



ESTABLISH PURPOSE

Equitable Strategic Planning & Shared Governance

The "WHY"

Equity, Governance & Organizational Culture

Introduction to HBCC Network Toolkits

Home-based child care (HBCC) networks play a critical role in strengthening early care and education (ECE) systems by supporting the large number of families who rely on home-based care arrangements. In the United States, home-based providers—including licensed family child care (FCC) and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers—serve a significant proportion of young children, particularly infants and toddlers. These settings often provide flexible schedules, culturally responsive care, and smaller group environments that meet the needs of many families. Despite their importance, HBCC providers frequently operate in isolation and have historically had limited access to professional development, coaching, and system supports compared with center-based programs (Bromer & Porter, 2019; National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance [NCECQA], 2020).

Home-based child care networks have emerged as a promising strategy to strengthen the HBCC sector and improve both provider support and program quality. Networks typically connect groups of providers with coaching, professional learning, peer communities, and shared services such as business supports and regulatory guidance. Research suggests that relationship-based supports offered through networks—particularly coaching and peer learning—can improve instructional practices, strengthen provider knowledge of child development, and reduce professional isolation. In addition, networks can contribute to provider retention and sustainability by supporting both the educational and business aspects of family child care (Bromer & Porter, 2019; Tout et al., 2018).

As states, communities, and intermediary organizations increasingly invest in HBCC networks, there is a growing need for practical tools that translate research-informed benchmarks into actionable guidance. While emerging research highlights key components of effective networks—including strong relationships, provider leadership, and coordinated services—leaders often need concrete resources to operationalize these principles in practice. Translating research and policy benchmarks into accessible guidance can help network leaders strengthen implementation, support providers more effectively, and ultimately improve the quality, stability, and equity of early care and education systems (HomeGrown, 2021; Tout et al., 2018).

Toolkit Overview

What is a Toolkit?

A toolkit is a collection of practical resources, strategies, and guidance designed to help people apply knowledge or research to real-world practice. Unlike a traditional report or academic article, a toolkit focuses on action—it provides step-by-step supports, templates, examples, and tools that help users implement ideas, solve problems, or improve their work.

In professional fields such as early childhood education, a toolkit typically translates research, policies, or best practices into accessible, user-friendly materials that practitioners can use in their daily work. Toolkits often include items such as checklists, reflection questions, planning templates, case studies, worksheets, and implementation guides. These resources help bridge the gap between theory and practice by giving early childhood providers and leaders concrete ways to apply new strategies in their programs or organizations.

HBCC Network Toolkits

Three toolkits were developed to operationalize the Home-Based Child Care Network Benchmarks and make them usable for strategic planning, service design, and implementation. While the benchmarks articulate a comprehensive vision for high-quality networks, they are conceptual and aspirational in nature. The purpose of these toolkits is to help networks move from principles to practice, clarifying how to establish strong organizational foundations, design coherent service models, and build the infrastructure necessary for sustainable impact.

To support practical application, the benchmarks have been organized into three complementary toolkits:

- **Toolkit 1 (The Why)** focuses on organizational culture, equity commitments, and shared governance.
- **Toolkit 2 (The What)** focuses on service design, quality practices, and provider and family outcomes.
- **Toolkit 3 (The How)** focuses on implementation systems, staffing, recruitment, and continuous improvement.

Each toolkit centers a distinct lever of change, while acknowledging that high-quality networks require alignment across all three domains. The benchmarks are interconnected by design. The framework itself makes clear that the benchmarks operate as a system, not as isolated categories. Equity and provider voice are intentionally embedded across all domains, not confined to a single benchmark. For example, equity influences governance structures, service design, recruitment strategies, staffing models, and data collection practices. Similarly, provider voice shapes decision-making, evaluation, and continuous quality improvement. These toolkits preserve that interconnectedness while offering clear entry points for planning and action.

Networks may choose to use the toolkits sequentially, beginning with foundational values and governance before refining services and strengthening implementation, or they may engage with a single toolkit based on current priorities and capacity. The tools are designed to support reflection, strategic planning, alignment, and continuous improvement. They are not intended as compliance checklists or rating instruments, but as guides for building coherent, equitable, and sustainable HBCC network strategies.

Used together, the three toolkits provide a structured yet flexible pathway from vision to execution to measurable impact, strengthening outcomes for providers, children, and families while honoring the unique role of home-based child care within the early care and education system.

