Introduction

The Early Childhood Systems Leadership Toolkit

I. What is the Early Childhood Systems Leadership Toolkit?

The Early Childhood Systems Leadership Toolkit (the toolkit) is a practical resource designed to help leaders understand, strengthen, and sustain coordinated early childhood systems. It translates research, field-tested frameworks, and real-world experience into accessible guidance that leaders can use to plan, design, implement, and improve system efforts over time.

Rather than presenting system building as a linear or purely technical process, this toolkit reflects the reality that early childhood systems are complex, cross-sector, and continuously evolving. It emphasizes both the visible elements of systems, such as governance, roles, and processes, as well as the less visible but equally critical conditions such as trust, communication, shared understanding, and the ability to learn and adapt together.

The goal is not only to help leaders know *what* to do, but to support *how* they prepare, think, lead, and work with others to strengthen coordinated early childhood systems. Throughout the toolkit, there is an emphasis on recognizing that effective systems are shaped not only by organizations and professionals, but also by families and communities whose experiences, perspectives, and leadership contribute to how systems function and evolve over time. By strengthening leaders' ability to work within these complex dynamics, the toolkit aims to support results that are coordinated, sustainable, and meaningful for children and families.

The Help Me Grow (HMG) Model is an evidence-informed, replicated system model designed to connect and strengthen the many sectors that serve young children and families, including health care, early care and education, early intervention, and family support. Through its National Affiliate Network, the HMG National Center works directly with state and local systems across varied contexts, supporting the development of infrastructure, partnerships, and continuous improvement processes that enable more effective and coordinated service delivery.

This real-world system building experience, combined with the National Center's role in supporting and learning from communities nationwide, positions National to translate both research and practice into actionable guidance for system leaders. In addition, the HMG Systems Leadership Learning Community (2024–2025)—a year-long initiative engaging HMG affiliates in structured learning, reflection, and application of core system leadership competencies—provided important insights into the challenges and opportunities leaders face in practice. Findings from this initiative, including the central role of systems thinking, trust-building, communication, and continuous learning, helped inform both the content and practical orientation of this toolkit.

Concepts and approaches included throughout the toolkit are grounded in research, implementation science, systems change frameworks, and field-based learning from early childhood systems efforts nationwide, with detailed citations provided in Section 4, References and Resources.

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Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed for individuals and groups who are building, strengthening, or supporting early childhood systems at the local, regional, state, or national level. Early childhood system leaders are not defined by a single title or formal role. Rather, they are defined by the function they serve: helping different partners work in more coordinated, aligned, and effective ways to improve outcomes for children and families.

These leaders may include:

- **System initiative leaders** who guide cross-sector strategy, coordination, and overall system performance.
- **Public sector leaders and staff** responsible for early childhood, health, education, and human services systems, who shape policy, funding, and accountability structures.
- **Backbone or coordinating entity leaders** who support alignment, manage shared infrastructure, and facilitate day-to-day system functioning.
- **Community and coalition leaders** who convene partners across sectors and advance shared priorities at the local or regional level.
- **Organization and program leaders** who contribute to system goals while also playing coordination, referral, or partnership roles beyond their own services.
- **Family leaders and caregivers** who contribute lived experience, help identify system strengths and challenges, inform priorities and decision-making, support change efforts, and partner with organizations to strengthen system design and functioning.
- **Funders, technical assistance providers, and policy leaders** who influence system direction through resources, guidance, and broader field priorities.

Many individuals may play more than one of these roles at the same time, depending on context and need.

Often, these leaders do not have formal authority over all parts of the system. Instead, they lead through influence, facilitating shared understanding, building relationships, aligning efforts, and creating the conditions for coordinated action. This includes family leaders, whose lived experiences and perspectives provide critical insight into how systems function in practice and how they can better meet the needs of children and families. The role of systems leaders is not only to guide strategy, but to help the system function more coherently, responsively, and effectively over time.

What do we mean by “system”?

A **system** is a group of interconnected people, families, organizations, structures, policies, resources, and activities that influence one another while working toward a common purpose or set of outcomes.

