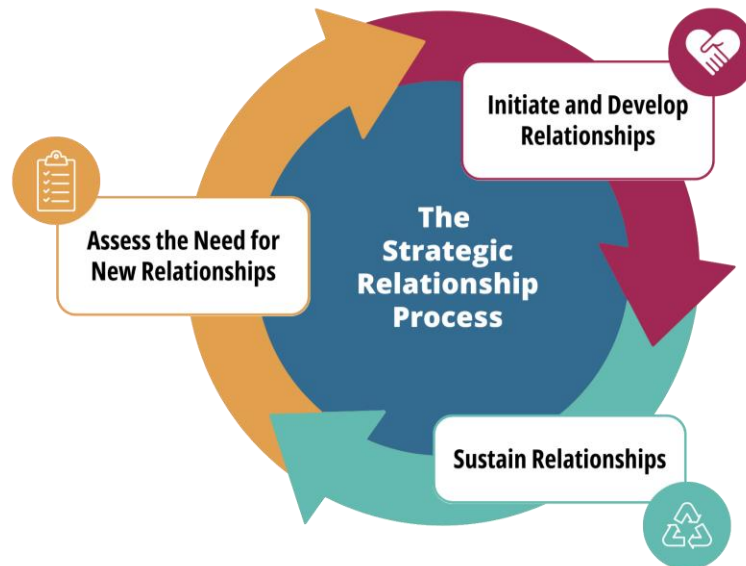
⁸ Staats, C., Capatosto, K., Tenney, L., & Mamo, S. (2017). *State of the science: Implicit bias review*, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. <https://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/implicit-bias-module-series>

⁹ Lieberman, M. D., Rock, D., Grant Halvorson, H., & Cox, C. (2015). *Breaking bias updated: The SEEDS model™*. *NeuroLeadership Journal*. [http://www.scn.ucla.edu/pdf/Lieberman\(2015\)Neuroleadership.pdf](http://www.scn.ucla.edu/pdf/Lieberman(2015)Neuroleadership.pdf)

Initiating and Sustaining Strategic Relationships

State early childhood leaders and other participants in systems building efforts at the state level should initiate and develop various relationships with individuals and organizations as potential partners, sustain these relationships, and periodically assess the need to initiate new strategic relationships. This process creates strategic relationships by fostering engagement and partnership to ensure collaboration.

Figure 4. The Strategic Relationship Process



As people move into new positions, state leaders should consciously and intentionally try to build new relationships to move forward with organizational, programmatic, and societal goals. Making time and space for relationship building in the workplace and across organizations is critical to forming collaborative relationships that build trust. A narrow focus on conducting business or accomplishing tasks may leave a leader with very little support for carrying out initiatives. Cultivating relationships is an important aspect of achieving early childhood system priorities, including sound programs and their implementation. While the product of strategic relationships is change, the process is conversation.

Conversation and Trust

Strategic relationships require a willingness to connect and converse. Conversation may begin with a casual interoffice encounter, a small meeting, a social gathering, or a larger public forum. It might start with an invitation through a phone call or an email. The point is to start, host, and sustain a conversation. Conversation is the way humans create new possibilities and form knowledge and solutions in response to new challenges and dilemmas. Conversation helps people discover what they care about and cultivate the conditions for change. Strategic relationships form through conversations and actions that build trust and understanding.¹⁰

Understanding what motivates people to form strategic relationships informs state leaders about how to nourish and sustain relationships. Underlying all successful strategic relationships is the critical element of trust. Covey and Merrill explain as follows:

¹⁰ Wheatley, M. J. (2002). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Simply put, trust means confidence. The opposite of trust, distrust, is suspicion. When you trust people, you have confidence in them, in their integrity and their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them, of their integrity, their agenda, their capabilities, or their track record.¹¹

Building or rebuilding trust is challenging, but possible, and essential to forming truly meaningful and sustainable strategic relationships. Ideally, trust is built through attention to positive relationships, good judgment, and consistency.¹² Without trust, the relationship is fleeting, maybe lasting only as long as a required partnership and perhaps not yielding the long-term benefits necessary for systems building. Research has demonstrated that there is a strong correlation between the perceived fairness of a collaborative relationship and the effects of the program implementation, even many years later. If, at the beginning of the relationship, each person trusts that their partners will value their input and treat them fairly, they will continue in the relationship even if they receive less than what they had hoped. They will be willing to stay committed to the process and dedicate themselves and resources to joint initiatives.¹³

Creating, cultivating, nourishing, and sustaining strategic relationships is important for the success of any systems building effort. For CCDF Administrators, productive relationships with key stakeholders across the early learning field are the cornerstone of systems building work.