Establish Purpose: Equitable Strategic Planning & Shared Governance

Toolkit One

Grounded in our “Why,” this foundational toolkit supports networks in defining and operationalizing their core values, power structures, and equity commitments that shape all other aspects of their work. By utilizing the tools, resources, and trainings within this toolkit, networks will build a culture that intentionally centers home-based child care (HBCC) as a distinct, essential, and valued part of the Connecticut early care and education system.

Through structured tools and reflective processes, networks will:

- Articulate a mission, vision, and theory of change that explicitly prioritizes HBCC.
- Establish governance structures that position providers as equal decision-making partners in strategy, operations, and accountability.
- Embed equity into organizational policies, funding decisions, recruitment priorities, and service design.
- Clarify roles, transparency practices, processes for open communication, and accountability mechanisms.
- Develop sustainable strategies for maintaining and increasing funding aligned with HBCC values and goals.

This toolkit focuses on building the internal conditions necessary for high-quality network implementation. It emphasizes power-sharing, culturally grounded service delivery, and intentional inclusion of providers, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, at every level of decision-making.

Core Foundational Questions

Rather than focusing on specific services, this toolkit helps networks answer foundational questions:

- Who are we accountable to?
- Who holds power in our system?
- How do we define equity in action?
- How do our mission and governance structures reflect the lived realities of HBCC providers?

By strengthening organizational culture and governance first, networks create the conditions for coherent service design, effective implementation, and meaningful outcomes for providers, children, and families.

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HBCCN Benchmark Reflection

The “WHY” Benchmarks

Purpose of Engaging in Reflection

By reviewing each benchmark and indicator through a self-evaluation process, network leaders can better understand where their network currently stands and select the resources that will be most relevant and impactful. This reflective approach ensures that the toolkit is used not simply as a set of activities, but as a guide for continuous improvement that strengthens services for providers and ultimately enhances outcomes for children and families.

How to Use this Reflection Tool

The HBCCN framework provides a comprehensive list of 11 benchmarks which are each organized into indicators and descriptors to provide a clear and structured way to understand expectations and guide implementation. Indicators represent the broad areas of practice that define what strong home-based child care network supports should include. They highlight the key components of effective network design and functioning and provide a high-level view of what quality looks like within each benchmark area.

Each indicator is further divided into descriptors, which break the broader concept into more specific actionable elements of practice. Descriptors help clarify the different parts of the indicator and make complex concepts more manageable. By separating the indicator into smaller components, network leaders can more easily identify which specific practices are already in place and which may need further development.

Directions:

- Review each benchmark along with its associated indicators.
- Then examine the descriptors and indicate whether your network meets the criteria by selecting “Yes,” “No,” or “Sometimes,” based on the extent to which each practice is currently in place.
- Your responses will help identify current strengths, areas for growth, and opportunities for improvement as you work through the toolkit.

Benchmark A: The network’s organizational culture includes an intentional focus on home-based child care (HBCC) as a distinct, essential, and valued early care and education (ECE) setting for children and families.

A1: Articulates a commitment to HBCC as central to the organization’s philosophy, approach, and operations.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
In organizations that house HBCC networks, the mission incorporates services and supports for HBCC providers including FCC providers and/or FFN caregivers.	☐	☐	☐
In organizations that house HBCC networks, network management staff are included in the senior leadership and management team that is responsible for organizational administration and oversight.	☐	☐	☐

A2: Promotes inclusion of HBCC in public ECE systems and initiatives as an equity issue.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Plays an active leadership role in continuing collaborations with community organizations and local ECE councils to promote the importance of HBCC in the community.	☐	☐	☐

A3: Demonstrates a sustained commitment to HBCC through continued efforts to maintain and increase targeted funding to cover the full cost of supporting and delivering meaningful services to HBCC providers.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Dedicated and clearly identified funding stream for HBCC that is maintained or increased annually.	☐	☐	☐
Documentation (e.g., cost analysis, budget justification) showing that HBCC funding is intended to cover the full cost of delivering services to providers.	☐	☐	☐

Benchmark B: The network includes providers as equal decision-making partners in network governance, operations, and accountability.

