


Leading by Listening.

Starting in spring of 2020, families, early childhood professionals and community and state leaders shared their insights and lived experiences with us.

In their voices, we hear a path to drive equitable solutions to close the opportunity gap among our youngest learners.



“ I hope our children are able to respond to the world around them with composure, have an equitable world in which connections to dreams exist for all of them, and that they have many opportunities to experience and learn repair as part of the process of well-being. ”

—Educare Leader, Oklahoma

Listening = Learning

Putting the voices of those most impacted by early childhood systems—families, early childhood professionals, community leaders—at the center of our collective work is critical. These conversations and what we have learned will set us on an informed path forward.

Start Early's *Build it Back Better Dialogues** effort engaged over 150 participants across 12 states and the District of Columbia—creating a space for us to hear directly from community and systems leaders right alongside families and caregivers. Early childhood practitioners, parents and community leaders—heroes on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic—provided critical insight into the disparities faced by many—including those that existed long before March 2020.

170
hours of
collected
insight



Key Concerns We Heard:

- Safety of children, families and caregivers
- Constant uncertainty
- Fear of worsening financial insecurity
- Increasing inequities, on the basis of race/ethnicity and/or income
- Lack of mental health and well-being supports
- Barriers to accessing resources

“We need to ask ourselves:

What is it that this country wants our children to experience?

What kind of citizens do we want them to become?

What skills do they need?

And of course, in each conversation, we need to ask ourselves: and how are the children?”

—Training & Development Coordinator,
Oklahoma

Listening = Actionable Data

Throughout the dialogues, themes emerged across the breadth of participants. Gathering the stories and combined depth of expertise revealed experiences common across communities, across districts, counties, states, and regions, and act as immediate guides to drive action. These themes map to priorities that will advance equity across our nation and in our individual communities when we decide to allocate emergency response investments and implement long-term systemic-change through policy.

Listening = Leading

As we work to address disparities rooted in our nation's history, seeking the expertise and insight of those most impacted by persistent disparities is a crucial step in realizing promises of equity and inclusion. For those working to rebuild and strengthen early childhood systems, listening to the families and caregivers of young children will ensure promotion of investments and policy that truly supports those who need it most.

“We are worried about the social and emotional development and relationship-based work at every level—including physical contact especially with younger children. Everything we know about child development is seemingly unavailable during this pandemic.”

—Educare Practitioner

Key Themes

FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS

“My support system is breaking.”

“My family's mental well being is worse than ever.”

“What about my child's safety?”

“Hope for more social support in schools.”

“We need better pay for teachers.”

“Hope for greater community involvement.”

COMMUNITY LEADERS

“Essential Services”

“Toxic Stress”

“Inequitable Access”

“System Fragmentation”

“Building Stronger Networks”

“Recognizing Value”

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM DESIGN:

- How will we ensure all families have efficient access to essential services (food, housing, child care)?
- How will we ensure adequate mental health supports available and accessible for children and the adults who care for them?
- How will we ensure children are safe both at home and in early learning and care settings?
- How will we eliminate systemic racism and inequitable policies that impact young children and families?
- How will we ensure all families have adequate financial resources and access to coordinated services?
- How will we ensure all early childhood professionals have adequate compensation and benefits?
- How will we foster public will and community involvement resulting in robust early childhood systems in every community?

Listening = Progress

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic swept across communities that were already at or near their breaking point, early childhood infrastructure and care supports were underfunded, understaffed and under never-ending threat of allowing another generation of children to lose out on opportunities to gain a stronger footing on their path to a fuller and healthier life. The optimistic voices we heard provided new solutions they were developing in support of children and families and one another and what their hopes were for progress.

“ Hopeful to see—
in our lifetime—
changes to
systemic racism. ”

—Training & Development
Coordinator,
Oklahoma

“ Basic needs—shelter, job,
food—are the critical concerns
now. How long will a road to
economic recovery be for
low-income families? ”

—HIPPY Program Associate,
Colorado

“ My hope is our children will
continue to grow and flourish
while they are apart from us.
I especially hope they grow up to
be successful members of society
and are happy and feel they have
the skills they need in life. ”

—Educare Leader,
Nebraska

Voices Across Early Childhood Systems

People from across the early childhood ecosystem have expressed what they want for their children and for all children. How do we build upon this? We need ongoing insight from parents, early childhood professionals, and community leaders in order to realize our collective vision to build back the early childhood system stronger and more responsive than ever. Are you gathering feedback or input from families or early childhood professionals? How are you centering the voices of those most impacted by early childhood policy and investments? We invite you to share your ideas and findings on the Early Childhood Connector. **Join the conversation at ecconnector.org.** Together, we will lead by listening to ensure we build back better.



Start Early (formerly known as the Ounce of Prevention) is a nonprofit public-private partnership advancing quality early learning and care for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to help close the opportunity gap. For nearly 40 years, Start Early has delivered best-in-class doula, home visiting and Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Bringing expertise in program delivery, research and evaluation, professional development and policy and advocacy, Start Early works in partnership with communities and other experts to drive systemic change so that millions more children, families and educators can thrive.

Learn more at www.StartEarly.org.

***The Build it Back Better Dialogues took place in the spring of 2020, and are not associated with the Build Back Better Framework.**