Section 1:
System Foundations

The Early Childhood Systems Leadership Toolkit

SECTION 1 KEY IDEA

Strong early childhood systems depend not only on structures and strategies, but also on leaders' ability to recognize and navigate the real-world conditions and human dynamics that shape system functioning.

I. Section 1 overview

The intent of Section 1 is to ground us in how early childhood systems function in real-world practice, with a particular focus on helping leaders explicitly recognize the characteristics, conditions, and human dynamics that often shape and influence the realities and nuances of systems work.

As illustrated in Figure 3, effective leadership strengthens how systems function and, over time, influences results for children and families. The knowledge leaders bring, the behaviors they model, and the influence they exercise all shape how partners communicate, coordinate, interpret shared goals, respond to challenges, and sustain collaborative action across organizations and sectors. In this way, leadership is not separate from system functioning; it is one of the conditions that continuously shapes it in practice.

Figure 3.

While early childhood systems are frequently discussed across policy, funding, and implementation efforts, the realities of how these systems operate—and what leaders must navigate to guide them effectively—are not always clearly defined or openly acknowledged. As described in the Introduction, early childhood systems are shaped not only by structures, strategies, and formal partnerships, but also

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by the quality of communication, shared understanding, trust, coordinated action, and the ability to learn and adapt across organizations and sectors as systems evolve.

This section therefore focuses on making visible many of the often-unstated conditions that shape how systems function in practice. It clarifies how systems differ from individual programs, why coordination across sectors is inherently complex, and how leadership behavior influences whether systems become aligned, responsive, and sustainable. In doing so, Section 1 establishes the conceptual foundation for the leadership competencies explored in Section 2 and the practical reflection and monitoring tools introduced in Section 3. As illustrated in Figure 2, the toolkit is intentionally organized to move from establishing a common grounding in systems functioning, to strengthening leadership practice, to supporting ongoing reflection, coordinated implementation, and continuous improvement.

II. Learning objectives for Section 1

After completing this section, leaders will be able to:

1. **Describe** early childhood systems as coordinated, interdependent networks rather than standalone programs.
2. **Identify** the seven core characteristics of early childhood systems, including (a) multiple sectors and partners; (b) interdependence; (c) separate and overlapping structures; (d) shared responsibility and decision-making; (e) dynamic conditions; (f) structural and relational conditions; and (g) human-centered dynamics.
3. **Differentiate** between structural elements and relational conditions and explain how each influences system functioning.
4. **Explain** the role of complexity in shaping system performance and leadership decision-making.
5. **Recognize** the human dynamics that influence collaboration, including trust, communication, shared understanding, and the ability to navigate differences.
6. **Apply** an understanding of real-world conditions to planning and implementation, moving beyond idealized assumptions.
7. **Articulate** how leadership practice influences system functioning and contributes to long-term results.
8. **Use** concepts, examples, tools, and resources from this section to strengthen coordination, exchange of information, and alignment in their own systems.

III. What are early childhood systems?

An early childhood system is not a single program, a single organization, or a loose collection of services. It is a coordinated set of relationships, structures, functions, behaviors, and processes through which organizations, communities, and families work together to support children and families. In a strong system, partners are not simply working near one another; they are working in concert with one

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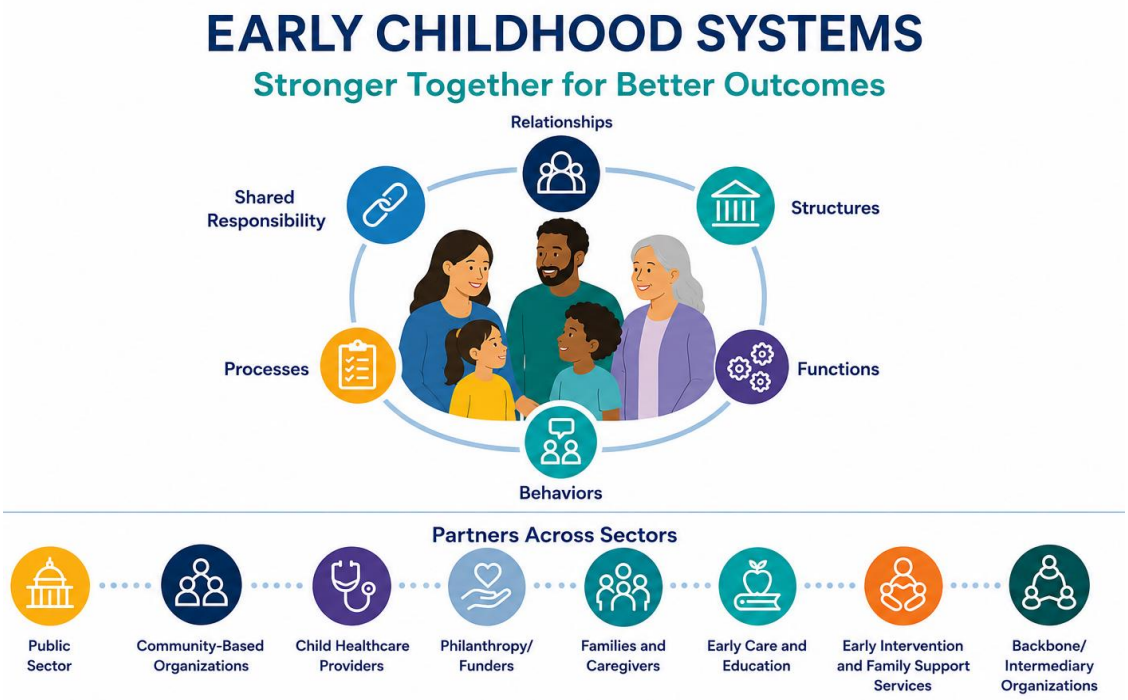
another, with enough alignment, dialogue, and shared responsibility to improve how the whole system functions.