B1: Offers scaffolding, transparency, preparation, training, and support for providers to meaningfully engage and share power as decision-making partners at the network.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Provides documented training and/or preparation to HBCC providers to support their participation in decision-making roles (e.g., orientations, leadership training, meeting prep).	☐	☐	☐
HBCC providers actively participate in decision-making, with clear evidence of their input influencing outcomes via formal structures (e.g., advisory groups, voting roles, leadership positions).	☐	☐	☐

B2: Supports and compensates providers as leaders through their engagement in distributed decision-making around governance and services design as well as through co-creation of network operations.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Has a diverse provider leadership board or advisory group.	☐	☐	☐
Includes providers on the agency Board of Directors.	☐	☐	☐
Adopts clear and transparent agency policies about processes for provider input and governance.	☐	☐	☐

B3: Creates mechanisms to ensure that the network's management and operations (including service delivery, staffing, and fiscal management [revenues and expenses]) are accountable and transparent to providers.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Maintains transparency and offers clear information about the network's role in monitoring compliance with regulations and requirements, if relevant, as well as the tension between enforcement and support.	☐	☐	☐
Maintains transparency about network staff obligation as mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect through offering clear information to providers about staff responsibilities.	☐	☐	☐

Benchmark C: The network demonstrates an intentional focus on equity and culturally-grounded service delivery.

C1: Instills a culture of self-reflection and encourages staff at all levels to examine how their own biases may influence the ways they engage with providers, families, and children.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Actively engages all network staff in reflection on their own beliefs, values, experiences, ethics, and biases.	☐	☐	☐
Ensures that all network staff are knowledgeable about the history of systemic racism, gender bias, and immigration bias in child care and how these intersecting inequities may impact HBCC providers, families, and children.	☐	☐	☐
Conducts an annual equity audit that examines how bias is addressed in service delivery.	☐	☐	☐

C2: Understands and respects the diverse backgrounds of HBCC providers and families, including culture, language, ability, family composition, and circumstances.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Demonstrates practices (e.g., translated materials, culturally responsive approaches, inclusive policies) that reflect and respect the diverse backgrounds of HBCC providers and families.	☐	☐	☐
Collects and uses information about HBCC providers' and families' cultural, linguistic, and individual needs to inform services and interactions.	☐	☐	☐

C3: Prioritizes groups of providers, families, and children who have been historically marginalized in order to increase their equitable access to meaningful and quality resources and opportunities.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Collects detailed demographic data including racial, ethnic, linguistic and gender identity on providers, children, and families to inform the development of equitable policies and supports, including recruitment.	☐	☐	☐
Sets goals and policies for HBCC providers from marginalized communities including Black, Latinx, Indigenous, immigrant, and rural populations to increase access to meaningful and quality supports and services.	☐	☐	☐

C4: Deliberately takes actions to support providers, families, and children living in Black, Latinx, Indigenous, immigrant, and rural communities to redress historical inequities around access to services.

Descriptors	Y	N	S
Ensures that all network services and communications are available in the preferred languages of providers or translation.	☐	☐	☐
Creates targeted outreach strategies to engage providers who have historically been underrepresented in ECE systems including family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers.	☐	☐	☐

HBCCN Benchmark Reflection Analysis

The “WHY” Benchmarks

Use your benchmark data to guide this reflection. Be specific — reference the data points, trends, or patterns you noticed. Honest reflection is the foundation of meaningful growth!

Strengths

One area where my data shows clear growth or strength is...

Point to a specific metric, score, or trend as your evidence.

I believe this strength developed because...

Consider your practices, strategies, or intentional focus this term.

A strategy or practice I want to continue and build on is...

Be specific — what will you keep doing, and why does it work?

Areas of Growth

An area where my data indicates I have room to grow is...

Name the specific benchmark, standard, or data point that stands out.

I think this area is a challenge because...

