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Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide: Strategic Relationships



CHILD CARE
State Capacity Building Center

Early Childhood Systems Building Resource Guide: Strategic Relationships

Successful early childhood systems building in states and territories requires Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Administrators to build strong, trusting relationships with stakeholders (in other words, those who are affected by a line of action) throughout the state and its systems. Building relationships may seem like a simple and straightforward task, but as experts have suggested, it requires a serious investment of time, discipline, and humility to develop relationships in a way that will help lead to successful systems. “Strategic Relationships,” chapter 4 of Systems Building Resource Guide, is about building and sustaining strategic relationships in the context of systems building, understanding the value of strategic relationships, and initiating and sustaining strategic relationships. This guide also provides quick tips for CCDF Administrators and resources. Please use the navigation bar on the left to explore the guide.

Technical Assistance in Systems Building for State Leaders

Technical assistance to support systems building, including strategic planning, is available through the State Capacity Building Center. Technical assistance may be available through other federal technical assistance centers. Please check with your State Systems Specialist for more information.

Strategic Relationships and Systems Building

Developing stakeholder 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 efforts. Strategic relationships¹ fuel the design, implementation, and improvement of an early childhood and school-age system.

There can be no system without the human actors 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 shapes how the system works as a whole.²

Underlying all systems building efforts is the most pivotal systems building concept—building and sustaining strong, trusting relationships. No governance change, strategic planning, policy and program development, or other endeavor can be successful and sustainable over time without enlightened self-interest, of which the primary purpose is to simultaneously serve the group’s goals and individual interests.

Relationships require care, just like your family or your significant other. Don’t take them for granted, or you may be missing out on the biggest opportunities for change in the systems that benefit children and families.

The term “strategic relationship” is defined as an “agreement between two or more entities to conduct specified activities or processes, to achieve specified objectives.”³ 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 whom you think out

loud—confidentially—about different elements of the early childhood system, ranging from early childhood policy to implementation and focusing 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.⁴

The Value-Added of Strategic Relationships

Benefits

Strategic relationships offer many benefits to state leaders and state systems building work. Strategic relationships can help with improving services and more effectively using 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, diverse perspectives, and more creative and collaborative possibilities that yield sustainable results in an increasingly complex environment. When strategic relationships are developed and sustained on an ongoing basis, organizations can respond nimbly to emerging opportunities and needs.

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You can't build a successful relationship if you don't know why you're considering partnering in the first place.

—Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*

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Strategic relationships can be essential to the strong and diverse communication networks that effective state early childhood leaders cultivate and maintain. For CCDF Administrators, combining strategic relationships to form these networks can include various stakeholders: public officials, public funders, philanthropic organizations, the provider community, statewide associations, advocates, and parents. Cultivating relationships on an ongoing basis as part of a network can stimulate collaborative problem-solving and implementation of systems building and change. Individuals who connect their strategic relationships in this “very down-to-earth, day-to-day way, make the world work.”⁵ These relationships and networks can yield sustainable progress to resolve specific issues or take strategic advantage of opportunities, allowing for much bigger results and a smoother process to attain them. Additionally, strategic relationships that are embedded in networks “spread ideas and information ... [and] connect all the dots that constitute the vast apparatus of government and influence and interest groups.”⁶

Motivation

Before engaging in relationships, you should understand what each party sees as the opportunities, challenges, and benefits of the relationship. During this evaluation stage, understanding your motivation, goals, and those with whom you are developing the strategic relationship is critical.

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Table 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 for early childhood systems building. In general, following a strategic plan that outlines a shared vision helps ensure 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 stakeholders and form strategic relationships.

Table 1. Establishing the Value of Strategic Relationships

Exploring the Potential of Early Childhood Strategic Relationships			
What early childhood policy or systems issue can this relationship address more effectively?	What needs of the systems will the relationship meet?	What positive change for children and families can this relationship create that neither partner has right now?	Is there an alignment of values, culture, and perspective between early childhood partners?

Understanding why people may or may not be interested in a strategic relationship becomes foundational to initiating and keeping people engaged in the relationship. To successfully engage with another person or organization, one must take the time to understand more about their challenges and goals. An initial meeting with a potential partner may be almost exclusively for this purpose. Future conversations can focus on sharing challenges and goals and finding mutually beneficial ways to work together.

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 stakeholders 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.

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.

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 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 helps cultivate the conditions for change. Strategic relationships form through conversations and actions that build trust and understanding.⁷

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: "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."⁸

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 actively 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 that 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—work with voicemail, e-mail, and now social media; family and friends—all of which can make us feel overextended and out of time. Staying top-of-mind means communicating in a way in which the connection is the focus and so that it helps you find out about opportunities. Sometimes it works well just to pick up the phone and call—it’s more personal.
3. **Don’t assume:** We assume people know our specific discipline, understand exactly what we do, or that we know what each other does. Those assumptions are probably wrong. Even in organizations or partnerships in which good relationship protocols exist and cross-pollinating is a priority, 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.

