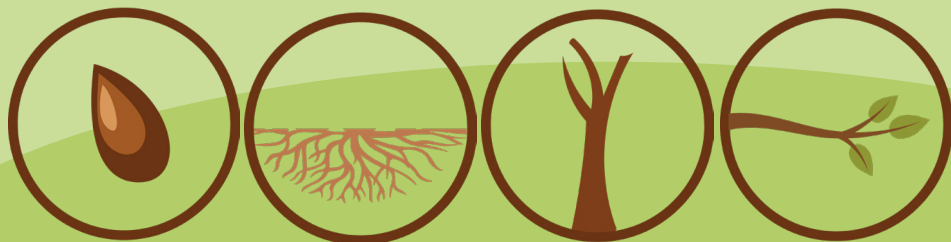


THE ENGAGED NEIGHBORHOOD INITIATIVE:

Cultivating Conditions for Children and Families to Thrive

Prepared for First 5 Orange County



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2014, First 5 Orange County's **Engaged Neighborhoods (EN)** initiative has demonstrated how centering **family leadership, data-informed collaboration, and cross-sector partnerships** can transform the systems that shape children's lives. Across **Anaheim, Garden Grove, La Habra, and Santa Ana**, Engaged Neighborhoods have grown from grassroots networks into powerful ecosystems that strengthen early learning, health, and family well-being.

Purpose and Approach

This evaluation examines how Engaged Neighborhoods foster equitable family engagement, community-defined impact, and systems change. Guided by the **Evaluation Task Force**, data were collected through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and meetings. The Task Force – composed of parents and caregivers, community leaders, backbone organizations, and partner organizations – helped design tools, interpret findings, and co-develop recommendations.

Due to disruptions related to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement activity in several neighborhoods, data

collection methods were adapted for safety and accessibility, resulting in a smaller but rich qualitative dataset. Despite these limitations, participation remained strong, and the findings offer valuable insights into both the outcomes and mechanisms of sustainable community transformation.

Cumulative Impact (2021–2024)

Since 2021, Engaged Neighborhoods backbone organizations have collectively:

- Engaged **2,000+ parents, caregivers, and families** in early learning, health, and leadership activities.
- Delivered **400+ workshops and events** connecting families to essential resources.
- Trained **570 parent and caregiver leaders** who now sit on local boards, committees, and councils.
- In sites established before 2020, reduced early childhood vulnerability by **5–10 percentage points**, while

newer post-COVID sites continue rebuilding participation and trust after pandemic disruptions.

- Expanded formal organizational partnerships from **4 to 15**, institutionalizing collaboration.
- Leveraged **\$160K+ in new public and private funding** beyond First 5 OC.

These outcomes illustrate how relational, resourced, and resident-led approaches can drive lasting systems change.

2000+ parents, caregivers, and families engaged



400+ workshops and events



11 new partnerships



Key Findings

While cumulative outcomes demonstrate what has changed across Engaged Neighborhoods, the Evaluation Task Force focused on understanding how this transformation occurred. The evaluation reveals key drivers of success and areas for continued improvement:

Welcoming, resource-rich spaces build trust.

Parents and caregivers engage and remain active when programs meet practical needs — like food, diapers, and bilingual early learning activities — while fostering belonging and cultural connection. These conditions reduce isolation and create sustained participation among parents and caregivers.

Family leadership strengthens confidence and collective power.

Over 570 parents and caregivers completed leadership trainings with Resident and Parent Leadership Academies, Promotoras, etc. Parents and caregivers move from participants to decision-makers, gaining the skills and confidence to advocate for their children and communities.

Trusted messengers drive engagement.

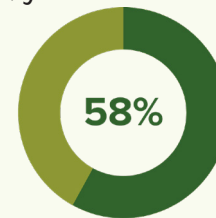
Word-of-mouth and promotora outreach remain the most effective recruitment

methods. About 60% of parents and caregivers joined because of a personal invitation, underscoring the value of relational networks, cultural familiarity, and consistent communication in sustaining participation.



Partnerships deepen but require clearer roles.

Collaboration across schools, cities, and nonprofits has grown, yet 58% of partner organizations identified the need for clearer expectations and shared accountability. Strengthening backbone coordination and defining responsibilities will ensure sustainability.



Data transparency builds trust.