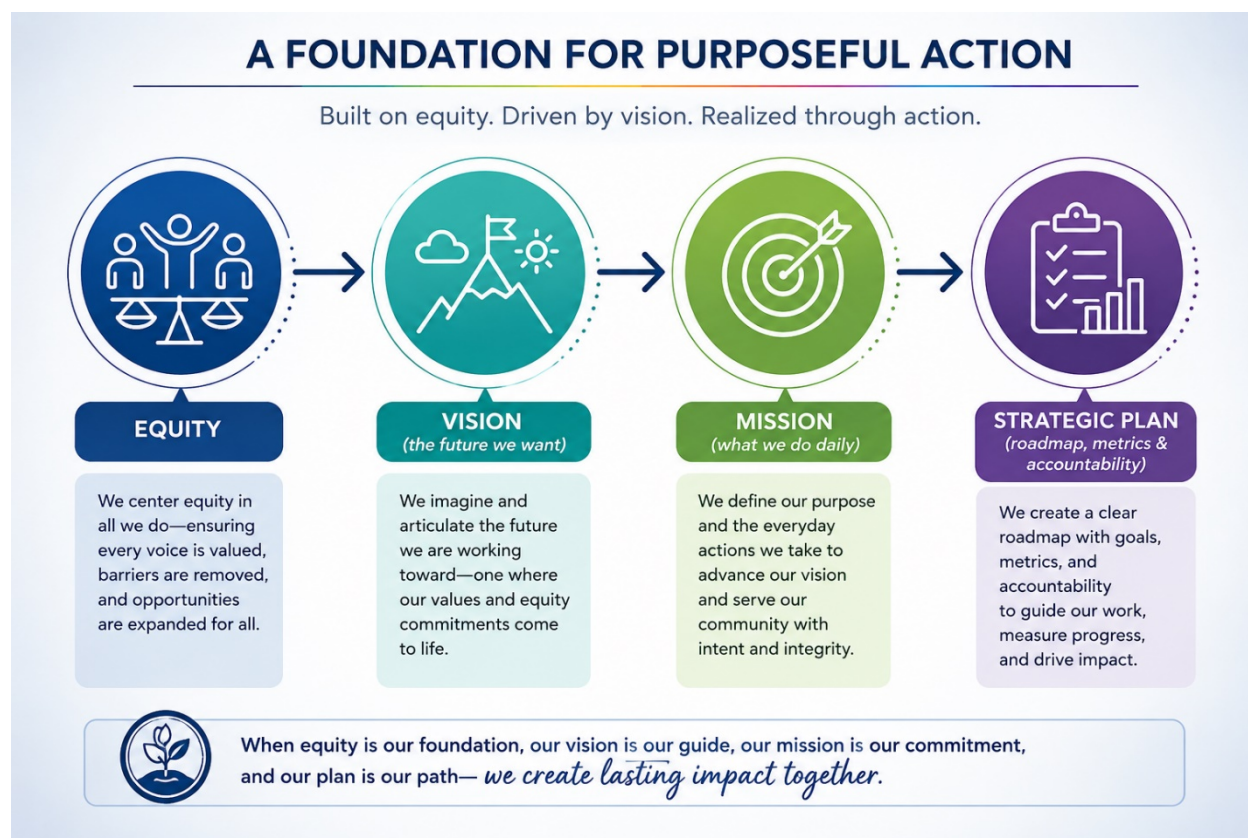
Reflect honestly — what factors (internal or external) may be contributing?

One concrete step I will take to improve in this area is...

Focus on an action within your control. What will look different next cycle?

Equity-Centered Strategic Planning

This strategic planning tool treats equity not as a secondary goal but as the lens for every decision, from defining the word together, to rewriting your North Star, to pressure-testing each priority.



Grounding the Work: What Is Equity?

Before planning, agree on a shared definition. In early childhood, equity means making sure every child, family, and educator receives exactly what they need to thrive, recognizing that different communities face different historical and systemic barriers.

Equality is NOT Equity	
Equality	Equity
Treating everyone the same and providing identical resources to all.	Distributing resources based on need; everyone has a fair shot at high quality outcomes.

What does this look like across SFCCN?

- **Access** — who receives high-quality care and education, and who is quietly left out?
- **Representation** — does the curriculum, staff, and materials reflect the identities of the children and families we are serving?
- **Workforce support** — are educators, often belonging to Black Indigenous Persons of Color (BIPOC) communities, compensated fairly and supported professionally?

In your own Words: A Shared Definition of Equity

Write it in your own words — use this space to write one sentence defining what equity is in regard to your network.

Your North Star: Vision & Mission

An equity-centered vision and mission name who you serve and the barriers you are dismantling. Compare the framings below, then write your own.

Vision — the “what if?”

TRADITIONAL

To be a leading early childhood center providing excellent education for all children.

EQUITY-CENTERED

A community where every child — regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or ability — has an uncompromised foundation for lifelong learning, rooted in an inclusive and affirming environment.

In Your Own Words: Our Vision Statement

Describe the future you want to create.

Mission — the “how?”

EQUITY-CENTERED

To partner with families to deliver accessible, culturally responsive, high-quality early education while actively dismantling systemic inequities in early childhood spaces.