Early childhood systems are designed to improve outcomes for children and families by bringing together partners across sectors such as health care, early care and education, early intervention, family support, and public health. As shown in Figure 4, these systems address complex, interconnected needs that no single organization can meet alone.

Figure 4.



IV. Background: Help Me Grow and the toolkit

The evidence-informed Help Me Grow Early Childhood Model offers a practical, widely implemented example of how these system concepts come to life in practice. The Help Me Grow (HMG) Model operationalizes a coordinated approach by defining a set of core functions that help partners work in alignment: connecting families to services through coordinated access pathways; reaching and engaging families and communities; supporting providers to promote developmental health; and using data to identify gaps, guide decisions, and strengthen partnerships. In this way, the Model reflects the structural and relational conditions described above, making visible how coordinated functions, shared responsibility, and continuous information flow enable systems to respond to complex, interconnected needs. Importantly, data is not simply a reporting function; it is an active driver of system functioning, supporting co-design with stakeholders, tracking progress, identifying emerging needs, and informing continuous improvement.

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Building on this practical, field-tested Model, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supported the HMG National Center in developing this toolkit, in response to a clear and consistent need across the field: support for the leadership practices that enable coordinated systems to function effectively in real-world conditions. Drawing on the implementation experience of HMG affiliates and the Model's emphasis on aligned functions, shared responsibility, and data-informed improvement, this toolkit is designed to strengthen the capacity of early childhood system leaders to translate systems concepts into sustained, collaborative action.

This focus on leadership capacity builds directly on prior efforts within the HMG National Affiliate Network, including the Systems Leadership Learning Community. Sponsored by the HMG National Center, this structured, year-long initiative (September 2024–September 2025) created a forum for state and local early childhood systems to strengthen systems leadership practice, share experiences, test strategies, and refine implementation in real-world settings. In doing so, it reinforced a systems approach to change that recognizes how leader capacity and relationships shape system functioning and how system functioning, in turn, influences results for children and families. Through this cross-site learning and application, participants contributed to a growing body of practice-based evidence that complements the research base and informs continuous improvement of both the HMG Model and this toolkit.

Insights from the Learning Community illustrate how early childhood systems function in practice, highlighting not only the importance of core system functions, but also the conditions that enable those functions to operate effectively across diverse contexts. Together, these experiences underscore that successful implementation requires more than adopting a model; it depends on sustained attention to coherence, information-sharing, relationship-building, and ongoing adaptation.

This toolkit builds on those collective insights, translating lessons from the HMG Affiliate Network and its Systems Leadership Learning Community into practical guidance for leaders working to build, strengthen, and sustain early childhood systems.

These lessons are consistent with and reinforced by a broader body of research and practice on collective impact, systems change, implementation science, continuous improvement, and collaborative leadership. This body of work includes contributions from organizations such as FSG, the Tamarack Institute, and the HMG National Center, as well as thought leaders and researchers including John Kania, Mark Kramer, Peter Senge, Mark Friedman, Dean Fixsen, and Per Nilsen. Collectively, this research points to a dual requirement for effective systems:

- Strong infrastructure (e.g., governance, data collection and sharing, resource management, and coordination mechanisms)
- Strong relational conditions that support collaboration (e.g., trust, mutual respect, communication, shared understanding, and shared ownership)

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Research on collective impact, systems change, Results-Based Accountability, implementation science, and organizational learning indicates that early childhood systems function most effectively when partners:

- **Share a common understanding** of goals, roles, and responsibilities (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018)
- **Communicate consistently and clearly** across organizations and sectors (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Damschroder et al., 2009)
- **Coordinate actions across sector and organizational boundaries** (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Nilsen, 2015)
- **Use data for learning, decision-making, and improvement**—not simply for reporting (Friedman, 2005; Help Me Grow National Center, n.d.)
- **Adapt strategies and approaches as conditions change** (Damschroder et al., 2009; Nilsen, 2015; Kania et al., 2018)
- **Demonstrate self-awareness, self-regulation, and intentional leadership** behaviors that support productive collaboration and decision-making under pressure (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Good et al., 2016; Creswell, 2017).

Strong systems are not defined solely by how they are designed, but by how they operate day to day through behaviors, relationships, information sharing, and synchronized activities. Importantly, early childhood systems are not built once and then simply maintained; they are shaped and reshaped through ongoing cycles of alignment, action, reflection, and adaptation.

The knowledge leaders bring, the behaviors they model, and the influence they exercise across time and repeated interactions play a central role in shaping how systems function in practice and whether coordinated efforts translate into meaningful results for children and families.

V. Seven defining characteristics of early childhood systems

Given the central role leadership and collaborative relationships play in shaping how early childhood systems function and achieve results, it is important to develop a shared understanding of the conditions, dynamics, and realities that distinguish systems work from program-level efforts. Early childhood system leaders, partners, families, and community members bring valuable expertise and perspectives to this work, yet the characteristics of systems functioning are not always made explicit during system design and implementation.

