

Early Childhood Collaboration:

Together We Can Serve Children and Families Better

by Fiona Stewart



Fiona Stewart
Exchange Leadership Institute
ChildCareExchange.com/leadership



Fiona Stewart is the program director of the Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles, where she develops and oversees all county-wide professional development training, coaching, and quality improvement programs and the California Early Care & Education Workforce Registry. In 2016 Stewart was chosen as a Master Leader from the Exchange Leadership Initiative. She is the author of *Time for Change: Transformational Leadership for Collaborative Early Childhood Systems Building* (in press) scheduled for publication by Redleaf Press in fall of 2018. Fiona has a master's degree from Pacific Oaks College and a bachelor's degree from Cornell University.

Collaboration. It's a word we hear more and more in the work world. But what does it really mean to collaborate? What are the benefits of collaboration and how can an organization embark on this work?

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration begins when people work together toward a common goal

to achieve something they couldn't have done as well alone. Collaboration is also about the way individuals and organizations work. It is a cooperative effort with shared input of resources, time, decision-making, and trust to see the effort through. Collaboration is more extensive and requires a deeper commitment than coordinating services or programs or cooperating on projects.

Type	Definition	Characteristics	Example
Networking	Exchange information for mutual benefit	Minimal time commitment; limited trust required; no shared resources	Informal gathering of colleagues to share ideas or learn new information
Coordination	All of the above, plus alter activities to achieve a common purpose	Moderate time commitment; moderate trust required; some access to shared services or resources	Separate agencies meeting to determine ways to increase access to services or advocate together
Cooperation	All of the above, plus share resources to achieve a common purpose	Substantial time commitment; high levels of trust required; greater access to shared resources; shared protocols or policies	More formal arrangement between independent agencies that each contribute to and share the work of coordinating services
Collaboration	All of the above, plus work together to enhance the capacity or each organization to achieve a common goal	Extensive time commitment; very high level of trust required; more extensive sharing of resources, risks, responsibilities, decision-making, and goals	Formal agreement, with contracts or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), to jointly offer a program or services. Partner organizations remain autonomous but share a decision-making structure and administrative processes

(Adapted from Roberts, 2004 & 2010)

The work of collaboration is to produce or implement something to address issues better or deliver services, outcomes, or products in an improved or enhanced manner. What is significant is that the end result includes shared ownership of the efforts, services, and products. The outcomes belong to all. The results are neither yours nor mine, but ours.

The early childhood education field is a natural fit for collaborative projects. Often, in order to serve a child, family, or community well, it takes multiple stakeholders figuring out how to work together. Furthermore, with greater national, state, and local attention paid to the importance of early childhood education, the time is right for agencies, organizations, and institutions to examine how to work more collaboratively.

Why Collaborate?

Collaboration is the new imperative. It's the only way to accelerate innovation, improve agility, increase adaptability, and cut costs all at once (Ricci & Wiese, 2011, p. 233).

As Clifford (2012) notes, "Collaboration among many stakeholders is essential for success in early childhood system building. Collaboration brings together a wealth of expertise and in-kind resources that, together, can have greater impact and influence than the expertise and resources of any single organization" (p. 165). Collaboration can expand or improve services, better achieve outcomes, or reduce barriers and inequities in accessing services.

1. What are the issues or challenges facing your organization?

- How might you address these?

2. What are the challenges in your community?

- What are the solutions?

3. How might you achieve your goals in meaningful ways?

- Are the solutions attainable and if so, are they sustainable?
- Are they cost-effective?

Today's Complex Challenges

The issues facing children and families, as well as the agencies that serve them, are often multilayered and complex. Tackling current issues and serving children and families takes thinking things through and working to address them in new and different ways. Working with others who provide services or programs provides opportunities to meet the complex challenges facing families. Let's look at one example.

When the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health was unable to increase the number of flu and pertussis immunizations given, they partnered with other organizations to more

AFFIRM YOUR EXCELLENCE

- Attainable, affordable, National Accreditation
- CCP teacher credential at your pace
- Comprehensive National Administrator Credential
- Readily available staff and mentors

Earn up to 25% higher reimbursements.

Contact us today.



NECPA™
NATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD
PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

855.706.3272

necpa.net

necpa@necpa.net

broadly and effectively reach out to the community. To reach children and families, DPH turned to the child care resource and referral (R&R) agencies. The R&Rs reached out to the families they work with directly, as well as those they could reach by giving information to child care providers to share with the families they serve. Within a few months, community-based clinics were set up at the R&Rs. As a result, more than 1,800 people received flu vaccinations, more than 1,600 pertussis shots were administered, and information on the importance of immunizations was distributed to over 30,000 parents and 18,000 child care providers. Later when DPH received funding to focus on early childhood obesity, they turned again to a collaborative approach. Building on the R&Rs' ongoing work and trusted relationships with child care providers and parents, the project reached 3,143 child care providers and 30,633 families to deliver training, information, resources

and/or support on healthy nutrition and physical activity. Additional collaborative partners included hospitals and health providers, local non-profits serving families, and food assistance programs.