Our Mission Statement

Your daily mandate. Name who you serve and how you remove barriers.

Addressing Inequities and Barriers

*What inequities currently exist? How will our mission/vision address these inequities?
What barriers might we encounter in trying to uphold our mission/vision with fidelity?*

Inequity	Inequity Addressed	Barriers

The Four Phases

Each of the following pairs a reflection with an equity check that keeps power and disaggregated data in view.

Phase One: Preparation & Community Alignment

Goal: Our planning team itself represents the community, especially frontline staff and families.

Reflection questions	Equity check
Who is at the table? Are parents and teachers represented alongside leadership?	Shift power. Ensure non-leadership voices have equal voting weight.
What quantitative (demographics, funding) and qualitative (family stories) data do we need?	Look beyond averages. Disaggregate by race, income, and language to see who is being left behind.

Notes for Phase One

Who's in the room, who's missing, and what data we'll gather.

Phase Two: Defining Mission & Vision

Goal: Refine your North Star so it explicitly centers equity.

Phase Three: Strategic Priority Setting

Goal: Choose three to five core pillars for the next 3–5 years.

Example pillars with an equity lens:

- **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy** — policies, practices, materials, and supports that honor children and families' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- **Inclusive Family Partnership** — move from "parent involvement" to co-designed engagement where families share governance.
- **Equitable workforce & compensation** — development pathways for a living wage for all staff.

Our 3–5 pillars

Choose from above or write your own.

Phase Four — Implementation & Accountability

Goal: Turn priorities into goals with clear metrics. Transform a standard SMART goal into a SMARTIE one by adding Inclusion and Equity.

TRADITIONAL

SMART: Enroll 50 new children by Fall 2027.

EQUITY-CENTERED

SMARTIE: Enroll 50 new children by Fall 2027, prioritizing families from the [historically underserved] zip code, by partnering with local mutual-aid groups and translating all enrollment materials into Spanish and Arabic.

Our Accountability Plan

Who reviews progress, how often, and what's the course-correction plan if a strategy isn't reducing disparities?

Build your own SMARTIE goal

Your SMART goal (specific, measurable, time-bound)

+ Inclusion (who is prioritized, and who helped shape it)

+ Equity (how barriers are actively removed)

The Continuous Equity Filter

Before finalizing any decision, run it through these three questions. Reuse this filter for every major initiative.

1. Benefit & Burden: Who benefits from this decision? Who might be unintentionally burdened or excluded?
2. Voice: How were the people most affected involved in creating this?
3. Accountability: How will we know if it reduces disparities and what's our course-correction plan if it isn't?

Conclusion

Equity-centered strategic planning ensures that the gaps children start with don't become the gaps they're left with. By centering equity as the foundation of every decision rather than a separate initiative, organizations direct resources to where they're most needed and build accountability for closing real disparities. In early childhood especially, the choices made now shape lifelong trajectories, so a plan that doesn't actively name and dismantle barriers will, by default, preserve them. Centering equity is how good intentions become measurable outcomes for the children and families who have been historically underserved.

Social-Emotional Leadership

Leading Networks with Self-Awareness, Empathy, and Trust

Why Social-Emotional Leadership Matters

An equity-centered strategic plan sets the destination—the values, pillars, and metrics that commit a network to closing real disparities. But a plan only becomes equitable through the relationships that carry it out. This is where Toolkit One begins, asking networks to define their "Why"—the values, relationships, and culture that shape everything else. Social-emotional leadership is how that "Why" becomes lived practice, and how the commitments on the page turn into a culture providers actually trust.

Family childcare home providers often work in isolation, navigate financial stress, and have historically been overlooked by larger systems—the very inequities a strategic plan is designed to address. The way a network's leaders and staff show up—how they listen, regulate their own reactions, and build trust—directly shapes whether providers feel acknowledged, respected, and willing to engage. Without that, even the strongest equity goals stay on paper.

Social-emotional leadership means bringing intentional awareness of emotions, relationships, and culture into the work of leading. It is not about being "nice" or avoiding hard conversations—and equity work demands hard conversations about power, exclusion, and who has been left out. It is about leading in a way that is self-aware, grounded, and relational, so that the network can build the kind of trusting, equitable culture this toolkit—and any equity-focused plan—is designed to create.