Parents and caregivers are more willing to engage when they understand how data will be used. Many voiced fatigue with traditional surveys and prefer participatory methods like story circles and photovoice. Building transparent feedback loops enhances trust and inclusion in decision-making.

Policies now reflect family priorities.

Some cities with Engaged Neighborhoods initiatives have adopted Early Childhood or Child-Friendly City Resolutions. Those involved with Engaged Neighborhoods now want to see these policies translate into tangible change — through visible investments, public tracking, and integration with broader city priorities like housing and mobility.

Burnout threatens sustainability.

Organizational partners and backbone staff report exhaustion due to limited capacity and short-term funding. Sustained investment, paid leadership roles, and cross-sector funding models are needed to prevent attrition and maintain momentum.

Engagement gaps persist among underrepresented families.

Some linguistic and cultural groups — particularly men and families speaking Indigenous languages — remain less engaged. More targeted outreach and flexible programming are needed to ensure full inclusion, particularly for men, families speaking Indigenous languages, and Middle Eastern, South Asian, and other Asian American and Pacific Islander communities who remain less engaged.

Systems change requires long-term investment.

True sustainability cannot rely on volunteerism alone. Multi-year pooled funding, and alignment across local government, philanthropy, and education partners are essential to embed early childhood priorities into local infrastructure.

Conclusion

These findings affirm that sustainable systems change begins with relationships and grows through shared leadership and investment.

- Engaged Neighborhoods have demonstrated that when parents and caregivers are centered as experts and partners, systems evolve toward equity and lasting impact.
- Continued alignment between policy, funding, and family voice will be essential to sustain progress.
- Future efforts should strengthen backbone support, expand engagement among underrepresented groups, and secure long-term cross-sector investment to keep early childhood at the center of community well-being.

The strength of this movement lies not in creating new voices, but in amplifying the ones that have always been there — parents, caregivers, and communities leading change from the ground up.





INTRODUCTION

First 5 Orange County's Engaged Neighborhoods (EN) initiative began in 2014 and, today, supports four community collaboratives. EN reflects a long-term commitment to ensuring that every child in Orange County grows up healthy, supported, and ready to learn. Since 2014, First 5 OC has invested in four community collaboratives — **Network Anaheim** — **Learn Well Task Force, Growing Up Garden Grove, La Habra Little Learners, and Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative** — each rooted in the four conditions children need to thrive:

1. Early and ongoing health and development
2. A safe, stable, and nurturing home
3. Neighborhoods that support young children and families
4. Equitable distribution of resources.

Most of these collaboratives were not created by First 5 OC; rather, they emerged from grassroots organizing efforts led by parents and caregivers, educators, and local leaders before formal funding began. First 5 OC's role has been to nurture and expand their work by investing in **community leadership, capacity building, and systems alignment**.

The EN initiative now represents a maturing model of community-led systems change — where families are not only recipients of services but co-designers of the ecosystems that shape their children's futures. Over time, these networks have demonstrated how place-based collaboration can drive measurable progress in early development, leadership, and local policy.

ENGAGED NEIGHBORHOOD TIMELINE

Centering Community Leadership

What began as localized efforts to improve early childhood readiness has matured into a coordinated, countywide network of parents and caregivers and organizational partners driving policy change, resource alignment, and systems transformation.

Network Anaheim established.

Residents launch a collaborative using Early Development Instrument (EDI) data to improve early childhood readiness.

2014

La Habra Little Learners formed.

City and partners formalize a collaborative to boost kindergarten readiness.

2017

Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative (SAELI) launched.

Families and partners create a citywide network for early learning and family leadership.

2015

Growing Up Garden Grove established.

Garden Grove and the Boys & Girls Club co-lead efforts to strengthen child health and literacy.

2021

Shared learning network launched.

First 5 OC connects all four Engaged Neighborhoods to align strategies and share data.

2022

First 5 OC Renews Engaged Neighborhood Initiative.

Investment grows to deepen evaluation, technical assistance, and systems alignment.

2024

2025

Evaluation Task Force launched.

Fractal Strategies and community partners co-design a participatory evaluation framework.

Community data collection conducted.

Neighborhood surveys and interviews document individual, community, and systems outcomes.