Making these characteristics more visible helps participants better understand how their actions, relationships, and decisions influence system functioning. It also strengthens the capability, opportunity, and motivation of partners to engage in coordinated action and contribute to shared goals. Capability, opportunity, and motivation are key drivers of behavior change identified in the Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, and Behavior (COM-B) model, a framework for understanding and influencing behavior change (Michie, van Stralen, & West, 2011).

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Seven defining characteristics of early childhood systems, grounded in research and field-based experience—including insights from the HMG National Network and other social impact efforts—reflect both established frameworks and real-world application.

Described in Figure 5, these characteristics include:

1. Multiple sectors and partners
2. Interconnected components
3. Separate and overlapping structures
4. Shared responsibility and decision-making
5. Changing conditions
6. Structural and relational conditions
7. Human-centered dynamics

These characteristics do not operate in isolation; they function as an interconnected set of conditions that collectively shape how early childhood systems are designed, implemented, and sustained:

- Cross-sector coordination and interdependence establish the foundation for shared work.
- Separate and overlapping structures, along with distributed responsibility and decision-making, introduce complexity that requires intentional coordination, shared interpretation, and ongoing engagement across partners. Shared responsibility also includes meaningful participation by families and communities in shaping priorities, implementation, and improvement efforts.
- Dynamic conditions require continuous adaptation.
- Relational and human-centered dynamics influence the effectiveness of both structures and strategies.

In practice, system performance emerges from how these characteristics interact throughout phases of implementation through ongoing alignment, strategic and consistent communication, and adaptation. When intentionally addressed together, they enable more coherent coordination, more responsive implementation, and stronger outcomes for children and families.

These characteristics help explain why early childhood systems function differently than traditional programs or organizations. Making these conditions visible allows leaders and partners to better anticipate challenges, align expectations, and design more realistic approaches to collaboration and implementation.

While these characteristics describe different aspects of early childhood systems, they also reflect two interconnected dimensions of system functioning: the structural and operational conditions that organize the work, and the human and relational conditions that influence how people engage within it.

Figure 5.

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7 Defining Characteristics of Early Childhood Systems

EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM CHARACTERISTIC	DEFINITION	IDEAL FUNCTIONING
1. **Multiple sectors and partners**	Early childhood systems involve multiple sectors and organizations that interact around shared populations and overlapping needs.	***Ideally,*** partners communicate regularly, clarify roles, and coordinate efforts so children and families experience more connected and coherent support.
2. **Interdependence**	Actions taken by one part of the system influence and are influenced by other parts of the system.	***Ideally,*** partnering organizations recognize their individual strengths and collective influence. They work collaboratively to support shared goals and improve overall system functioning.
3. **Separate and overlapping structures**	Services, funding, policies, and responsibilities are often spread across separate organizations, sectors, and systems.	***Ideally,*** leaders and partners intentionally align efforts, reduce duplication, and create clearer pathways for children and families.
4. **Shared responsibility and decision-making**	Responsibility, authority, influence, and decision-making are distributed across multiple organizations and stakeholders.	***Ideally,*** partners engage in transparent, shared decision-making processes and work through collaboration rather than seeking independent control.
5. **Dynamic conditions**	Early childhood systems operate within changing environments shaped by policy, funding, workforce, community, and social conditions.	***Ideally,*** systems adapt effectively to changing conditions through continuous learning, communication, and coordinated adjustment over time.
6. **Structural and relational conditions**	System functioning is shaped by both formal structures (e.g., policies, procedures, data systems) and interpersonal dynamics (e.g., trust, communication, relationships).	***Ideally,*** structures and relationships reinforce one another to support alignment, coordination, accountability, and effective implementation.
7. **Human-centered dynamics**	System functioning is affected by how people experience their work, relationships, responsibilities, and environments.	***Ideally,*** leaders and partners create conditions that support trust, engagement, communication, reflection, and sustainable collaboration over time.

Figure 6 illustrates that effective system functioning depends not only on how systems are structured, but also on how people interpret, experience, and engage within those structures across time.

Figure 6.

Two Interconnected Dimensions of Early Childhood System Functioning

SYSTEM CONDITIONS The structures and operational conditions that shape the work	HUMAN CONDITIONS The relational and human dynamics that influence how people engage
Governance and Leadership	Trust and Mutual Confidence
Resources and Funding	Communication and Dialogue
Data and Information	Shared Understanding
Coordination and Processes	Psychological Safety
Policies and Requirements	Ability to Navigate Differences

Effective early childhood systems depend on both dimensions.
Strong structures and processes create the conditions for success, while healthy relationships and human dynamics bring the work to life.

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Together, these characteristics and dimensions help explain why early childhood systems work is frequently misunderstood when approached as if it were a single program, organization, or initiative rather than a dynamic, coordinated system operating across sectors and conditions. Recognizing these distinctions helps leaders more effectively anticipate complexity, guide collaboration, and support coordinated action across stages of implementation.