Building or rebuilding trust is challenging, but possible, and essential to forming truly meaningful and sustainable strategic relationships. 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, stakeholders trust 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 hope for. They will be willing to stay committed to the process and dedicate themselves and resources to joint initiatives.⁹

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

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Quick Tips for CCDF Administrators

These quick tips are provided to help state leaders approach strategic relationships.

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 or compass based) tasks best supports the achievement of long-term results.¹⁰ Redefining relationship building as an essential task that supports the content of the work may help make it a higher priority.

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-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 stakeholder 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 skills¹¹ and emotional intelligence¹² 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. 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, and how we relate to others.

Build and Sustain Trust

Cultivating trust deserves attention because trust impacts every relationship, communication, transaction, project, or joint venture.¹³ Ideally, trust is built through attention to credibility (integrity), consistent behavior, alignment, reputation, and contribution. Respect, shared experiences, trust, reciprocity, and mutual enjoyment are important factors in building strong relationships, while fear, self-centeredness, and failure to acknowledge similarities can be detrimental.¹⁴

Most people can appreciate the importance trust plays in any relationship because they have experienced some level of betrayal in their professional life.

Support a Culture of Cooperation and Collaboration

Does the environment support creativity, innovation, and exploration of new territories, 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.¹⁵ 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.

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Study and Apply What Contributes to a Successful Collaboration

There is a great deal to understand about what makes for successful collaboration in early childhood. In 2013, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation released [Conceptualizing and Measuring Collaboration in the Context of 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.¹⁶

Build and Sustain Commitment

Building and sustaining commitment 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, 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.

Facilitate a Level of Understanding about Change Management

When a new project work does not have a clear path, we may become paralyzed, unsure, stuck, or tempted to micromanage in an effort to maintain control. When forging a new path, it may be difficult to see the big picture; break it down into smaller, more manageable segments; or maintain focus on the conceptual or creative process needed to meet the objective. Fear of losing control of the process may make others wary of including too many people and may lead to ineffective micromanaging. Understanding key concepts of change management may help build trust and make the transition process smoother. See "[Leadership](#)," chapter 1 of Systems Building Resource Guide, which addresses the topic of change management.

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 you 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.

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Resources

Approaches to Relationship Building

[*The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*](#) (Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs, 2005)

This book highlights seven integrated design principles to foster conversations that reveal deeper patterns and insights. These design principles address context, space, asking powerful questions, encouraging full participation, cross-pollination of ideas, and connecting diverse perspectives.

[*Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*](#) (Margaret Wheatley, 2009)

This book explores the power of conversation and the conditions that support it; encourages the reader to pause, reflect, prepare, and work for truly meaningful conversations; and provides 12 questions to help start conversations. The book highlights conversation's central role in healing relationships and organizational dysfunction.

Collaboration

[*Conceptualizing and Measuring Collaboration in the Context of Early Childhood Care and Education*](#) (Nina Chien, Amy Blasberg, Paula Daneri, Tamara Halle, Carlise King, Martha Zaslow, ... and Kathleen Dwyer, 2013)

The purpose of this study was to identify key parts of collaboration in the early care and education field. This brief presents the logic model for measuring collaboration in an early childhood context, explains its core parts, and highlights these parts by mapping them onto a hypothetical example of collaboration in early care and education. The brief also shares the results of an extensive review of existing measures of collaboration, describes key measurement considerations, and discusses future directions for collaboration research in the field of early care and education.

[*Elements of Successful Collaboration: Lessons Learned by the Family Literacy Support Network*](#) (First 5 LA, 2013)

In 2002, the Los Angeles County Office of Education was awarded a contract to create and establish the Family Literacy Support Network to support First 5 LA-funded family literacy grantees in building capacity. In this brief, the Family Literacy Support Network identifies characteristics that promote strong collaboration, which in turn leads to positive outcomes for programs, communities, and families with young children.

[“Generating and Sustaining Commitment in Community Collaboration”](#) (Darrin Hicks, n.d.)

In this resource, the author provides a definition of collaboration and describes three key elements: communication, relationship, and commitment. The article argues that commitment is a key ingredient of collaborative success and describes the various collaboration processes that foster commitment.

[“Promising Practices: Building Collaboration in Systems of Care”](#) (Sharon Hodges, Teresa Nesman, and Mario Hernandez, 1999)

This paper describes promising practices in interagency collaboration at sites funded by the Federal Center for Mental Health Services, which is part of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program. It explores the importance of collaboration in systems of care and focuses on three specific issues: the foundations of collaboration, strategies for carrying out the collaborative process, and the results of collaboration.