“Community Voices, Community Data” gathering held

Parents, caregivers, and organizations reflect on results and shape next-phase sustainability strategies.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The Engaged Neighborhoods evaluation assesses the reach, depth, and sustainability of the initiative’s impact on children, families, and systems – asking not only what has changed, but how that change is happening and what it will take to sustain and scale it over time.

Grounded in First 5 OC’s Theory of Change, the evaluation recognizes that lasting improvements in child well-being emerge when families, neighborhoods, and systems are intentionally connected and mutually reinforcing.

Theory of Change

If we:	Communities will have:	And changes we will see are:
Support neighborhoods to engage and empower families	Families that are empowered changemakers, advocating for solutions to issues facing their community	Increased family leadership
Connect families to resources	Equitable access to services	Improved kindergarten readiness
Connect resource providers to each other	Neighborhoods with the infrastructure to support healthy children	Cross-sector coordination (e.g., system integration, child-friendly policy changes) and funding diversification

The Engaged Neighborhoods initiative brings this theory to life by investing in family leadership, community collaboration, and cross-sector partnerships to create equitable early childhood systems.

Evaluation Approach

Grounded in a participatory evaluation design, this approach translates First 5 OC’s Theory of Change into practice through community-led methods and measures of success. Fractal Strategies worked with the Evaluation Task Force – parents, organizational partners, and EN backbone agencies – to co-create

research questions, data tools, and an analysis framework. This collaboration kept the evaluation rooted in lived experience and guided by community-defined indicators of change.

Key Research Questions

- What impact is Engaged Neighborhoods having on families, communities and systems, and what will it take to sustain and strengthen this work?
- What barriers to engagement exist within Engaged Neighborhoods, and what strategies can effectively address or overcome them?

Methodology

Data were collected between spring and summer 2025 through organizational surveys, paired interviews with parents and caregivers in English and Spanish, and organizational partner interviews. To deepen and contextualize these findings, the evaluation triangulated these qualitative insights with grantee annual reports, empirical data on socio-ecological factors influencing early childhood development, and parent engagement indicators.

The evaluation is grounded in **Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory**, which recognizes that children grow within interconnected systems of family, community, and institutions.

FROM SEEDS TO BRANCHES

THE STORY OF ENGAGED NEIGHBORHOODS

To visualize these relationships, the evaluation team applied a **Tree Framework**. This framework illustrates how small, consistent acts of family engagement at the seed level can grow into broader structural change – showing how ENs cultivate the conditions for children and families to thrive.

SEEDS

Seeds represent engagement – the first spark when families connect through welcoming programs and trusted relationships. Engagement is the thread that runs through every level of impact.