Systems are more than a collection of individual programs or organizations. The way the parts interact—including how information is shared, decisions are made, resources flow, and relationships are

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maintained—shapes how the system functions and the results it produces.

In early childhood, the system includes numerous sectors, partners, and supports that influence the well-being of young children and families, such as health care, early care and education, early intervention, family support, public health, and related services.

II. Why is this toolkit needed?

Early childhood systems are often referenced as if they are self-explanatory. They are not.

Strong systems are not built through strategy alone.

They depend on leadership that can translate complexity into coordinated action.

Across the country, leaders are expected to build and lead systems while simultaneously delivering results through them and, in many cases, helping partners understand what systems work is and why it matters. They are asked to "build the system," "strengthen coordination," "align partners," and "improve outcomes," often without a shared understanding of what an early childhood system actually is, how it functions in practice, or what is required to lead it effectively.

In reality, early childhood systems are complex and demanding. They span multiple sectors, organizations, funding streams, mandates, cultures, and accountability structures. They are shaped by policy environments, workforce capacity, local infrastructure, and changing community conditions. They are also shaped by something less visible but equally important: how people communicate, interpret the work, respond to pressure, navigate differences, and sustain trust over time.

Despite this complexity, many leaders take on system-level responsibilities with limited preparation, uneven guidance, and few practical resources that reflect the realities of the work. Existing tools often focus on individual programs, discrete initiatives, or high-level frameworks, without fully addressing how to translate those ideas into coordinated, sustained action across systems in real-world conditions. As a result, many early childhood systems experience recurring challenges that can limit coordination, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability:

- Systems may be designed but not consistently implemented in practice.
- Partnerships may exist but lack alignment, clarity, or sustained follow-through.
- Data may be collected but underused for shared learning, decision-making, and improvement.
- Progress may rely heavily on individual leaders, making efforts difficult to sustain through transitions or change.
- Partners may operate with different expectations, incentives, or definitions of success, limiting coordinated action.
- Uncertainty may exist about how to define, measure, and evaluate system-level progress and outcomes, particularly in contrast to program-level results.

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These challenges are not due to lack of commitment or effort. They reflect a gap between what the work requires and the support leaders are given to do it.

This toolkit is intended to help close that gap by offering clear explanations of how early childhood systems function, more explicit guidance on what leaders need to know and be able to do, and practical tools to support coordinated planning, implementation, and continuous improvement. It also brings greater visibility to the human dynamics that influence whether systems function effectively in practice, including trust, communication, shared understanding, and the ability to learn and adapt together over time. In doing so, it aims to help early childhood system leaders translate complexity into coordinated, sustained action that strengthens systems and improves outcomes for children and families.

III. What is the core organizing idea of this toolkit?

The toolkit is grounded in a core principle: leadership behavior and collaborative relationships shape system functioning, and system functioning shapes results over time.

This principle is grounded in a broad body of research and practice that examines not only what effective systems look like, but how leaders translate strategy into coordinated action in complex, real-world environments.

Within early childhood systems specifically, evidence from HMG Model implementation demonstrates that effective early childhood systems depend on coordinated core functions, shared measurement, and continuous improvement across a broader network of partners. However, the presence of these structures alone is not sufficient; how they are led, interpreted, and used in practice determines whether they function as intended.

Research from Clear Impact and the Results-Based Accountability framework reinforces the importance of disciplined decision-making—clarifying results, using data intentionally, and moving from discussion to action. At the same time, this work shows that tools and metrics are only effective when leaders are able to facilitate shared understanding and support coordinated follow-through across partners (Friedman, 2005; Clear Impact, n.d.).

The Water of Systems Change framework, which defines the conditions that need to be addressed to transform systems, further expands this understanding by highlighting that system outcomes are shaped not only by formal structures and policies, but also by relationships, power dynamics, and mental models. This reinforces the idea that system functioning depends on both visible infrastructure and less visible human and relational conditions (Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018).

Findings in implementation science further demonstrate that even well-designed strategies often fall short without attention to context, leadership, and the supports needed to enable behavior change in real-world settings. Frameworks such as the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research emphasize that leadership engagement, organizational readiness, and ongoing learning are critical to successful implementation (Damschroder et al., 2009; Nilsen, 2015).