Collective Impact

[“Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work”](#) (Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, and Mark Kramer, 2012)

This article provides an in-depth follow-up to Kania and Kramer's 2011 article, “Collective Impact” (below). The purpose of this article is to expand understanding of collective impact and provide greater guidance for those who seek to initiate and lead collective-impact initiatives around the world. It focuses on the most common questions: How do we begin? How do we create alignment? How do we sustain the initiative?

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

This article argues that the traditional approach of using isolated initiatives to address complex social problems is unlikely to produce system-wide 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.

Partnership Building

[“Partnership Basics: Strategies for Creating Successful Partnerships”](#) (Office of Child Care, and Office of Head Start, 2014)

This document provides a framework for successful partnerships and fundamental strategies for creating a stable foundation for partnerships. It emphasizes the importance of careful planning, a shared vision, communication, and clear expectations.

[“Shaping the Partnership: Key Steps”](#) (Office of Child Care, and Office of Head Start, 2014)

This document highlights key steps to help local early care and education programs develop and carry out plans for managing multiple funding resources and other shared resources. It assumes that local partners will pursue, as a starting point, the following program goals: providing full-day, full-year child care for families who need it, so parents can work or pursue education and training opportunities; making comprehensive services more widely available for children and families; improving continuity of services; and improving program quality.

[“Stages of Partnerships”](#) (Office of Child Care, and Office of Head Start, 2014)

Although all partnerships are unique and different, they follow predictable stages. Navigating these stages skillfully ensures success. These stages are not unlike traditional phases that any strong relationship encounters as the partners learn more about each other in the process of building trust and respect. The stages of partnerships listed in this resource can serve as a guide for individual partners through a process that allows the partnership to grow from the early stages of coming together as strangers to a higher level of commitment.

Forming and Maintaining an Effective Team

[“The Intersector Toolkit: Tools for Cross-Sector Collaboration”](#) (The Intersector Project, 2017)

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

“The New Science of Building Great Teams” in *HBR’s 10 Must Reads on Teams* (Alex “Sandy” Pentland, 2013)

This book is a compilation of 10 articles that share real-world experiences, teaming theories, and new research about team building. These articles include quick tips in pullout boxes and other resources to help you carry out and reflect on efforts to build effective teams.

[“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.

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Virtual Relationship Building

[“Building Collaborative Virtual Teams: A Personal Interview with Jaclyn Kostner”](#) (Cinda Daly, n.d.)

This interview shares tips and ideas to use with virtual teams. Sharing the idea of eTeamwork, Jaclyn Kostner offers ideas and principles to help teams form virtual relationships. Highlighted are excerpts from her other books on this topic and the need for intentional, disciplined focus to ensure connections in virtual work.

[Directory of Virtual Meeting Tools](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness, 2015)

This resource shares a directory of virtual meeting tools such as conference calls, meeting platforms, document sharing, website design, hosting, and social media. At the end of the document, helpful charts—categorized with examples of resources and tools to use for virtual meetings—are available for review and consideration.

Managing Partners in Contracts

[Collaboration Checkup: Assessing and Improving Your Community Partnership](#) (Community Action Partnership, 2012)

This document combines empirical evidence of successful partnerships in a manner that can be applied to local community action agencies. The goal of this guide is to support organizations in understanding and assessing their partnerships, so they can more effectively develop and nurture those that have a measurable impact in local communities. Example surveys and other measurement tools to assess both the functioning of the partnerships and the results they achieve are provided.

[“PARTNER”](#) (Visible Network Labs, 2014)

PARTNER is a tool that allows people and organizations that work together as a network to measure and monitor collaborative activity over time. Using social network analysis, network measures indicate the progress of collaboration by assessing which partners are involved and the ways partners exchange resources and by providing a better understanding of the effort needed to sustain a collaborative. The tool also provides outcome measures related to the process of collaboration.

[Partnership Elements Worksheet](#) (Office of Child Care, and Office of Head Start, 2014)

This resource was created to support partners as they work together to build partnerships. The tool outlines the elements of a partnership and key questions and critical issues related to each element. It provides a mechanism for partners to consider their progress on each element and organize necessary action steps.

[Shaping the Partnership: An Assessment Checklist](#) (Office of Child Care, and Office of Head Start, 2014)

This assessment checklist will aid partners in identifying skills, developing strategies, and strengthening the results of their partnerships. This checklist should be completed with all actively involved partners. The tool has six sections: Planning and Developing the Partnership; Communicating, Decisionmaking, and Negotiating in the Partnership; Managing the Partnership; Leading the Partnership; Assessing and Stimulating Continual Improvement of the Partnership; and Partnering with the Greater Community. This resource also provides action plans to support partners in prioritizing next steps.

[The Good Collaboration Toolkit: An Approach to Building, Sustaining, and Carrying Out Successful Collaboration](#)

(The Good Project, 2013)

The Good Collaboration Toolkit is a set of 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. This toolkit gives participants an opportunity to work through exercises, as individuals and in groups that can be useful to the collaborative process.

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