What This Tool Offers

This tool introduces the five core social-emotional competencies and shows what each looks like in the day-to-day work of leading an HBCC network. Use it individually or with your team to reflect on your current practice and strengthen the relational foundation of your work.

By working through this tool, you and your team will:

- Define the five social-emotional competencies and why they matter for network leadership.
- Recognize concrete examples of each competency in action with providers, staff, and partners.
- Reflect on your own strengths and growth areas as a social-emotional leader.
- Practice strategies for staying grounded and relational during difficult moments.

What Is Social-Emotional Leadership?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which people develop the self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making they need to navigate life and work. Although SEL is often discussed in relation to children, the same competencies are essential for adults—especially those who lead. Social-emotional leadership applies these competencies to the work of guiding people, making decisions, and shaping organizational culture.

Key Idea: The Parallel Process

How leaders feel and behave ripples outward. When staff feel supported and respected by leadership, they extend that same warmth to providers. When providers feel trusted and valued, they create more nurturing environments for children and families.

This is the parallel process: the emotional climate at the top of a network is mirrored all the way down to the child. Tending to your own social-emotional practice is not separate from the work—it is the work.

The Five Competencies in Network Leadership

The five competencies below are drawn from the widely used CASEL framework. Each one shows up in specific, observable ways in the work of leading an Staffed Family Childcare Network (SFCCN).

Competency	What It Looks Like in Network Leadership
Self-Awareness	Recognizing your own emotions, values, biases, and triggers—and noticing how they influence your decisions and your interactions with providers and staff.
Self-Management	Regulating your emotions and reactions under stress, following through on commitments, and modeling calm, steady leadership during uncertainty or conflict.

Competency	What It Looks Like in Network Leadership
Social Awareness	Listening with empathy, understanding providers' cultural contexts and lived realities, and reading the emotional dynamics of a meeting, partnership, or community.
Relationship Skills	Building trust, communicating clearly, navigating disagreement, sharing power, and sustaining authentic, strengths-based relationships with providers and partners.
Responsible Decision-Making	Making choices that are ethical, equity-centered, and grounded in the needs of providers, children, and families—and being transparent about how and why decisions are made.

Equity in Action

Social awareness includes cultural humility—approaching every provider relationship with curiosity rather than assumptions. Many HBCC providers are women of color, immigrants, and multilingual caregivers whose expertise has been undervalued by traditional systems. A socially aware leader notices whose voices are centered and whose are missing, examines their own biases, and adjusts so that engagement is genuinely inclusive.

Case Study: A Difficult Conversation

Case Study

Lena, a network coordinator, needs to talk with David, a family child care provider, about repeatedly missing required documentation. Lena's first instinct is frustration—this is the third reminder. Before the call, she takes a moment to notice that feeling and set it aside (self-awareness and self-management).

On the call, instead of leading with the problem, she asks how things are going. David shares that his mother has been ill and he has been caring for her while keeping his program open. Lena listens without rushing to the agenda (social awareness). Together they identify a simpler way for David to submit paperwork and agree on a check-in in two weeks (relationship skills and responsible decision-making).

The documentation still matters—but Lena addressed it in a way that strengthened trust rather than eroding it. David later becomes one of the network's most engaged providers.

Reflect on the case study:

- Where do you see each of the five competencies showing up in Lena's approach?
- Think of a recent difficult conversation of your own. What went well, and what might you do differently?

Try This: The Pause Practice

In a charged moment—a tense email, a frustrating meeting, an unexpected pushback—our reactions often outpace our intentions. Before responding, try a simple three-step pause:

- **Notice.** Name what you are feeling, silently and without judgment: "I'm feeling defensive right now."
- **Breathe.** Take one slow breath. This brief gap interrupts the automatic reaction and gives you back a choice.
- **Choose.** Ask yourself: "What response best serves this relationship and our shared goals?" Then respond from there.

Practiced over time, the pause becomes a habit that keeps you grounded and relational when it matters most.

Reflection Prompts

Set aside ten quiet minutes—on your own or with your team—to reflect on your practice as a social-emotional leader. There are no right answers; honest reflection is the goal.

Reflect

- Which of the five competencies feels most natural to you? Which is your growing edge?
- When are you most likely to lose your grounding—and what helps you return to it?
- Whose voices are most and least present in your network's decisions right now?
- What is one small, specific practice you could adopt this month to lead more relationally?