ROOTS

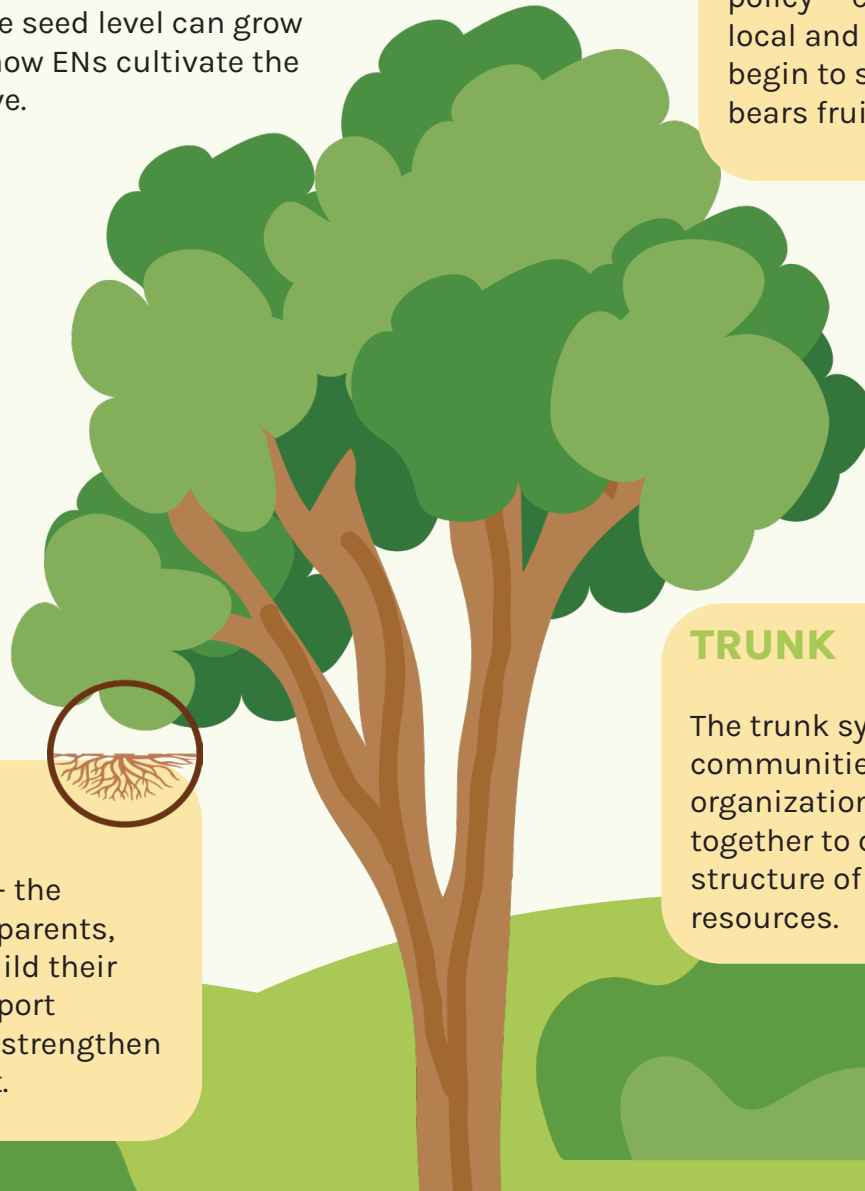
Roots reflect our families – the foundation of the work. As parents, caregivers, and children build their skills, confidence, and support networks, they anchor and strengthen the base for lasting impact.

BRANCHES

Branches represent systems and policy – extending outward as our local and state civic institutions begin to shift, spreading change that bears fruit for the whole community.

TRUNK

The trunk symbolizes our communities – neighbors and organizational partners coming together to create a strong, supportive structure of collaboration and shared resources.





How Families Connect & Engage

Parents and caregivers describe ENs as welcoming, resource-rich spaces that meet real needs while fostering trust and belonging. These early connections represent the seeds of the initiative – moments when parents and caregivers first take root in supportive environments that nurture participation and shared growth. When parents and caregivers feel seen and supported, they stay engaged and invite others to join, helping new relationships sprout and strengthen across neighborhoods. These findings align with research showing that culturally grounded, relationship-based approaches increase participation and retention among families facing structural barriers.¹

FINDING 1: Resource-Rich Programs Build Trust and Participation

What partners told us:

Parents and caregivers consistently said they join and stay involved because ENs help them meet basic needs while

offering meaningful learning. food, diapers, and early learning activities make the program both *practical and purposeful*.

“They have a food pantry after the class...lunch is provided during the summer.” – Parent/Caregiver

“The focus on early childhood education has helped educate parents and stakeholders on the importance of intentional activities that support a child’s development.” – Organization

What the data show:

- 100% of interviewed parents/ caregivers said EN provides helpful early childhood development education, early learning resources, and essential resources (food, books, diapers).
- These services increase participation and strengthen family trust in the program.²



Best practices from the field:

- **Continue to Support Resource Integration.** Maintain consistent access to material supports (food, diapers, books), pairing them with early-learning messaging – shown to boost attendance and caregiver efficacy.³

FINDING 2: Welcoming, Inclusive Spaces Foster Belonging

What partners told us:

Parents and caregivers repeatedly emphasized that EN feels “like family.” Staff remember names, speak families’ languages, and create events rooted in culture. These gestures transform programs into hubs of community connection.

“They make you feel seen, and they get to know the families and build connections.” – Parent/Caregiver

3 Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Weiss et al., 2010.

1 González et al., 2005; Han & Love, 2021.

2 Parent and Caregiver Interviews, 2025.



SEEDS CONTINUED

What the data show:

- 78% of caregivers described EN as welcoming, accessible, and family-oriented. (8 out of 10 caregivers)
- Free programming, bilingual activities, and community events drive engagement.⁴
- Men and diverse racial and ethnic groups remain under-represented among EN participants. Some common barriers include scheduling and lack of awareness.⁵
- Multiple interviews emphasize that translation alone isn't inclusion – dialect diversity (e.g., Mixteco, Zapoteco) and cultural familiarity were cited as key to sustained engagement.⁶



78% of caregivers described EN as welcoming, accessible, and family-oriented.