Benefits of Collaboration

Greater ability to create something that can't be created alone or by a single agency.

Organizations can't respond to every type of need or deliver every type of service. Reaching far beyond an organization's core services, mission, or budget can be very risky. Working with other agencies provides opportunities to combine, extend, or leverage other services into a single system or program. Each agency brings its strengths to the endeavor in order to create something that one entity alone could not. Another collaborative formed when multiple organizations worked together to address early childhood literacy in a systemic way.

One college provided courses on early childhood literacy for child care teachers. The R&R provided coaches to work with the participants at their child care sites to support the implementation of what they were learning in their practice. The local Head Start agency and public library provided lending libraries, storytellers, and literacy activities at the child care sites. Finally, a community agency that serves children with learning disabilities provided information on working with children with special needs and consultation on meeting the needs of children who required additional literacy support.

Increased ability to achieve necessary or important outcomes.

Sometimes a collaborative forms to reach important outcomes that are better or more easily met through a group approach. Striving towards better out-

comes for children and families is often better done with a cross-organization or even cross-sector approach; this facilitates the effective leveraging of knowledge, resources, ideas, infrastructures, and talents.

Cost-effective use of scarce resources.

Nonprofit organizations often face a scarcity of resources with little funding to address significant social issues. Collaborative models can create opportunities to streamline services and use resources more effectively.

How to Get Started

All organizations, even those in the same industry, are unique, so there are many ways to begin developing collaboration. First, each organization needs to assess its strengths and determine where increased collaboration can lead to improvement. Each collaborative effort will vary depending on the community problems and needs it faces, as well as the resources and organizational strengths available. Second, it's essential to establish whether this is the right time and these are the right organizations, the right individuals, and the right reasons for launching a collaborative.

Consider the following key elements of collaboration (adapted from Linden, 2002) before embarking on your collaborative effort. Have you and your organization:

- agreed that there is a reason or shared interest that everyone wants to pursue at this time?
- discussed each potential partner's interests and goals for this process?
- defined what each individual/organization brings to the collaboration?
- brought together those who can represent the views of each partner organization?

- identified and supported those who will serve as leaders and/or champions for this work?
- considered how the process will be managed or lead?
- reflected on the potential impact if the initiative succeeds?
- begun to establish trusting relationships?

Working through these questions will help identify the shared interests and potential partners for the work. It will also provide you with the opportunity to determine if the shared interests are strong enough and if there is enough buy-in from the potential partners to begin the work. Most collaborations are built on existing relationships; however, new relationships can be built and existing ones strengthened. Routinely checking in on these key elements will help build a productive and successful collaboration.

Collaboration Skills

It is critical to have leaders with the knowledge and skill to guide the collaboration. A strong collaboration will also encourage and include opportunities for individual members to learn and build these skills. According to Tamm and Luyet (2004) there are five essential skills for realizing true collaboration:

1. Collaborative intention
2. Truthfulness
3. Self-accountability
4. Self-awareness and awareness of others
5. Problem-solving and negotiation skills

I would add openness to change and transformation to this list. To be open to change, one must be genuinely interested in others' ideas and points of view, as well as to the possibility of being changed by what one hears or learns. Openness to change also requires an acceptance that conflict is a natural part of working towards transformation and change. Therefore, the desire to generate ideas and seek solutions is critical.

Trusting Relationships

In order for collaborations to grow and succeed, trust must be nurtured. As Linden (2002) points out, "Poor relationships will kill almost any alliance; without strong relationships there's not trust, and without trust there will be no collaboration (p. 94). With trust, people will be willing to take risks and work together towards common goals.

Additionally, the journey may be long and full of twists and turns, challenges, and unexpected surprises. The group will need to be able to find ways to work through these together. The journey will also include some tough conversations about roles, funding, organizational values, and models. Trusting relationships will help collaborators to have open and honest conversations about issues that affect their work.

Valuing the Strengths of Each Individual and Organization

Each individual and organization has its strengths. Successful collaborations value these and implement ways to include and build on them. This may require recognizing that another agency is better at something than you are. It may mean letting go of how you thought the collaboration might evolve and arriving at a new definition of who you are as an organization. Let's look at another example.

A higher-education collaboration in

California composed of child development faculty from public and private colleges and universities focuses on strengthening higher education systems to support the development of aligned academic and professional development pathways for the ECE workforce. According to its coordinator, Dr. Jan Fish, from the onset, "PEACH (Partnerships for Education, Articulation, and Coordination through Higher Education) created a forum that recognizes the strengths and value of each voice at the table by building relationships through collaborative work, respecting and embracing each individual's pace, perspective, and style while co-constructing a shared vision and accomplishing common goals. They value listening, sharing, working together and accomplishing goals together because both relationships and work deepen through this process."

At the local level, partners have articulated coursework and programs and worked together to develop ECE baccalaureate and doctoral programs. At the state level, they have advocated for the development of an ECE teaching credential.