Bringing It Back to Your Network

Social-emotional leadership is not a one-time exercise—it is an ongoing practice that shapes your network’s culture from the inside out. As you continue through Toolkit One, notice how these competencies connect to your mission, your governance structures, and your equity commitments. The relationships you build through grounded, empathetic leadership are the foundation on which everything else in your network depends.

Learn More

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The CASEL framework and the five core social-emotional competencies. casel.org

Collaborative Teamwork

Leading Networks with Self-Awareness, Empathy, and Trust

Critical and caring collaboration is a way of working together that holds two things at once. The **critical** side names inequity honestly — asking who holds power, whose voices are missing, and how systems produced the disparities in front of us. The **caring** side does that work through trusting, humanizing relationships built on empathy and respect. The collaboration binds them: the work happens *with* the people most affected — not *to* or *for* them. It is neither critique without warmth, which alienates people, nor care without honesty, which quietly protects the status quo.

Why it Matters

An equity-centered plan has to confront who benefits, who is burdened, and who was left out — which takes a critical edge, or the plan defaults to comfortable goals that preserve existing gaps. But raising those questions in a way that brings families and frontline providers genuinely into the work takes care and trust, or people won't speak honestly or stay at the table. Critical and caring collaboration is how social-emotional leadership turns an equity-centered plan into lived practice: leaders can tell the truth about disparities and keep relationships strong enough to act on it — so honesty and trust reinforce each other rather than compete.

How to Use this Playbook

This playbook includes five activities designed to support collaborative teaming, build trust, and strengthen professional partnerships. The activities are flexible and do not need to be used all at once. Teams can use them individually, in sequence, or overtime based on their needs and available time.

Activities may be used with teaching teams, leadership teams, or cross-functional teams. They are designed to support reflection, communication, and shared problem-solving. Teams are encouraged to select activities that feel most relevant to their current challenges or priorities. Revisiting activities over time can help deepen trust, strengthen collaboration, and support ongoing professional growth.

When to use these activities:

- During staff meetings or team planning time
- During team-building events or professional development (PD) days
- As part of coaching or supervision
- With new or existing teams
- To support collaboration across teams, roles, departments, or service areas

Facilitation Note

These activities work best when teams establish shared norms for respect, listening, and open communication. The goal is learning and relationship-building, not evaluation. Facilitators are encouraged to create space for multiple perspectives and focus on shared problem-solving.

Activities are designed to fit into existing meetings, planning time, coaching, or professional development. They can be completed in short time blocks or extended over longer sessions, depending on team needs.

Activity 1: Strengths and Superpowers

Purpose: Build psychological safety while helping team members recognize individual and collective strengths.

Materials

- Chart paper or shared digital document
- Markers or sticky notes

Directions

1. Ask participants to reflect individually:
 - What professional strengths do you bring to a team?
 - What is a “superpower” colleagues rely on you for?
2. Participants share their strengths with the group.
3. Record strengths and categorize them into team assets such as:
 - Trusted relationship-building
 - Instructional expertise
 - Behavior support
 - Family engagement, family collaboration
 - Multidisciplinary approaches
 - Supportive, welcoming environments
 - Organization and planning
 - Creativity and problem-solving
 - Reflective practice
 - Coaching/PD systems and supports
 - Add your own!

Reflection Prompts

- How do our strengths complement one another?
- How can we intentionally use team strengths when supporting children?
- What strengths might we overlook in collaborative work?

Activity 2: What Makes Collaboration Work?

Purpose: Create shared expectations that support respectful, productive teamwork.

Directions

1. In small groups, participants answer:
 - What helps teams collaborate successfully?
 - What creates barriers to teamwork?
2. Groups share ideas and create a list of collaboration behaviors.
3. Facilitate development of group norms – add or modify your own! Use these examples, if needed, to spark ideas!:
 - Listen with curiosity
 - Share responsibility for solutions
 - Stay focused on child outcomes

Reflection Prompts

- Which norms will be most important for our work?
- How will we hold ourselves accountable to these norms?

Activity 3: Team Case Consultation

Purpose: Strengthen structured problem-solving and shared decision-making.

Directions

1. One team member presents a real or sample classroom challenge.
2. Use the following protocol:

Step 1: Clarify the Concern

Team asks clarifying questions only.

Step 2: Identify Strengths

Team identifies educator, child, and environmental strengths.