Best practices from the field:

- **Deepen cultural and linguistic relevance.** Continue bilingual (English / Spanish) and culturally familiar programming—such as cooking classes and literacy nights—to promote inclusion and trust. Expand to

other languages, dialects, and cultures to reach under-represented families.⁷

- **Expand outreach beyond the workday.** Offer flexible scheduling outside of the traditional 9-5, Monday through Friday workday to sustain participation among diverse participants.⁸
- **Use alternative communication methods.** Tools such as WhatsApp, text messages, and phone reminders are often more effective at increasing awareness and participation than emails or websites alone – particularly among families with limited digital literacy or language barriers.⁹

FINDING 3: Trusted Messengers Expand Reach and Retention

What partners told us:

Parents and caregivers often joined EN because they were invited by someone they trusted – a friend, librarian, or promotora. Word-of-mouth and personal outreach remain the most effective strategies for engagement.

“Engaged Neighborhoods has built a sense of community amongst the families who are actively participating, and those families have invited others... we’ve slowly seen steady growth in participation.” – Organization

What the data show:

- ~60% of caregivers cited personal invitations or referrals as the reason they joined EN.
- Peer networks are among the strongest predictors of sustained engagement.¹⁰
- Building trust also involves being clear about the outcomes of programming and initiatives, including data collection.¹¹
- Families and many organizational partners are “surveyed out” and appreciate alternative data collection methods.¹²

Best practices from the field:

- Invest in trusted community messengers such as promotoras, parents, and caregivers.
- Create “Family Ambassador” roles to recognize and resource peer leaders.

4 Parent and Caregiver Interviews, 2025.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

7 González et al., 2005.
8 Han & Love, 2021.
9 Evans et al., 2012.

10 Organization Interviews, 2025.
11 Parent and Caregiver Interviews, 2025.
12 Evaluation Task Force Meeting, 2025.



SEEDS CONTINUED

Finding 4: Trust in Data Collection Shapes Engagement and Participation

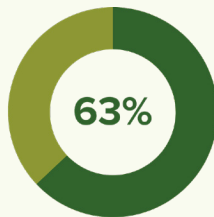
What partners told us:

ENs expressed strong views about how data is collected, shared, and used within the initiative. While parents and caregivers trust the relationships built through promotoras and peer networks, they remain cautious about sharing information unless they understand its purpose. A consistent theme across interviews was that transparency and feedback loops are essential to maintaining engagement.

“Parents won’t participate if they don’t know how the data will be used.” – Organization

What the data show:

- 63% of parents and caregivers indicated that trust in how their input would be used directly affected their willingness to participate.¹³
- Parents, caregivers,



and organizations voiced fatigue with repetitive surveys and preferred alternative, relational approaches like photovoice, storytelling circles, and pop-up dialogues.¹⁴

- Distrust in data use was particularly pronounced in communities where immigrant families cited concerns about privacy and potential misuse of personal information.¹⁵
- Evaluation Task Force members identified the need to “close the loop” by sharing results back to communities and demonstrating how their input shaped decisions.¹⁶

Best practices from the field:

- **Diversify data collection methods.** Move beyond traditional surveys toward participatory and creative methods – such as photovoice, story circles, and community dialogues – to capture richer, more inclusive data. These approaches enhance trust and voice among marginalized groups.¹⁷

- **Enhance transparency and feedback loops.** Share findings back with participants through bilingual community meetings, visual dashboards, and newsletters to demonstrate how data informs change. Transparent communication strengthens credibility and sustained participation.¹⁸
- **Strengthen capacity for community-led research.** Train parent and caregiver leaders, promotoras, and partner organizations in community-based participatory evaluation so they co-own both data and decisions. Evidence shows participatory evaluation increases program relevance and trust.¹⁹

¹⁴ Evaluation Task Force Meeting, 2025.

¹⁵ Parent and Caregiver Interviews, 2025.

¹⁶ Evaluation Task Force Meeting, 2025.

¹⁷ Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010.

¹⁸ Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995.