Quick Tips

Three Tips for Building and Sustaining Strategic “Muscle” in Relationships

1. **Listen:** Be available to listen, and really listen. Sometimes we make the mistake of listening to solve a problem as opposed to actively listening to show that we understand. It’s the listening itself that’s important. Before rushing to solve a problem, stop to listen—both to get information and so the person you’re working with knows that they are being heard and understood.
2. **Stay top-of-mind:** There’s so much activity competing for our attention, both professionally and personally—all of which can make us feel overextended and out of time. Staying top-of-mind means communicating in a way that focuses on the connection and helps you find out about opportunities. Taking the extra step of making a personal connection to an individual’s interest, such as their children or hobbies, keeps the relationship more relevant.
3. **Ask. Don’t assume:** We may assume people know our specific discipline and understand exactly what we do, or that we know what each other does. Those assumptions are probably wrong. Even in organizations or partnerships with good relationship protocols and that prioritize cross-pollination, we don’t know enough about what colleagues do or share enough about ourselves to fully understand the culture or details of the work we all are doing on behalf of children and families.

Invest Time

For those who focus their efforts on technical or measurable tasks or find themselves constantly responding to crises, investing time in strategic relationship building may seem challenging. Balancing both urgent (clock-based) and important (goal-based) tasks best supports the achievement of long-term results. Redefining relationship building as an essential task that supports the content of the work may help make it a higher priority.

¹¹ Covey, S. M. R., & Merrill, R. (2008). *The speed of trust: The one thing that changes everything*. Free Press.

¹² Zenger, J., & Folkman, J. (2019, February 5). *The 3 elements of trust*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2019/02/the-3-elements-of-trust>

¹³ Hicks, D., Nelson, C., Olds, D., Johnston, E., & Larson, C. E. (2008). *The influence of collaboration on program outcomes in the Colorado Nurse-Family Partnership*. *Evaluation Review*, 32(5), 453–477.

Know the Work and Deepen Understanding of the Early Childhood Landscape

Understanding more about others and their perspectives and issues is a key concept in successful strategic relationships. Developing a deeper knowledge of current state- or territory-level early childhood education (ECE) services and staff will help you identify who might be interested in forming partnerships and furthering systems building goals. Learning more about the constellation of ECE services offered, including the administrative details of key programs and the lead staff and partner interests, facilitates strategic relationship building.

Assess and Develop Personal and Professional Skills to Maximize Success

Becoming more self-aware and identifying personal strengths, challenges, biases, and triggers may help develop and hone the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and emotional intelligence needed to support strategic relationships. Interpersonal skills include one's sensitivity to others' moods, feelings, temperaments, and motivations as well as one's ability to cooperate to work as part of a group.¹⁴ Emotional intelligence refers to understanding characteristics of oneself and others (for example, emotions, motivations, goals, intentions, responses, and behaviors) as well as the capacity to manage relationships effectively. As roles and expectations change, so must our understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, how we approach our work, how we relate to others, and the emotional intelligence needed to support strategic relationships.

Support a Culture of Cooperation, Collaboration, and Inclusion

Does the environment support creativity, innovation, and exploration, or is it tightly managed with many levels of control? Creating a successful incubation environment in which strategic relationships and work can grow is based on mixing and matching people with diverse skills, talents, and ideas, as well as providing the necessary resources to support and sustain collaborative work and planning. Even if the external environment is not conducive to building relationships, you should search for internal opportunities to build more inclusive teams and model systems building relationships. Improving communication and collaboration internally is important so that organizations are prepared to "walk the walk" when external relationship opportunities arise.