Step 3: Analyze Possible Factors

Discuss:

- Instructional factors
- Environmental factors
- Developmental considerations
- Relationship influences

Step 4: Brainstorm Strategies

Generate multiple possible supports.

Step 5: Action Planning

Select 1–2 strategies to implement and determine follow-up.

Reflection Prompts

- How did structured collaboration improve problem-solving?
- How did the process support shared ownership?

Activity 4: Team Outcome Mapping

Purpose: Align team efforts around shared child and classroom outcomes.

Directions

1. Teams identify a shared goal related to behavior, instruction, or social-emotional development.
2. Teams map:
 - Desired child outcomes
 - Adult practice changes needed
 - Support or resources required
 - Indicators of success

Reflection Prompts

- How does shared goal setting strengthen teamwork?
- How can teams monitor progress together?

Activity 5: Team Health Check

Purpose: Support ongoing reflection and improvement in collaboration.

NOTE: If you support multiple centers/teams, choose: a) reflect on your overall practices across all teams; b) select one representative team that reflects common patterns; OR c) the team where collaboration feels more challenging or impactful.

Materials:

- Flip Charts and Markers
- Post-It Notes and Pens
- Blank Pieces of Paper
- Consider writing the Collaboration Items in #2 ahead of time on flip chart paper, or creating a handout for participants.

Directions:

1. Set Context: Explain this is a reflective tool, not an evaluation. The purpose is to identify strengths and areas for deeper collaboration.

2. Teams rate themselves on:

- Shared goals and priorities
- Trust and psychological safety
- Communication clarity
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Respect for other's experiences and perspectives
- Use of data for decision-making
- Follow-through and accountability
- Regular reflection and planning

How To Rate: Staff rate each area listed in #2 using this simple scale

1 = Not Yet in Place 2 = Emerging/Inconsistent 3 = Strong and Consistent

Participants can:

- Complete individually first (recommended), then discuss as a group OR complete as a team through discussion (if time allows)

3. Teams identify 1-2 collaboration strengths and 1-2 areas of improvement. Be prepared to share and discuss.

4. Discuss using the Reflection Prompts (and feel free to add your own) below.

Reflection Prompts:

- What practices are currently strengthening our team collaboration?
- Where do we see the greatest opportunity for growth?
- What are 1-3 concrete actions we can take to improve how we work together?
-

Conclusion

Collaborative teaming is essential to high-quality early childhood practice. When educators work together with trust, psychological safety, and mutual respect, they are better able to reflect on challenges, learn from one another, and strengthen their practice. By recognizing and building on the diverse strengths of each team member, teams increase their ability to support children's social-emotional, developmental, and academic growth. Strong professional partnerships also model the sense of belonging, connection, and responsiveness that educators work to create for children e

Tips for Developing a Culture of Reflection



A culture of reflection builds the self-awareness social emotional leadership depends on: leaders and staff notice patterns in their reactions, the gap between intention and impact, and moments that build or erode trust. When examining mistakes and areas of growth are shared and expected, it signals that hard conversations are safe — letting providers and staff raise concerns about power and exclusion.

Model Reflective Practice to Build Brave Spaces

Link reflection to program goals and child outcomes
Share personal reflections openly: "I noticed I reacted quickly — next time I'll pause before responding."
Normalize uncertainty; it's okay not to have all the answers
Demonstrate curiosity and empathy rather than judgment
Coach and give corrective feedback privately

Why it matters:

When leaders model vulnerability, teams feel safe doing the same. Safety increases trust, which increases honest reflection and problem-solving.

Use Reflective Questions Purposefully to Challenge Perspectives

Schedule regular reflective supervision or coaching sessions.
Integrate reflection questions into team meetings that deepen thinking instead of directing behavior:
"What were you noticing in yourself during that moment?"
"How might the child have been experiencing the situation?"
"What assumptions might we be holding?"
"How might our experiences be influencing our interpretation?"

Why it matters:

Good questions encourage exploration, not defensiveness. Predictable structures ensure reflection becomes a habit, not an add-on.

Encourage Team-Based Reflection and Build Shared Language

Use case studies, video clips, or practice-based scenarios.
Facilitate peer reflection groups where staff learn from one another.
Use reflection to redesign processes, not just discuss challenges.
Use terms like "pause," "wondering," "curiosity," "assumptions," and "interpretations vs. observations."
Celebrate examples of reflective practice in action.

Why it matters:

Team-based reflection and shared language broaden perspectives and reduce isolation.

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