¹⁹ Israel et al., 1998; Cargo & Mercer, 2008.



Strengthening Families and Children

As parents and caregivers deepen their involvement, the **seeds of engagement grow into roots of strength and stability**. Parents and caregivers gain confidence, skills, and leadership, while children thrive socially, emotionally, and cognitively. These roots anchor families in networks of mutual support, allowing growth to spread across households and communities. This pattern echoes research on collective efficacy and parent empowerment, which links relational learning to measurable child-development gains.¹

FINDING 1: Early Learning Activities Strengthen Child Development

What partners told us:

Parents and caregivers said EN activities help children learn through play, reading, and interaction with other kids. These moments also strengthen bonds between parents and caregivers and their children.

**“My child is ready to start school.”
– Parent/Caregiver**

What the data show:

- 89% of parents and caregivers reported improvements in their child’s motor, social, and cognitive skills.
- Activities like storytime, music, and arts-and-crafts were cited as favorites for school readiness.²



89% of parents and caregivers reported improvements in their child’s motor, social, and cognitive skills.

Best practices from the field:

- **Integrate two-generation learning.** Pair child play-based learning with parent education to strengthen family-school partnerships and reinforce early learning at home.³

² Parent and Caregiver Interviews, 2025.

³ Weisberg et al., 2016.

FINDING 2: Family Support Reduces Isolation and Builds Resilience

What partners told us:

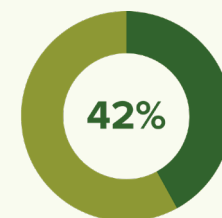
Many parents and caregivers said attending EN events improves their mental health and helps them feel less alone. The social connections built in EN spaces create emotional safety and ongoing mutual support.

“You aren’t alone with your struggles...it’s easier to get advice and input.” – Parent/Caregiver

“Attending events is good for mental health.” – Parent/Caregiver

What the data show:

- 42% of interviewed parents and caregivers reported improved mental well-being.



¹ Moll et al., 1992; García et al., 2023.



ROOTS CONTINUED

- Parents who regularly attended events were 2x more likely to report feeling connected to other families.⁴

Best practices from the field:

- **Embed family wellness supports.** Incorporate wellness circles, peer-support groups, and mindfulness into programming to reduce stress and promote resilience.⁵
- **Foster mutual-aid networks.** Support informal peer groups through WhatsApp or neighborhood pods to maintain connection among families.⁶

FINDING 3: Parents Grow as Leaders and Advocates

What families and partners told us:

Parents and caregivers are not only participants — they become community leaders. ENs support parents and caregivers to take on leadership roles, facilitate classes, and speak up for their community's needs. Partners emphasized that this leadership development is successful because it builds on assets parents already possess — cultural insight, deep community relationships,

and lived expertise. ENs recognize and cultivate the strengths that families bring, allowing their knowledge and skills to shape programming, outreach, and community decision-making.

**“We trained moms to be the leaders — they bring other parents in and keep the work going.”
– Organization**

What the data show:

- 32% of organizations noted observing parents and caregivers stepping into leadership roles.
- Parent leaders help sustain engagement, especially when staff turnover occurs.⁷

Best practices from the field:

- **Continue to formalize leadership pathways.** Create structured ladders for parent leaders with training, stipends, and co-designed systems change goals that embed leadership within the community fabric.⁸

4 Parent and Caregiver Interviews, 2025.

5 Fawcett et al., 2017.

6 Han & Love, 2021.

7 Organization Interviews, 2025.

8 Dempsey & Baine, 2021; Moll et al., 1992.





Building Connected Communities

As the roots of family strength grow deeper, they give rise to the trunk of community connection – the sturdy framework that links families, schools, and local organizations. ENs serve as hubs where residents and organizations share resources, exchange learning, and align efforts to support young children. These collective structures sustain the initiative's growth and stability. Research shows that such cross-sector networks foster stronger coordination and improved outcomes compared to isolated programs.¹

FINDING 1: Families Access and Shape Community Resources

What partners told us:

Parents and caregivers are more aware of available resources and help each other connect to them. They also voice their needs in planning and program design, creating a stronger sense of ownership.

"It's my belief that residents are better informed of the work being done in our community."