> **RESEARCH INSIGHT**
>
> "Shifts in systems happen when attention is paid not only to policies and practices but also to relationships, power dynamics, and mental models."
> — Peter Senge, John Kania, & Mark Kramer, *The Water of Systems Change* (2018)

VI. Why early childhood systems are often misunderstood

A common challenge in early childhood system building is the tendency to approach it as if it were program implementation. While this is a natural starting point given that many leaders bring deep experience from programmatic settings, it can obscure key differences between programs and systems that affect how work unfolds in practice.

> **RESEARCH INSIGHT**
>
> "Focusing on individual programs is insufficient to achieve population-level outcomes; improvement requires coordinated action across the system."
>
> — Center for the Study of Social Policy

Programs are typically designed to deliver a defined set of services within a single organization or model, with clearer lines of authority, control, and accountability. Systems, by contrast, require the coordinated action of multiple organizations, sectors, and functions that were not originally designed to operate as a unified whole. These partners may share a commitment to improving outcomes for children and families, but they often operate under different mandates, funding structures, timelines, and definitions of success. This has important implications for how systems must be designed, led, and sustained (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2020) relative to programs. As illustrated in Figure 7, the differences between program and system approaches extend beyond structure to include how work is coordinated, decisions are made, and accountability is shared across partners.

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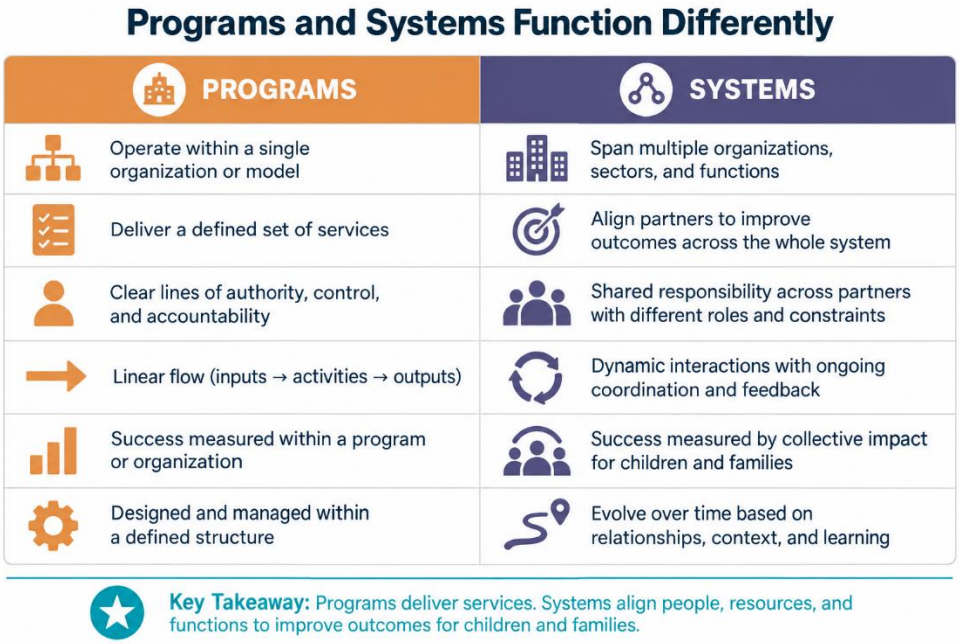
Figure 7.



Focusing primarily on plans, roles, or structures captures only part of what is required for system functioning. When systems work is approached primarily as a matter of developing plans, assigning committees, or selecting indicators, there is a risk of underestimating what is required to achieve coordinated action across partners. Systems do require clear plans, defined roles, shared measures, and supporting structures. However, these elements alone are not sufficient. Effective systems also depend on how partners interpret shared goals, how decisions are made and communicated, and how synchronized effort is maintained as conditions change (Aarons et al., 2011; FSG, 2016).

This distinction reflects a broader insight from systems thinking and implementation research: system performance is shaped not only by formal strategies, but also by the conditions that influence how people work together in real-world settings (Tamarack Institute, 2020; Damschroder et al., 2009). These conditions include clarity of purpose, mutual trust among partners, shared learning, perceived fairness, and the ability to adapt to emerging challenges. When these conditions are not intentionally supported, even well-designed strategies may not be implemented as intended. Understanding this distinction can help early childhood system leaders more accurately anticipate what is required to support effective system functioning.

FROM THE FIELD: Help Me Grow Systems Leadership Learning Community

"System leadership is both challenging and deeply rewarding. It requires more than just managing from the perspective of one's own organization or role—it demands foresight and a broad understanding of the entire community's needs and dynamics."— HMG System Leader

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VII. The importance of understanding partner operating conditions across sectors

Early childhood systems bring together partners from multiple sectors, each operating under distinct conditions, expectations, and constraints. These differences shape how partners make decisions, engage in collaboration, and respond to shared system goals. Partners are often working from different "rulebooks" shaped by their sector's requirements, constraints, and norms, even when they are working toward the same outcomes. As a result, developing a shared understanding of these dynamics is not a one-time task, but an ongoing leadership responsibility that evolves alongside the work.

These operating conditions are both structural (e.g., funding requirements, accountability measures, staffing capacity) and cultural (e.g., long-standing paradigms, professional norms, and organizational practices). Together, these characteristics reflect both system-level operating conditions and the human dynamics that influence how people engage, collaborate, and respond within those conditions. They influence how partners define success, assess risk, prioritize work, and determine what is feasible within their roles.