Study and Apply What Contributes to a Successful Collaboration

There is a great deal to understand about what makes for successful collaboration in the early childhood field. In 2013, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation released [Conceptualizing and Measuring Collaboration in the Context of Early Childhood Care and Education](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/conceptualizing-and-measuring-collaboration-context-early-childhood-care-and-education). This resource introduces a framework for exploring collaboration in the early childhood field. This framework, or logic model, introduces the possible parts of a successful collaboration and provides a roadmap for how key inputs and processes build on one another to result in better outcomes for early childhood systems, programs, and the people they serve. The brief also provides a review of tools that have been used to measure process components of collaboration in health care, public administration or public policy, psychology, and early care and education.¹⁵

Build and Sustain Commitment

Building and sustaining commitment is a process that grows within people over time. People commit to a group or organization because they gain something meaningful from their involvement, such as camaraderie, professional development, or a sense of accomplishment. Commitment is supported by practicing and encouraging leadership,

¹⁴ Goleman, D. (2011). *Leadership: The power of emotional intelligence*. More Than Sound.

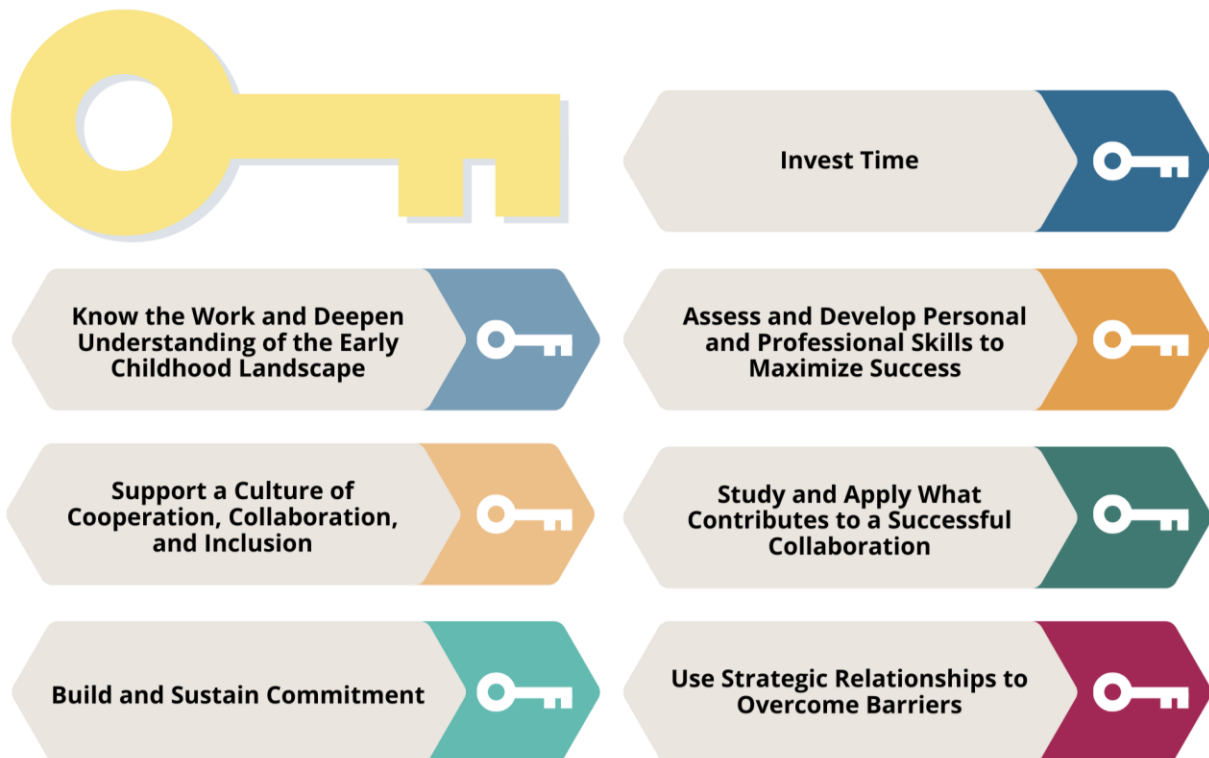
¹⁵ Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. (2013). *Conceptualizing and measuring collaboration in the context of early childhood care and education*. U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/conceptualizing-and-measuring-collaboration-context-early-childhood-care-and-education>

sharing successes, having fun together, respecting and appreciating one another, challenging one another, and working through conflicts, as well as learning from mistakes and weathering setbacks together.