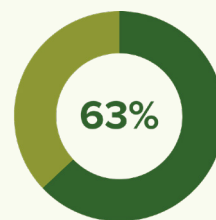
– Organization

"ENs link families with services for developmental screenings and bring community partners together to meet and share information."

– Organization

What the data show:

- 63% of organizations observed stronger resident connections to community resources.
- Families report greater confidence in seeking help or information.²
- Despite positive gains, some resource gaps remain for families.³



Best practices from the field:

- **Sustain neighborhood coordination hubs.** Continue to position ENs as bridges between families, schools, and community-based organizations.⁴

- **Build parent capacity for resource navigation.** Train parents and caregivers to co-facilitate community resource workshops, empowering families to access and share critical services.⁵
- **Co-locate services.** Where possible, integrate health, education, and early-learning supports under one roof to streamline access and build shared accountability.⁶

FINDING 2: Collaboration Across Sectors Breaks Down Silos

What partners told us:

The EN initiative has inspired collaboration between schools, city programs, and community-based organizations. These relationships allow organizational partners to align services and focus on early childhood outcomes.

¹ Blank et al., 2010; Kania & Kramer, 2011.

² Organization Interviews, 2025.

³ Organization and Parent and Caregiver interviews, 2025.

⁴ Blank et al., 2010.

⁵ Bryk et al., 2010.

⁶ McDonald et al., 2019.



TRUNK CONTINUED

“Our school districts and city child development programs are working together, breaking the silos.”

– Organization

“First 5 Engaged Neighborhoods is different. There is the ability to be creative, the ability to recognize all communities are similar, yet have different needs, we all have our own relationships, which creates and honors the process to achieve the desired outcomes and results.”

– Organization

What the data show:

- 32% of organizational partners reported new or strengthened cross-sector partnerships when asked about the greatest value of participating in the EN initiative.
- Collaboration led to shared early childhood planning in multiple EN sites.⁷
- Multiple stakeholders across communities explicitly call for cross-neighborhood learning to share strategies and innovations.⁸

⁷ Partner Interviews, 2025.

⁸ Ibid.

Best practices from the field:

- **Strengthen cross-sector collaboration.** Host quarterly inter-agency learning exchanges to align data, priorities, and service models across education, health, and family sectors.⁹

FINDING 3: Partners Desire More Role Clarity

What partners told us:

EN backbone organizations convene local partner organizations and agencies to collaborate with parents and caregivers on early childhood priorities. These partners praised ENs for improving collaboration among schools, cities, and nonprofits, but many also expressed confusion about shared expectations and boundaries. These organizational partners desire greater role clarity to strengthen their participation.

Backbone organizations noted that as relationships deepened, the line between “backbone,” “partner,” and “funder” roles blurred. They emphasized that while collective impact thrives on collaboration, it requires clear definitions of who leads, who convenes, and how accountability is

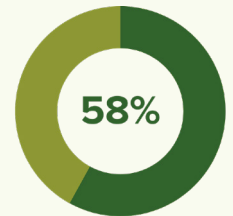
⁹ Kania & Kramer, 2011.

shared. This tension reflects the challenge of sustaining collaboration while maintaining organizational identity and trust.

“Our job is not to count widgets — we’re conveners, not direct service providers.” – Partner

What the data show:

- 58% of partner organizations identified a need for greater clarity in roles, communication, and reporting expectations.¹⁰
- Survey comments and interviews highlighted that while cross-sector collaboration has strengthened, inconsistent definitions of scope and deliverables have led to frustration and occasional duplication of effort.¹¹
- Partners also described shifting perceptions of First 5 OC — from a funder to a co-creator — but noted that evolving leadership and staff transitions sometimes disrupted continuity.¹²



¹⁰ Organization Survey, 2025.

¹¹ Organization interviews, 2025.

¹² Ibid.



TRUNK CONTINUED

- Partners also noted backbone fatigue, claiming “mismatch between funder expectations and role definitions.”¹³

Best practices from the field:

- **Clarify roles & expectations.** Refine shared governance charters that define the distinct responsibilities of backbone organizations, partners, and funders—consistent with best practices for collective impact networks.¹⁴
- **Establish transparent communication loops.** Use quarterly “role alignment” check-ins to review evolving scopes, reporting needs, and capacity constraints.¹⁵
- **Invest in backbone capacity.** Ensure backbone organizations have dedicated staff and flexible resources to manage coordination functions effectively.¹⁶
- **Document and share lessons.** Capture learning from EN sites that successfully balance autonomy with alignment to strengthen the model countywide.¹⁷

¹³ Organization interviews and survey, 2025.