In practice, differences in participation, pace, communication, or decision-making are often interpreted as differences in commitment or priorities. However, these variations are frequently rooted in underlying conditions such as incentives, constraints, professional expectations, and organizational roles that may not be immediately visible to others.

Recognizing this distinction can help leaders shift from *attributing intent* to *building understanding*. Over time, effective systems leaders go a step further by intentionally fostering a culture in which differences across partners and sectors are not only understood but valued as strengths. When partners appear misaligned, the more useful question is often not *"Why aren't they aligned?"* but *"What conditions might be shaping how they are engaging?"*

Increasing shared understanding of these factors can reduce misinterpretation, strengthen trust and openness, and support more effective coordination across partners. This understanding develops through reflection, dialogue, and ongoing adjustment as conditions change.

While every community is unique, partners often bring patterns of thinking and operating shaped by the sectors in which they are rooted. These patterns are not problems to solve; they are conditions to understand, work with, and intentionally align, often serving as sources of strength when engaged effectively. As relationships deepen and new partners participate, leaders may need to revisit and refine this understanding iteratively.

The sections that follow illustrate how these operating conditions and sector-specific paradigms may influence participation in system efforts and how leaders can respond in practice.

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A. Public Sector

Public sector partners often operate from a population-level perspective, with a strong emphasis on prevention, accountability, and long-term outcomes. Their work is shaped by distinct operating conditions including funding cycles, compliance mandates, policy priorities, and formal reporting requirements. These conditions influence how decisions are made, how quickly action can occur, and how success is defined and measured. For example, a state health official may need to align early childhood system strategies with federal funding requirements and procurement processes, shaping both the pace of decision-making and the structure of how partners can engage in collaborative work.

Public sector leaders responsible for administration, policy, and oversight (not direct service delivery) may include state or local health department officials, Medicaid administrators, public health program managers, and leaders of public early childhood and education agencies (e.g., state pre-kindergarten, child care administration, early intervention systems), as well as other government staff supporting services for children and families.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Decision-making is often shaped by regulations, procurement processes, and leadership transitions.
- There is a strong emphasis on population-level data, trends, and measurable impact.
- Longer timelines are often required to demonstrate outcomes.
- Priorities are closely tied to state and federal policy direction.
- Actions that may appear slow or cautious are often responses to accountability and risk management requirements.

Positive Practices

- Align system strategies with policy and regulatory requirements where possible.
- Plan for longer timelines and more structured decision-making processes.
- Recognize how accountability and risk considerations influence participation and pace.
- Communicate in ways that acknowledge constraints while maintaining shared direction and forward momentum.
- Support partners in accurately interpreting public sector dynamics to reduce misalignment and strengthen connection across sectors.

HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Public Sector

A statewide HMG affiliate works with state public health officials to align system activities with federal funding and reporting requirements.

✓ Recognizing that procurement processes and compliance expectations shape the pace of implementation, system leaders adjust timelines and align system strategies with existing funding structures.

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✓ By working with these constraints while maintaining shared goals, partners are able to move forward more efficiently and sustain public sector engagement in system coordination.

B. Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are often deeply rooted in the communities they serve, with a primary focus on meeting immediate family needs, building trust, and maintaining responsive, relationship-centered services. Their work is shaped by operating conditions such as funding variability, workforce capacity constraints, and the need to remain flexible to evolving community needs. These conditions influence how CBOs prioritize work, allocate time, and engage in broader system efforts. For example, a local organization may need to prioritize urgent family needs while managing limited staffing, which can affect its ability to consistently participate in system meetings or take on additional coordination activities.

Community-based leaders may include nonprofit directors, family support providers, home visiting staff, and leaders of other frontline organizations working directly with children and families.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Work is often centered on direct service delivery and real-time responsiveness to families.
- Funding may be time-limited, restricted, or uncertain, affecting stability and planning.
- Workforce capacity is frequently stretched, with staff balancing multiple roles.
- Strong community relationships, trust, and transparency are central to effectiveness.
- Variability in participation or pace often reflects capacity constraints rather than lack of commitment.

Positive Practices

- Balance expectations for system participation with the realities of direct service delivery demands.
- Leverage CBOs' real-time insights and community knowledge to inform system decisions.
- Be attentive to capacity and avoid overburdening partners with additional responsibilities.
- Create flexible and meaningful ways to participate that do not compromise service delivery.
- Recognize and reinforce human-centered, family-oriented care as a core system asset.

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HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Community-Based Organizations

A local HMG system serving a single county operates through a Coordinated Access Network in which a collaborative of trusted community-based organizations (CBOs)—selected through a community-informed process reflecting the populations and families served—shares responsibility for referral coordination, family connection, and linkage to developmental and family support services.

- ✓ By engaging CBOs through a community-driven selection and leadership approach, system leaders strengthen shared ownership and create a more distributed model of system coordination grounded in direct service experience, trusted relationships, and real-time understanding of family needs.
- ✓ This approach helps increase consistency in participation across broader system efforts while ensuring that implementation decisions are informed by frontline perspectives, family experiences, and evolving community conditions.

C. Child Health Care Providers

Health care providers operate within complex clinical and organizational environments, with a primary focus on patient care, clinical outcomes, and practice standards. Their participation is shaped by operating conditions such as reimbursement structures, productivity expectations, regulatory requirements, and tightly structured workflows. These conditions influence how providers allocate time, evaluate priorities, and engage in activities beyond direct care. For example, a pediatric practice may need to incorporate developmental screening and referral processes into tightly scheduled visits, influencing how easily system processes can be adopted within existing clinical workflows.