Use Strategic Relationships to Overcome Barriers

Action items may be blocked by barriers in administrative structures or rules. Building strategic relationships helps shed light on whether these barriers are real or perceived, and these relationships themselves can help overcome barriers. For example, a CCDF Administrator who has carefully built a relationship with legal counsel, helping them learn the overall early childhood policy approach and outcomes, may find that this aids joint interpretation and understanding of these rules. For states in which it helps to showcase federal support for strategic relationships and partnerships, the Office of Child Care has used program instructions, information memoranda, and letters to show its support for strategic partnerships and relationships. While each state has its own barriers to navigate, strategic relationships can provide a valuable opportunity to explore whether these are real barriers or if further conversation and cooperation could help overcome them.

Figure 5. The Seven Key Actions that Build Relationships



Resources

In the resource list below, icons are used to represent key resources that correspond to one or more of the five dimensions of the [Capacity Building Self-Assessment Tool](#). For example, if a resource is relevant to the Financial Resources dimension, a green piggybank icon will appear next to it.

Collaboration and Partnership Building

This section provides a set of general resources on systems building. Many systems building initiatives begin with or involve strategic planning. Please see the [Strategic Plans](#) chapter of the Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide for more information on this topic.

[Collaborative Innovation Tools](#) (CoCreative, n.d.)

This collection of tools and resources is curated to help organizations solve complex problems through collaboration and partnership. This includes a guide to collaboration, patterns of collaboration, and tools to help define the purpose and work of collaborations.

[Creating and Maintaining Coalitions and Partnerships](#) (Community Tool Box, n.d.)

This toolkit provides guidance for creating successful partnerships as well as examples of organizations that have come together to address a common goal.



[“Establishing Governance and Sustainable Partnerships”](#) (Office of Child Care, 2022)

Resources on this webpage provide examples of how state, territory, and Tribal governments have established governance structures to streamline the administration of early childhood care and education programs and strategies for developing strategic partnerships to accomplish a shared vision and goals.

[Place-Based Partnerships Toolkit](#) (Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2021)

This toolkit is the result of a 2-year project that was created to understand how backbone organizations of place-based partnerships in 80 locations across the country operate and to gain insights into the factors that affect their sustainability and success in driving community-level outcomes. The toolkit includes lessons learned and recommendations for backbone structures, operations, and staffing and a tool that allows users to estimate the revenue and staffing needed to operate a backbone organization.

[Planning Guide for Intragovernmental Partnerships](#) (Office of Child Care, February 2022)

This guide is designed for early childhood state systems leaders to guide intragovernmental partnerships in support of creating new strategic relationships in their early childhood care and education systems-building work.

[State and Local Government Prenatal-to-Three Collaboration in Action](#) (National League of Cities, March 2021)

This webinar showcases the collaborative work of city, county, and state governments to address the needs of young children during the COVID-19 pandemic in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

[Strengthening Partnerships: A Framework for Prenatal through Young Adulthood Family Engagement in Massachusetts](#) (Massachusetts Family Engagement Coalition, 2020)

The primary purpose of this document is to provide a theoretical framework for family engagement concepts and the implementation of those concepts, as well as the research supporting this work.



[The Four Shared Rs of Collaboration](#) (Himmelman Consulting, 2016)

This brief paper outlines four shared “Rs” that are helpful for effective collaboration. This brief paper outlines four shared “Rs” that are helpful for effective collaboration: risk, responsibility, resources, and rewards. Also included is a table to help define whether organizations are engaged in networking, coordination, cooperation, or collaboration.

Collective Impact



[“Centering Equity in Collective Impact”](#) (John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer, and Jennifer Splansky Juster, 2022)

In this article, the authors revisit the concepts of collective impact that Kania and Kramer introduced a decade prior to emphasize the importance of centering equity in any collective impact effort.

[“Collective Impact”](#) (John Kania and Mark Kramer, 2011)

This seminal article argues that the traditional approach of using isolated initiatives to address complex social problems is unlikely to produce systemwide progress. Rather, such issues must be addressed through a collective-impact approach that involves collaboration across systems, sectors, and organizations toward shared goals. The authors outline five conditions of collective success: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations.

[“Getting Started”](#) (Collective Impact Forum, n.d.)

