



# **First 5 Efforts to Engage Families and Shift Power:** A Review of Current Practices

REPORT  
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FIRST 5 CENTER FOR  
CHILDREN'S POLICY

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# Introduction

Within the early childhood context, family engagement refers to the process by which organizations and institutions build authentic relationships with families.<sup>1,2</sup> This process involves the “systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children’s development, learning, and wellness, including in planning, development, and evaluation.”<sup>3</sup> In the last decade, family engagement has grown as a priority area in early childhood policies, systems, and programs because research indicates how families’ involvement contributes to improved and sustained outcomes for children, families, and systems. In early childhood education, for example, family engagement has been shown to contribute to improvements in school readiness, language and literacy, and social-emotional development.<sup>4,5,6</sup> When parents are involved in early childhood programs and the community as leaders, these programs are better able to meet the needs of the children, families, and communities they serve.<sup>7,8</sup> Moreover, when programs empower parents and provide opportunities to build their leadership capacity, the more likely they will be involved with their children’s service providers.<sup>9</sup>

When family-serving programs, organizations, and systems provide opportunities for parents to shape services and influence policies, they are also sharing power with communities that have faced ongoing racial oppression and marginalization.<sup>10</sup> In this way, engaging families and building their leadership capacity can be a transformational strategy for early childhood systems to advance equity and build community power. Having families who are impacted by social challenges involved in the design and implementation of solutions is also key to improving the effectiveness of programs and services.<sup>11</sup> Families are most familiar with system barriers and the needs that services are designed to address. Therefore, family engagement can also promote the more efficient use of resources and can help services be more effective at improving target outcomes.

The central role of family engagement and its numerous benefits are not lost to First 5s – key architects in early childhood, family-serving systems in California. To better understand First 5s’ family engagement efforts, First 5 Center for Children’s Policy conducted a two-part qualitative research project involving interviews with local First 5s. This brief includes a description of the project’s methodology and findings, as well as lessons learned to support authentic, equity-centered engagement with families.

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# Methodology

The first part of the research into First 5s' family engagement efforts involved a review of responses from interviews conducted in 2021 for "The Role of First 5s in Home Visiting: Innovations, Challenges, and Opportunities in California."<sup>12</sup> This project consisted of interviews with 54 of the 58 First 5 commissions about their home visiting investments and included a question about the commissions' family engagement efforts. Their responses to this question provided high-level, point-in-time information about how many First 5s engage families and in what ways.

To round out information gathered from that project specific to family engagement efforts, we conducted a second set of interviews with a sample of First 5s in the fall of 2022. See Appendix A for a full list of participants and the process for interviewee selection. The findings in this brief reflect information gathered from both sets of interviews.



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# Findings

## 1. ALTHOUGH MOST FIRST 5S NO LONGER PROVIDE DIRECT SERVICES, ABOUT THREE-QUARTERS OF FIRST 5S ARE MAKING EFFORTS TO CONNECT WITH LOCAL FAMILIES.

An analysis of the responses from the 2021 interviews indicated that 40 of 54 – approximately 74% – of interviewed First 5s are directly engaging with families to inform and influence their programs, approaches, and/or investments. This is an important finding because, in the last decade, most First 5s have shifted from direct service provision to funding and systems-building roles within their counties. In home visiting, for example, only 9% of First 5s provide direct service, whereas 61% are funders of home visiting programs at local community-based organizations or other entities. For those First 5s who were engaging families even though they were not providing direct services, interviewees described a range of engagement strategies, including parent feedback mechanisms, like surveys and focus groups, to community organizing.

First 5s who indicated they were not engaging families often discussed their goals to develop more opportunities for parent feedback. First 5 San Francisco noted how its information gathering has typically been done through their grantees. First 5 San Francisco Interim Executive Director Theresa Zighera explained, “We don’t have a direct connection to parents. We want to improve on this and do it. It’s a big learning curve for us and how far removed from families we’ve gotten.”