Child health care partners may include pediatricians, nurses, practice managers, hospital systems, and other clinical providers.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Clinical care and patient outcomes are primary drivers of decision-making.
- Time is highly constrained, with schedules structured around patient volume and care delivery.
- Workflows are tightly defined, often leaving limited flexibility for additional activities.
- Reimbursement models and billing requirements influence priorities and participation.
- Engagement often depends on clear alignment with clinical value and feasibility.
- Limited responsiveness may reflect workflow constraints rather than lack of interest.

Positive Practices

- Integrate system activities into existing clinical workflows wherever possible.
- Align system goals with clinical priorities, quality measures, and practice standards.

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- Design participation opportunities that are efficient, clearly defined, and scheduled before or after daily patient care.
- Communicate in concise, actionable ways suited to fast-paced environments.
- Identify and elevate value for providers (e.g., improved coordination, better outcomes).
- Support trusted relationships and champions within health care settings.

HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Child Health Care Providers

A regional HMG system serving two counties partners with pediatric practices within Federally Qualified Health Centers serving many families to strengthen referral pathways for developmental and family support services.

- ✓ Recognizing the time pressures and workflow demands within clinical settings, system leaders work collaboratively with providers to integrate developmental screening and referral processes into existing care routines rather than introducing separate or duplicative tasks.
- ✓ By simplifying forms and referral procedures, aligning processes with clinical quality measures, and establishing clear communication and follow-up pathways, system leaders and providers are increasing provider participation and improving the consistency and coordination of referrals.

D. Families

Families are integral participants in early childhood systems and may engage as caregivers, advocates, advisors, leaders, volunteers, peer supporters, coalition members, and community representatives. Their perspectives are shaped by direct experience navigating services, supports, and systems across sectors.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Families often experience the effects of fragmentation more directly than organizations.
- Participation may be strongly influenced by time, transportation, childcare, language, trust, accessibility, and prior experiences.
- Families bring expertise that complements professional and organizational perspectives.
- Family priorities may differ from organizational or system priorities.

Positive Practices

- Engage families early and consistently.
- Compensate participation when appropriate.
- Reduce barriers to participation.

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- Create opportunities for shared influence rather than consultation alone.

E. Philanthropy/Funders

Philanthropic organizations and funders often focus on measurable impact, strategic priorities, and opportunities to drive innovation. Their engagement is shaped by operating conditions such as funding cycles, board expectations, defined areas of focus, and the need to demonstrate results and stewardship of resources. At times, expectations for collaboration or rapid progress may be shaped without full visibility into the time, resources, and relationship-building required for effective cross-sector systems work. These conditions influence how funders make decisions, assess progress, and engage with system efforts. For example, a foundation may need to align investments with board-approved priorities and funding cycles, shaping expectations for timelines, measurable outcomes, and the pace of system progress.

Funders may include private foundations, community foundations, United Ways, and other grant-making organizations.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Priorities are guided by strategic goals, board direction, and defined focus areas.
- Funding is often time-limited, with expectations for measurable progress.
- There may be an emphasis on innovation, scaling, and visible impact.
- Decision-making timelines are influenced by grant cycles and reporting requirements.
- Funder expectations for collaboration and pace may not always reflect the time, resources, and relationship-building required for effective cross-sector systems work.
- Shifts in funding may reflect strategic repositioning rather than lack of commitment.

Positive Practices

- Align system strategies with funder priorities while maintaining a clear long-term vision.
- Communicate progress, challenges, and learning in clear, consistent ways, using both short- and long-term indicators.
- Build shared understanding with funders about the time, resources, and relationship-building required for effective systems change.
- Engage funders as partners in learning and adaptation, not only as resource providers.
- Encourage funding approaches that support collaboration, sustained coordination, and long-term system development.

> **HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Philanthropy/Funders**
>
> A statewide HMG affiliate works with a local private philanthropic funder to support system coordination efforts.

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- ✓ While the funder initially prioritized short-term service delivery investments, system leaders engaged them in ongoing conversations about the time, relationship-building, and shared alignment required to support authentic cross-sector collaboration and meaningful family engagement in systems efforts.
- ✓ By sharing progress indicators alongside longer-term goals, system leaders have helped the partnership evolve to include more flexible funding for coordination activities such as parent engagement, strengthening system infrastructure.

F. Early Care and Education

Early care and education partners operate in relationship-centered environments focused on child development, learning, and family engagement. Their work is shaped by operating conditions such as workforce capacity challenges, funding constraints, regulatory requirements, and the demands of daily program operations. For example, an early childhood program may need to balance staffing ratios, regulatory requirements, and daily classroom responsibilities, which can limit flexibility for participation in system-level coordination activities.

Partners may include childcare providers, pre-K programs, and Head Start staff.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Work is grounded in daily, relationship-based interactions with children and families.
- There is a strong focus on developmental outcomes and learning environments.
- Workforce capacity is often constrained.
- Funding may be fragmented across multiple sources.
- Programs must balance compliance, quality standards, and operations.
- Participation may be influenced by time, staffing, and operational demands.