Agreement on Purpose, Vision, and Goals

It is essential to build agreement on the purpose, vision, and goals early in the process. There has to be shared understanding and buy-in for people to engage in the process and feel like their ideas matter and believe that there is a compelling reason to collaborate. Working together to determine the purpose, vision, and goals inspires ownership of the project, a feeling of connection that creates dedication to seeing it through.

It is also critical to clarify and acknowledge the interests and needs of all parties. All participants will naturally want to protect or promote

either or both their organizational and/or personal interests. When these are vocalized for the group as a whole, the real work of the collaborative can begin.

Agreement on Membership and Roles

Begin by determining who will be a member of the collaborative and how the project will involve key stakeholders and partners. Who should be involved?

- Those with decision-making power?
- Those potentially affected or impacted by any decisions?
- Individuals or organizations with expertise, information, or ideas on the issue?
- Those who could block or impede decisions?

Decide on and document member roles to clarify responsibilities and empower members to work towards the agreed-upon goals with a common understanding. This will make it easier for new members to join and to keep the process transparent. Members and roles may change over time depending on the nature and details of the projects and this should be recognized and discussed up front.

Decision-Making Processes

Having an agreed-upon decision-making process is essential. It lays the foundation for open communication, determining direction, and valuing the input of all participating. Several collaboratives I've worked on had a leadership team or advisory board composed of representatives from each partner/member agency. The representatives were individuals with decision-making level authority at their organizations; this is crucial for the collaborative to make progress. For

example, the literacy program advisory board met monthly and worked together on all aspects of project governance including program activities, budgets, roles, and evaluation.

One highly effective collaboration is an alliance of ten organizations serving children and families. After coordinating efforts over many years, they formed the Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles in 1998 in order to uniformly negotiate and implement a large county child care subsidy contract together. The alliance includes a board made up of executives from each agency, along with director/manager level committees, as well as several subcommittees/workgroups that meet monthly to coordinate and implement all joint projects and services. Collectively they provide child care subsidies to 46,540 children in 19,776 child care settings annually. Leveraging their collective impact, they developed a comprehensive professional development system and have provided 3,312 training workshops to 10,200 child care providers along with supportive coaching to over 3,000 providers over the last five years.

Enjoy the Journey

Collaboration is a journey. It can be transformational and offer wonderful opportunities to build new, successful programs or address ongoing issues in new ways. It can also provide for new leadership and growth opportunities. But it can be challenging and hard work. One must have the will to approach problems in new ways and to seek out and be open to diverse opinions. It requires honesty and integrity and the willingness to listen, learn, and value new ideas. But successful collaboration is possible and is going to be a critical and valuable way to approach societal and workplace issues in the future.

References

- Clifford, D. (2012). *Local-level system building*. In Sharon L. Kagan & Katie Kauerz (Eds.) *Early childhood systems: Transforming early learning* (pp. 155–170). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Linden, R. M. (2002). *Working across boundaries: Making collaboration work in government and nonprofit organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ricci, R., & Wiese, C. (2011). *The collaboration imperative: Executive strategies for unlocking your organization's true potential*. San Jose, CA: Cisco Systems, Inc.
- Roberts, J. M. (2004). *Alliances, coalitions, and partnerships: Building collaborative organizations*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.
- Roberts, J. M. (2010). *Governance for collaboratives: A guide to resolving power and conflict issues*. Toronto, Ontario: Joan Roberts Consulting.
- Tamm, J. W., & Luyet, R. J. (2004). *Radical collaboration: Five essential skills to overcome defensiveness and build successful relationships*. New York: HarperCollins.

Resources

- Arsenault, J. (1998). *Forging nonprofit alliances*. Washington, DC, and San Francisco: The National Alliance for Nonprofit Management and Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Bruno, H. E. (2012). *What you need to lead an early childhood program: Emotional intelligence in practice*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Bruno, H. E., Gonzalez-Mena, J., Hernandez, L. A., & Sullivan, D. R. (2013). *Learning from the bumps in the road: Insights from early childhood leaders*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Goffin, S. G. (2013). *Early childhood education for a new era: Leading for our profession*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Kagan, S. L., & Kauerz, K. (Eds.). (2012). *Early childhood systems: Transforming early learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Marotz, L. R., & Lawson, A. (2007). *Motivational leadership in early childhood education*. Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning.

Mattessich, P. W., Murray-Close, M., & Monsey, B. R. (2001). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. St. Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.

Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths-based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. New York: Gallup Press.

Rosen, E. (2007). *The culture of collaboration: Maximizing time, talent, and tools to create value in the global economy*. San Francisco: Red Ape Publishing.

Straus, D. (2002). *How to make collaboration work: Powerful ways to build consensus, solve problems, and make decisions*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Sykes, M. (2014). *Doing the right thing for children: Eight qualities of leadership*. St. Paul MN: Redleaf Press.

Walker, D., Zimmerman, D. P., & Cooper, J. E. (2002). *The constructivist leader (2nd edition)*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Winer, M., & Ray, K. (1994). *Collaboration handbook: Creating, sustaining and enjoying the journey*. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Wold and Associates. (2011). *Partners in pandemic and emergency readiness: Building a public health system of response with child care networks in Los Angeles County*. Los Angeles: County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health.