## 2. FIRST 5S HAVE BEEN EXPANDING THEIR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS AS PART OF THEIR COMMITMENT TO EQUITY.

As indicated by interviews conducted with nine First 5s, there is a significant movement at the county level to engage parents and caregivers as part of First 5s’ commitment to equity. First 5 Orange, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and Monterey Counties, for example, described how their redesign and/or expansion of family engagement strategies were especially galvanized by the racial reckoning of 2020. They described a renewed commitment to identifying and addressing the root causes of social inequities and health disparities and saw family and community engagement as the key to advancing equity. Without the inclusion of family voices and sharing power with community members impacted by their First 5s’ investments, several interviews noted how they would be limited not only in advancing equity through their efforts but also in addressing root causes to improve outcomes for families of young children. If they wanted to understand and address the needs of young children, families, and communities, interviewees emphasized how they needed to hear from and partner with the recipients of the services supported by First 5 funding.

“We are shifting to intentionally include more community power for decision-making and implementation of our programs. We have always included community input as part of planning, strategy development, programming, and evaluation. However, I would say that now there is a deeper intention in our work to center Race, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion as part of those conversations and to move from community input toward actual decision-making. Populations that often are not called into systems change spaces are participating in capacity building so that they can more freely exercise their voice and power. This will help us get to the root causes of community challenges. If we want sustainability for our communities, this is our only option.”

—**Francine Rodd**

*Executive Director, First 5 Monterey*

“Our current systems are not set up to operationalize equity. Building the organizational capacity to do so requires intentional system change where agencies have the ability to receive direction from families and communities regarding approaches to public investments, program design, and data and evaluation.”

—**Kristin Spanos**

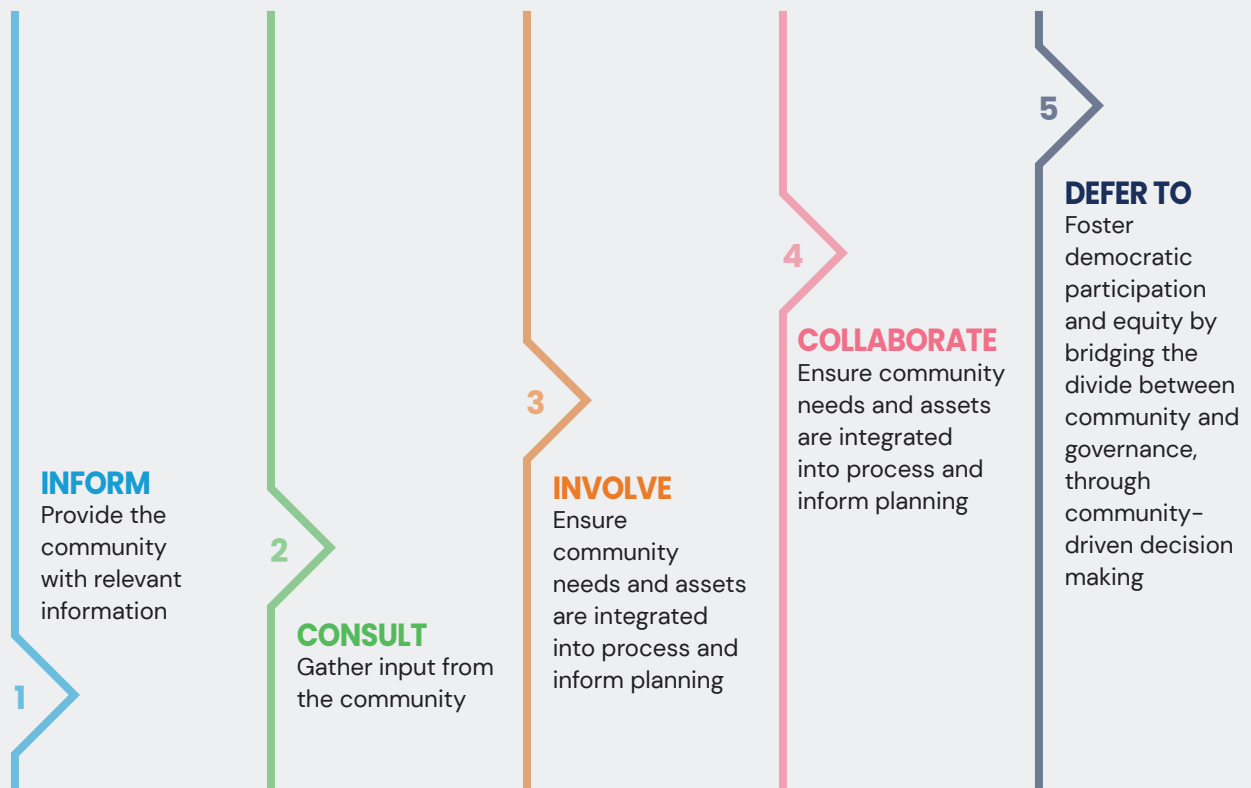
*Chief Executive Officer, First 5 Alameda*