Positive Practices

- Align system strategies with child development and family engagement priorities.
- Design participation opportunities that fit within daily program operations.
- Be attentive to workforce and capacity constraints.
- Leverage providers' direct knowledge of children and families.
- Support unified priorities across funding and program requirements.
- Recognize the central role these partners play in continuity of care.

HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Early Care and Education

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A statewide HMG affiliate partners with the Department of Early Childhood Education to support early care providers in implementation of developmental and social-emotional screening for all children enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten.

- ✓ Recognizing staffing and operational constraints, HMG system leaders and partners collaborated to plan implementation, offer flexible training, and provide ongoing technical assistance to support integration of developmental screening into daily routines and existing workflows.
- ✓ This approach is increasing provider participation and improving the consistency of screening and referrals while maintaining a focus on quality care and child development.

G. Early Intervention and Family Support Services

Early intervention and family support partners focus on identifying child and family needs early and providing coordinated, family-centered services. Their work is shaped by operating conditions such as eligibility requirements, service coordination mandates, documentation expectations, and complex family needs. For example, a service coordinator may be managing multiple cases while meeting eligibility and documentation requirements, shaping how quickly they can respond to referrals or engage in cross-sector coordination.

Partners may include early intervention providers, service coordinators, and family support staff.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Services are individualized and responsive to family needs.
- There is a strong emphasis on early identification and family-centered practice.
- Work involves coordination across providers and systems.
- Eligibility criteria and documentation requirements influence decisions.
- Families may be navigating multiple systems simultaneously.
- Workforce capacity and caseload demands affect responsiveness.

Positive Practices

- Align system strategies with family-centered and coordinated service delivery.
- Integrate system activities with existing service coordination processes.
- Recognize the impact of eligibility and documentation requirements.
- Design engagement opportunities that account for caseload demands.
- Leverage insights into family experiences and system navigation challenges.
- Strengthen connections across sectors to reduce fragmentation.

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HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Early Intervention and Family Support Providers

A regional HMG system covering multiple counties engages family and community voices through existing workgroups and early childhood coalitions to identify gaps and improve coordination of early intervention referrals, evaluations, and services.

- ✓ By using data to identify barriers, system leaders are able to align system processes with existing service coordination workflows and timelines and enhance training for pediatric providers on referrals to IDEA Part B (special education and related services for children/youth ages 3–21) and IDEA Part C (early intervention services for infants and toddlers up to age 3).
- ✓ This improves continuity of care and makes it easier for families to navigate services across systems.

H. Backbone/Intermediary Organizations

Backbone or intermediary organizations support coordination, shared direction, and sustained engagement across partners. Their role is shaped by operating conditions such as diverse stakeholder expectations, funding dependencies, and the need to balance neutrality with forward progress. Backbone organizations play a critical role in translating collaborative intent into coordinated action as early childhood systems develop and mature. These entities often operate without a formal mandate, relying on influence, facilitation, and relationships to move work forward. For example, a backbone organization may need to balance diverse partner expectations while operating without formal authority, influencing how it facilitates alignment and maintains forward progress.

In early childhood systems, the backbone, fiscal agent, or intermediary role can take many forms and often evolves as implementation matures. In some states or communities, this role is housed within a nonprofit organization or a dedicated HMG affiliate; in others, it may sit within a public agency (e.g., a health department), a hospital or health care system, a community foundation, or a cross-sector coalition.

In early stages of system development, backbone functions may be informal or distributed across partners. As time goes on, these functions often become more defined, with clearer responsibilities for coordination, data use, partner engagement, and continuous improvement. In some cases, responsibilities may shift or be shared across organizations as capacity, funding, and system needs evolve.

What matters most is not where the backbone role is housed, but how core backbone functions are supported and sustained over time. These functions play a central role in shaping the conditions, such as mutual support, clarity, and shared understanding, that enable effective system functioning.

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Key Considerations for System Leaders

- The role of backbone or intermediary organizations centers on facilitation, coordination, and maintaining shared direction across partners.
- Authority is typically informal, relying on relationships, credibility, and influence rather than formal control.
- Expectations may vary across partners, sectors, and funders.
- The work requires balancing multiple perspectives, priorities, and paces of action.
- Progress depends on relational strength between partners, consistency, and the ability to navigate tension constructively.

Positive Practices

- Use facilitation and structured processes to support alignment across partners.
- Maintain clarity of purpose and shared direction while working through influence rather than formal authority.
- Build trust and credibility through consistent, transparent, and responsive engagement.
- Balance forward momentum with listening and adapting to partner needs.
- Navigate cross-sector expectations with awareness of how context shapes participation.
- Reinforce shared ownership of system outcomes across partners.

HELP ME GROW NETWORK EXAMPLE: Backbone/Intermediary Organizations

A regional HMG system's functions are supported through a backbone structure shared across multiple partner organizations including public agencies and community-based intermediaries.

✓ Recognizing that no single entity holds formal authority over all partners, system leaders work through this shared backbone infrastructure to strengthen coordination, focusing on building collaborative cohesion, clarifying shared goals, and establishing structured communication pathways.

✓ By leveraging the backbone's facilitation and coordination role, while aligning HMG functions within that structure, partners are strengthening alignment across sectors and improving consistency in referral pathways.