Resources provided on this webpage serve as a starting point for those interested in pursuing collective impact within their community. The site includes a self-assessment as well as a curated list of foundational resources to support collective impact.

Forming and Maintaining an Effective Team

[“Foster psychological safety”](#) (re:Work, n.d.)

This webpage outlines the importance of establishing psychological safety within teams. It provides an embedded TEDx talk and a guide for managers to foster psychological safety in their teams.

[“Help teams determine their own needs”](#) (re:Work, n.d.)

The tool on this webpage is meant to be used by individual team members to assess the dynamics of their teams and to serve as a basis for team discussion amongst themselves.



[The Intersector Toolkit](#) (The Intersector Project, 2017)

This toolkit is a helpful guide for thinking about cross-sector collaborations. It allows the user to diagnose, design, implement, and assess collaborations.

[“What Google Learned from Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team”](#) (Charles Duhigg, 2016)

This article from the New York Times shares research from Google’s Project Aristotle and its efforts to build the perfect team. The article illustrates the researcher’s journey through the literature on teams and through the data they collected from their many teams in action. The findings indicate implications for communication, group norms, and especially how psychological safety can affect teams.

Assessing Partnerships and Collaboration

[Collaboration Multiplier](#) (Prevention Institute, n.d.)

This interactive framework and tool for analyzing collaborative efforts are designed to help organizations determine which partners to engage in their work. The tool also allows organizations that already work together to assess which activities should be undertaken to achieve a common goal, identify partners who are missing from the collaboration, and determine how each partner can leverage their expertise and resources to contribute to the collaboration.

[The Good Collaboration Toolkit](#) (The Good Project, 2013)

This toolkit contains materials aimed at helping individuals collaborate well and build successful collaborations. Through a series of activities, participants will be asked to consider questions, dilemmas, and cases involving all aspects of collaboration, especially the process of collaboration. The toolkit allows participants to work through exercises, as individuals and in groups, that can be useful to the collaborative process.

[“Learning in Action: Evaluating Collective Impact”](#) (Marcie Parkhurst and Hallie Preskill, 2014)

This article reviews ways in which collective impact collaborations can be evaluated at a big-picture level. This involves assessing the changemaking process as a whole to look at how and why change has occurred.

[Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory](#) (Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, n.d.)

This tool, based on concepts explored in the book *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*, provides an online assessment that allows groups or individuals to assess how their collaboration is doing based upon research-tested success factors.

Podcasts

CaseyCast

[“David Brooks on Being Seen, Social Trust and Building Relationships”](#) (December 10, 2021)

In December 2021, Lisa Hamilton of the Annie E. Casey Foundation spoke with David Brooks, a best-selling author, sought-after scholar, and longtime columnist for the New York Times, about key societal forces that are impacting social trust, social interactions, and the social fabric of America today.

Partnership for Public Service

[“Virtual Panel on Public-Private Partnerships”](#) (July 30, 2020)

In July 2020, the Partnership for Public Service’s Innovation Team and Federal Innovation Council hosted a virtual panel session to discuss innovative strategic partnerships that various federal agencies have formed and fostered to address pressing issues such as telehealth and access to water in remote regions of the world.

The Nonprofit MBA: Lessons for Nonprofits

[“Strategic Partnerships So Your Nonprofit Can Survive”](#) (Episode 2.9; November 4, 2020)

In this episode, the host speaks with leaders to discuss the importance of strategic partnerships in the nonprofit and social services sectors. Learn the importance of choosing the right strategic partners and how these partnerships, when harnessed, can help execute a mission more effectively.

Shannon Waller’s Team Success

[“The Value of Relationships in a Virtual World”](#) (Episode 176; n.d.)

In this episode, experts explore the importance of relationships in a digital world, emphasizing the importance of strong, meaningful connections in work over transactional relationships.

The Transformative Leader Podcast

[“Building and Leveraging Strategic Relationships”](#) (Episode 087; July 30, 2020)

In this episode, Amir Ghannad speaks with leadership advisor and executive coach David Nour about how to develop and maintain strategic relationships to create value beyond what either party could achieve alone.

The State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) works with state and territory leaders and their partners to create innovative early childhood systems and programs that improve results for children and families. The SCBC is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.



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