### **3. FIRST 5S ARE ENGAGING FAMILIES IN A NUMBER OF IMPACTFUL WAYS THAT VARY IN THE DEGREE OF FAMILY-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING.**

Coinciding with the growing emphasis on family engagement in the past decade, family-serving entities have developed and utilized a number of toolkits and frameworks to support improvements in family engagement efforts. First 5 Monterey and Santa Cruz both utilize Facilitating Power’s “Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership,” which has helped them assess and visualize the developmental steps needed to deepen community participation (see Figure 1 below).<sup>13</sup> According to author Rosa González, more community power is possible when organizations and systems progress to the far right of the spectrum, where community-driven decision-making is at its highest.<sup>14</sup> The steps preceding, however, are equally important and necessary developmental stages for organizations and systems to build their capacity to support family-driven decision-making.

The family engagement strategies described by the nine interviewed First 5s are located at various stages on this developmental spectrum, indicating that their family engagement efforts vary in terms of how much families are driving decision-making. The sections below provide more information on the involve, collaborate, and defer to stages, as well as examples of First 5s in each of these stages.

**FIGURE 1: THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO OWNERSHIP.**



### *INVOLVE*

First 5 Fresno, Nevada, and San Mateo reported utilizing family engagement strategies that fall within the “Involve” developmental stage. When organizations are at this stage, they engage communities to ensure their needs and strengths inform planning for strategic investments and programs. Both First 5 Nevada and Fresno, for example, prioritized family voice in their most recent strategic planning effort. In their previous strategic planning, First 5 Nevada had spoken to service providers to determine the needs of families with young children. They recognized how this missed the direct experiences of parents, so their current planning efforts have involved over 30 listening sessions with parents, as well as over 175 online community surveys. In these listening sessions, First 5 Nevada has gained a more accurate understanding of the needs of families with young children and will be using the findings to shape their strategic plan and program investments.

First 5 Fresno led the community input process for a cross-sector effort to build an early childhood agenda for all of Fresno County.<sup>15</sup> After receiving facilitation training, First 5 Fresno staff facilitated a series of focus groups and large-group convenings with over 190 caregivers throughout the county to ask about their priority needs for children ages 0 to 5.



In addition to utilizing findings for the cross-sector Preconception to Age 5 Blueprint, First 5 Fresno also used what they learned from participants as a guide to shape their 2020–2025 Strategic Plan around addressing these key challenges in responsive and innovative ways.<sup>16</sup> Staff were surprised by the issues that bubbled up during their conversations with families, particularly that the needs voiced by families were not always the same as the needs of families voiced by service providers. These needs, which might not have been identified through their previous strategic planning processes, underscore the value of hearing directly from families.