I. Private Sector and Employer Partners

Private sector and employer partners are increasingly recognized as important contributors to early childhood systems efforts, particularly in relation to workforce stability, family economic well-being, child care access, and broader community conditions that affect children and families. Their participation is often shaped by operating conditions such as workforce needs, business priorities,

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employee recruitment and retention concerns, economic development goals, and expectations for measurable return on investment. These conditions influence how private sector partners engage in collaborative systems efforts and how they define priorities, timelines, and outcomes.

Private sector partners may include employers, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, business coalitions, health insurers, health care systems, and corporate philanthropy initiatives. For example, a regional employer coalition may become involved in early childhood systems work after recognizing that child care instability is affecting workforce participation, employee retention, or productivity across the local economy.

Recent national and state-level efforts increasingly frame early childhood supports, including child care, developmental services, and family supports, not only as social services, but also as essential workforce and economic infrastructure. As a result, some communities are expanding cross-sector partnerships to include employers and business leaders in conversations related to family well-being, workforce participation, and long-term community sustainability.

Key Considerations for System Leaders

- Priorities are often influenced by workforce needs, economic conditions, and organizational performance goals.
- There may be strong interest in practical, measurable outcomes and efficient implementation approaches.
- Decision-making timelines may differ from those of public agencies or community organizations.
- Participation is often influenced by perceived alignment with workforce stability, employee well-being, or community economic priorities.
- Business and employer partners may bring valuable problem-solving capacity, influence, and community visibility, but may be less familiar with the complexity and pace of cross-sector systems work.
- Expectations for rapid progress may not always align with the relationship-building and coordination required for sustained systems change.

Positive Practices

- Connect early childhood systems goals to workforce participation, family stability, and broader community well-being.
- Build shared understanding regarding the complexity, timelines, and relational work required for effective systems coordination.
- Identify opportunities for employer-supported solutions that strengthen family access, workforce stability, or community partnerships.
- Engage private sector partners as collaborative contributors rather than solely as funding sources.
- Clarify roles, expectations, and decision-making processes across sectors with differing operational cultures and timelines.
- Recognize that private sector engagement may vary significantly across communities depending on local priorities, relationships, and infrastructure.

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HELP ME GROW EXAMPLE: Private Sector and Employer Partners

A regional early childhood systems initiative recognized that workforce participation challenges related to child care access were affecting both families and local employers.

- ✓ System leaders partnered with a regional business coalition and community employers to better understand how child care instability was influencing employee attendance, retention, and workforce participation.
- ✓ By connecting early childhood priorities to broader workforce and economic concerns, partners expanded cross-sector dialogue and identified opportunities to strengthen coordination between family supports, child care access efforts, and employer engagement strategies.
- ✓ The collaboration also helped increase broader community awareness that early childhood systems functioning influences not only child and family outcomes, but also workforce and community well-being more broadly.

VIII. Applying Section 1 concepts in practice: Early Childhood Cross Sector Collaboration Tool

Understanding how early childhood systems function is only useful if it helps leaders make sense of real-world situations as they arise. Throughout this section, we have explored the characteristics of early childhood systems, the conditions that shape partner engagement, and the structural, relational, and human dynamics that influence system functioning. In practice, however, leaders often encounter these concepts not as abstract ideas, but as day-to-day challenges involving communication, decision-making, coordination, and differing perspectives across partners and sectors.

To support the application of these concepts, this toolkit includes the Early Childhood Cross Sector Collaboration Tool. The tool is designed to help leaders and partners move beyond assumptions, better understand the conditions influencing participation and behavior, and identify practical actions that strengthen alignment and coordinated action across organizations, sectors, families, and communities.

The tool can be used in several ways:

- **Individually**, as a reflection tool when navigating challenging situations or planning new initiatives.
- **With leadership teams**, to strengthen shared understanding of partner perspectives and operating conditions.
- **With cross-sector partners**, to facilitate dialogue, identify barriers to coordination, and build stronger alignment around shared goals.
- **As part of continuous improvement efforts**, helping leaders examine how structural conditions, relational dynamics, and leadership behaviors interact to influence system functioning over time.

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While examples throughout Section 1 illustrate common system conditions, the tool provides a practical method for examining how these conditions are showing up within a specific community or initiative. Used regularly, it can help reduce misinterpretation, strengthen trust and shared understanding, and support more effective collaboration across sectors and specific partners.

IX. From understanding systems to leading them effectively

Section 1 has established a foundation for understanding how early childhood systems function in practice. Across definitions, research, and field-based examples, a consistent theme emerges: early childhood systems are not defined solely by their structures or plans, but by how people work together within them across organizations, sectors, and changing conditions.

At the center of this understanding is a critical insight: leader capacity and relationships shape system functioning, and system functioning ultimately shapes results for children and families.

Takeaways for Leaders

- **Systems are fundamentally different from programs.** They require coordination across organizations operating under different mandates, constraints, and definitions of success.
- **Structure alone does not produce coordination.** Governance, roles, and data systems are necessary, but their effectiveness depends on how partners interpret goals, communicate, and act together in practice.
- **Relational and human dynamics are central to system performance.** Mutual respect, coordinated messaging, shared understanding, and the ability to navigate tension determine whether strategies are implemented as intended.
- **Differences across partners are expected and predictable.** Variations in pace, participation, and decision-making are often shaped by operating conditions, not lack of commitment. When differences are seen as opportunities to better understand the system's operations, they can strengthen its functioning.
- **Alignment is built over time.** Systems require ongoing communication, reflection, and adaptation as conditions evolve.

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