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Across these bodies of work, a consistent gap emerges: while the field offers strong frameworks for *what* systems should do, there is less explicit guidance on *how* leaders translate those frameworks into coordinated, sustained action in complex, real-world environments. This gap between strategy and execution is where many system efforts stall.

Emerging research on leadership, decision-making, and collaboration further reinforces the importance of this "missing middle." Neuroscience and organizational behavior studies highlight how attention, stress, interpretation, and social dynamics influence how people make decisions, engage with others, and sustain coordinated action. Mindfulness-informed leadership practices and related research on self-regulation and adaptive leadership suggest that leaders' ability to pause, reflect, communicate clearly, and respond intentionally can directly affect group functioning, trust, and follow-through (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Rock, 2008; Good et al., 2016; Creswell, 2017).

Taken together, this body of work points to a consistent conclusion: outcomes are not produced by strategy alone. They depend on how leaders shape the conditions that enable people and organizations to align, act, learn, and adapt together over time.

This toolkit builds on that foundation by focusing not only on what *systems* should do, but on how *leaders* can strengthen the conditions that allow systems to function effectively in practice.

How can the "Leader → System → Results" relationship be understood?

- **Leader capacity and behavior** include what leaders know, how they think, how they plan, how they communicate, how they regulate themselves under pressure, and how they build, maintain, and repair relationships with others. It includes technical knowledge, but also facilitation skills, sound judgment, self-awareness, adaptability, and the ability to create clarity in ambiguous conditions.
- **System functioning** refers to how the system actually operates in practice. Do partners have shared understanding? Are governance structures and roles clear? Do referral and communication pathways work? Is data used for learning or only for reporting? Can the system adapt when conditions change? Are families able to access services effectively, contribute their expertise, and influence how the system improves over time?
- **Results over time** include stronger coordination, clearer pathways for families, better use of resources, improved implementation, stronger shared learning, greater durability of system efforts, and ultimately, better outcomes for children and families.

Again, a key implication follows: Better outcomes depend not just on strategy, but on the quality of leadership, the strength of relationships, the usefulness of structures, and the system's ability to learn and adapt over time.

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IV. How should this toolkit be used?

This toolkit is designed to support leaders at all stages of system development. Some users may be launching or redesigning a local- or state-level effort. Others may be working to strengthen an existing system that has stalled, become fragmented, or outgrown its original structure. Some sections of the toolkit can be read straight through, while others can be used as working resources for planning sessions, leadership retreats, partner meetings, onboarding, or continuous improvement efforts. Detailed citations and additional resources referenced throughout the toolkit are included in Section 4, References & Resources.

Throughout the toolkit, readers will find four types of support:

- Explanation of core concepts in plain language
- Practical reflection and planning tools
- Examples and placeholders that can eventually be adapted or populated locally
- References and citations connecting toolkit concepts to research, implementation science, systems-change frameworks, and related early childhood systems resources

V. What are the contents of this toolkit?

Section 1 of this toolkit establishes a foundation for understanding how early childhood systems function in real-world environments. It examines the core characteristics of these complex systems and the structural and relational conditions that shape coordination and results, while clarifying the central role of leadership in influencing system performance. Section 1 also includes a Cross-Sector Engagement Tool designed to help leaders and partners better understand and strengthen existing partnerships, build new relationships, or more intentionally align partnership efforts with current system priorities. This tool will assist teams in identifying actions that strengthen alignment, coordination, and shared progress across collaborative efforts.

Sections 2-4 build upon the foundation established in Section 1, moving from understanding how early childhood systems function to outlining the core leadership competencies needed for effective practice. These competencies serve as a bridge between knowing how systems work and leading within them—regardless of a leader's experience or stage of system development. Tools support ongoing reflection, monitoring, and continuous improvement to help systems leaders individually and collectively assess system functioning and their role in it. The toolkit also includes detailed citations, references, and additional resources that readers can use to further explore early childhood systems concepts, implementation science, systems-change research, leadership frameworks, and related tools that informed this toolkit.

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