At the height of the pandemic, First 5 San Mateo knew parents of young children were struggling, but wanted to improve their understanding of their specific challenges and provide support. Partnering with the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, First 5 San Mateo gathered stories of families who described experiences with their young children during the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> They plan to utilize the recommendations from interviewed families as they prepare for their next strategic plan.

### *COLLABORATE*

First 5 Yuba and El Dorado Counties use family engagement strategies that fall within the “Collaborate” developmental stage. Organizations in this stage build leadership capacity and engage the community as leaders in implementing decisions, then take active steps to increase access and opportunities for their constituents to collaborate and co-develop solutions for community challenges.

First 5 Yuba supports the leadership development of parents who have participated in their programs. It recently facilitated a weekly moms walking group for over 30 women, which focused on a maternal health curriculum incorporating self-care and other mental health topics. With a shift in funding, Yuba was no longer able to fully support staff in facilitating the group, but several mothers in the group noted an interest in taking up facilitation. Recognizing their initiative and engagement, First 5 Yuba trained several mothers as family member ambassadors, who now co-facilitate the group. First 5 Yuba has also maintained a connection with a mother and former childcare provider who participated in programs when her children were young. In addition to participating on the commission’s advisory committee, that same mother is completing her undergraduate degree and completing an internship with First 5 Yuba, where staff is supporting her professional development in many domains, including leading community engagement efforts.

First 5 El Dorado engaged families in the design of community advisories in the county’s five Community Hubs, which provide service connection and coordination to expectant parents and families with young children, improving systems of care throughout the county. They worked with Start Early– Early Learning Lab to implement a human-centered design approach, which involves parents and early childhood staff working and learning side-by-side to address key pain points relevant to early childhood systems.<sup>18</sup> Working with parents in these 5 communities, First 5 and Hub staff co-developed a long-term strategy for meaningfully engaging families in these advisories to support the continuous quality improvement of the Hubs. They are currently working to implement this strategy.

## *DEFER TO*

First 5 Alameda, Santa Cruz, Orange, and Monterey Counties reported engaging families in ways that fall within the “defer to” developmental stage. This stage is characterized by organizations making intentional efforts to defer to the community in decision-making whenever possible and there is a high degree of community participation. These processes could look like participatory action research, planning efforts where communities most impacted are at the decision-making table, and providing opportunities for community members’ civic engagement.

First 5 Alameda has been utilizing a participatory action research approach to their Kindergarten Readiness Inventory (KRI) efforts and convened a Research Advisory Group for their recent assessment. Half of this group consists of parents or caregivers who are paid for their time; the other half includes systems and community leaders, ECE providers, and teachers. The Research Advisory Group advises all aspects of the study design, including the research questions, the survey design and sample, and the analysis and dissemination of findings and recommendations to inform school readiness.

First 5 Santa Cruz sought community voices to inform planning for not only their First 5 efforts but also the wider early childhood system – while being mindful of parents’ capacity. They recently spearheaded an effort to expand community voice in their county’s cross-sector Thrive by Five Initiative (formerly Thrive by Three), which focuses on leveraging resources and increasing capacity and coordination among systems’ partners. From the outset, First 5 Santa Cruz aimed to co-create this effort with parents. Recognizing the importance of meeting community members in spaces where they are already at, First 5 Santa Cruz convened local family member leaders to develop a set of recommendations on how to support greater community-driven leadership and decision-making, outlining organizational practices that could support authentic, equity-driven community engagement. These recommendations laid the foundation for the longer-term community engagement now occurring with the initiative.<sup>19</sup>

First 5 Orange has developed a Family Ambassador Program, where Family Ambassadors and First 5 Orange staff (including consultants) work together to carry out the efforts of their assigned programs. In addition to their assigned programs, Family Ambassadors have also been involved in defining their role. They have convened a monthly family engagement working group consisting of First 5 staff and six ambassadors from some of Orange County’s most vulnerable neighborhoods. The working group co-developed a family engagement and leadership framework and toolkit, which provides First 5 program staff and their funded partners guiding principles and definitions about family engagement, with the goal of increasing family engagement and addressing access and equity throughout the County.<sup>20</sup> The working group is currently developing its long-term action plan for elevating equity through family member leadership.

First 5 Monterey has most recently been engaging families in two primary ways – through their strategic planning efforts and through their efforts to support parents’ civic engagement and power building. Their strategic planning process involved participation in a learning and working series with Monterey County regional government institutions, systems

partners, and community leaders representing families in a group known as COLIBRÍ: Collaboratively Organizing for Liberation, Inclusion, and Breaking Racial Inequities. Group members met monthly to develop a racial equity plan, which formed the basis of First 5 Monterey's strategic plan. An Action team made up of COLIBRÍ community leaders planned, presented, and facilitated community focus groups and developed recommendations. Approximately 100 parents, caregivers, and community members participated in 1-3 conversations about their dreams, challenges, and priorities for the young children in their lives. For First 5 Monterey, the process was not only about strategic planning, but also an opportunity to lean into more authentic community engagement, power building, and power sharing.<sup>21</sup>

First 5 Monterey, in partnership with First 5 San Benito and First 5 Santa Cruz, has also engaged families to support their civic engagement through the Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network (CCECAN), which convenes early childhood organizations, caregivers, and the early childhood workforce to advocate and strengthen policies and systems to support thriving families.<sup>22</sup> Back in 2020, CCECAN started hosting an annual Parent Power Summit, focused on bringing together local caregivers and other early childhood advocates to support social connection and leadership capacity. During that Summit, many parents expressed difficulty understanding early childhood systems and policies. This led the CCECAN planning team to pilot a Parent Policy Learning Community, developing their own curriculum and translating all materials into Spanish. Over the course of several sessions, parents learned about policymaking, including topics like collective power and advocacy, the legislative cycle, and effective storytelling. Following their participation in the learning community, parents were invited to legislative visits with their local representatives and spoke to important issues impacting their communities. The first learning community, which involved eight members, was such a success that the second learning community grew to 20 members, and the third community currently has over 70 participants. Parents are eager to meet on a semi-regular basis to talk about other advocacy opportunities. CCECAN intends to continue the Parent Power Summits, the Policy Learning Communities, and the legislative visits each year to build parents' leadership capacity.

#### **4. FIRST 5S ARE CHAMPIONING THE INCLUSION OF FAMILY VOICES AMONG THEIR PARTNERS.**

In addition to their own direct family engagement for strategic planning, 5 of 9 interviewed First 5s indicated that they advocate for the inclusion of family voice in cross-sector initiatives or build the capacity of their funded partners to enhance their family engagement activities. First 5 Nevada, for example, is part of the county's Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) planning process. One of the requirements of this process is the inclusion of parents and those with lived experience on planning teams. First 5 Nevada has been championing the inclusion of family member voices in this planning process, encouraging partners to consider how family member voices are authentically being used to guide their decision-making.

First 5 San Mateo prioritizes partnering with organizations that engage families directly. It also seeks to support and build the family engagement capacity of its partners' family-serving workforce. To this end, First 5 San Mateo supports Friday CAFEs (Community and Family Engagement), which are monthly learning communities for family engagement professionals to learn best practices for engaging diverse families. Family member leaders are invited to speak at the learning events, and as advisory members to inform planning for the learning communities.

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## Lessons Learned

Four key lessons emerged during discussions with the nine interviewed First 5s about best practices for authentic engagement with families.

### 1. CULTURAL HUMILITY IS FOUNDATIONAL TO BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES.

A common theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of grounding family engagement efforts in cultural humility. Several interviewees noted how cultural humility training supported self-reflection and recognition of implicit biases, as well as a deeper understanding of how structural racism is at the root of racial disparities. When engaging directly with families, cultural humility is critical to building trust and authentic relationships. A stance of humility acknowledges that families are the experts of their lived experiences and needs.

"It's helpful when we're in the presence of families to approach with humility, appreciation, and care. Go in kindly to yourself and the families. Go in without expectation of what's going to be said, but rather to be present and to hear."

—Hannah Norman

*Early Childhood Initiatives Director, First 5 Fresno*

### 2. RESOURCES ARE NEEDED TO BUILD TRUST.

Another major theme from interviews is that the process of building trust with families and communities takes time and resources. When recruiting parents, for example, interviewees' discussed how the inclusion of more than one family member voice can guard against tokenizing any one parent's experience. In order to support parents' success in engagement opportunities, organizations should also make efforts to provide sufficient information and context about the opportunity and their role. Organizations should also consider languages spoken by family participants, any need for simultaneous meeting interpretation and translation of meeting materials. Other meeting considerations include technology needs,

and selection of a time and location (if in-person) that works for diverse families, child care, and food.

Several First 5s have developed internal guidelines for compensating families, which is another way organizations can build trust. One challenge is that payments to households above \$600 must be reported as income, and may trigger a reduction in public assistance that the family receives through CalWORKs, CalFresh and/or WIC. First 5 Orange provides a stipend (\$50/hour, or \$595/year) to family member ambassadors giving them the opportunity to receive compensation while remaining under the \$600 threshold of taxable income.

First 5 Monterey attributes the success of its relationships with family member leaders to having a staff member whose role is to connect with families. They hired a bilingual English-Spanish community organizer who communicates regularly with family member leaders, providing follow-up with families following engagement, which supports ongoing relationships with families and reduces tokenization.

“Put [family engagement] in the budget so that you can provide incentives to parents. We need to find a way; because, as staff, we’re paid to provide our input. We want to provide the same value to caregivers’ time.”

—Melody Easton

*Executive Director, First 5 Nevada*

### 3. PARTNER WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS DOING THIS WORK WELL.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of partnering with other organizations that are already engaging parents well to support and inform new efforts to engage families. When conducting focus groups, First 5 Fresno leveraged its partner network to connect with existing family member advocacy groups through the local Head Start, allowing it to connect with families where they are already meeting rather than create another forum that may be time-consuming for families. Beyond local partners, some First 5s have sought out the support of other experts to build out their engagement efforts. First 5 El Dorado and Alameda have contracted with consultants who have demonstrated success engaging families with equity-centered approaches.

“There are people in our field that, in their core, are about having parent voice drive them. Listen to those people [...] ask them, ‘What are folks saying locally? How can we build the trusted relationships?’”

—Michelle Blakely

*Deputy Director, First 5 San Mateo*

#### 4. START WITH A VISION, BE OPEN TO CHANGE, AND BRING ALONG LEADERSHIP.

A few First 5s also discussed the importance of starting family engagement practices with an initial idea and goals for family engagement from the outset. Most interviewees, however, emphasized how including family voices and sharing power with families requires authentically listening to families and pivoting based on what families are saying. If parents are asked for their input, organizations should be as responsive as possible, turning ideas into thoughtful and timely action. Most First 5s described some level of trial and error in their efforts, which can result in efforts taking longer than expected.

Several First 5s identified how the support of their commissioners was also critical in the success of their family engagement efforts. For example, First 5 Monterey held a few half-day retreats for the commissioners, engaging them in conversations about the connection between racial equity and authentic community engagement. These conversations were pivotal in building the commitment of the commission to advance their efforts.

“It’s important that commissions are committed to Race, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and that we take the time to support them with understanding the ‘why’. We cannot expect our children to thrive and reach their unique potential unless our own staff, organizations, and systems are steeped in this work. Getting to a shared vision was achieved by working with the commission, our staff, partner organizations, and community members to build our own capacity to integrate these principles into our everyday work and systems.”

—**Francine Rodd**  
*Executive Director, First 5 Monterey*

# Endnotes

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