¹⁴ Kania & Kramer, 2011; McDonald et al., 2019.

¹⁵ Bryk et al., 2010.

¹⁶ Blank et al., 2010; Fawcett et al., 2017.

¹⁷ Preskill & Gowdy, 2020.





Advancing Systems and Policy Change

As the trunk of community collaboration expands, the branches of systems change grow – where shared learning and relationships extend into city and organizational practices. ENs help organizational partners align programs and priorities to better support families, and parents and caregivers contribute insights that inform local planning and strengthen early childhood systems. These branches represent sustained coordination and integration of family-centered practices into everyday work. This aligns with growing research showing that participatory governance and equitable recognition of lived expertise improve policy relevance and long-term impact.¹

FINDING 1: Child-Friendly Policies Reflect Family Priorities

What partners told us:

Organizations described how the EN model is shifting how cities think about early childhood. Families now have a seat

at the table, and early learning being is seen as central to community planning.

“The focus on early childhood education has shifted how the city approaches planning and policy.”
– Organization

What the data show:

- 68% of organizations reported that their cities adopted family- and child-friendly priorities.
- All ENs now include early childhood goals in their local plans and initiatives.²
- Communities want to see child-friendly policies translate into visible change. While cities are adopting new commitments, parents and partners emphasized the need for tangible results in their neighborhoods – acknowledging that competing priorities can slow action.³

Best practices from the field:

- **Develop public accountability tools.** Create community-facing scorecards that track early-childhood goals and

demonstrate city progress toward child-friendly priorities⁴.

- **Continue to cultivate family leadership in systems change.** Engage family advisors in policy design and budget reviews via strategies such as family policy forums to inform future city initiatives.⁵
- **Integrate early childhood goals into broader policy agendas.** Encourage cities to embed early childhood priorities into cross-sector initiatives – such as housing, transportation, and economic development – to ensure family-friendly commitments translate into visible community change. Research shows that aligning early childhood investments with broader municipal goals increases sustainability, equity, and public support.⁶

1 Best & Holmes, 2010; Cochran et al., 2022.

2 Organization Interviews, 2025.
3 Sensemaking Session, 2025.

4 Kania et al., 2018.

5 Ibid.

6 Cohen et al., 2021; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013; Kania & Kramer, 2011.



BRANCHES CONTINUED

FINDING 2: Institutions Are Embedding Family Voice

What partners told us:

Organizations are adopting practices that treat parents and caregivers as lived experts and compensate them fairly for their contributions.

“We value the community as experts and now provide stipends comparable to consultant rates.”
– First 5 OC

What the data show:

- First 5 OC’s own Family Ambassador Program demonstrates this shift internally: parents and caregivers co-review program materials, advise on funding priorities, and participate in governance.⁷
- Surveyed organizations noted that compensating parents at consultant-level rates improved both attendance and the quality of input, signaling that equitable pay is a driver of sustained engagement.⁸

Best practices from the field:

- **Standardize parent and caregiver compensation.** Implement

competitive pay for parent and family leaders who serve on boards or advisory councils to institutionalize equity and expertise.⁹

- **Expand parent and caregiver representation in governance.** Support increasing the number of parent and caregiver representatives on committees and councils to embed lived experience in governance.¹⁰

FINDING 3: Sustaining Systems Change Requires Long-Term Investment

What partners told us:

Backbone organizations noted that sustaining engagement beyond early childhood and funding cycles is a challenge. They want long-term structures to ensure the work continues.

“Partners mention it has taken time to build trust with parents and community stakeholders — funding should continue to sustain this work.” – Organization

What the data show:

- Short-term or restricted funding

disrupts consistency and trust.¹¹

- Parents, caregivers, and organization expressed interest in continuing engagement as children age.¹²

Best practices from the field:

- **Secure multi-year flexible funding.** Prioritize multi-year funding cycles that reflect systems-change timelines and prevent program disruption.¹³
- **Create joint funding pools.** Encourage collective investment across public, private and philanthropic partners to support shared outcomes.¹⁴
- **Create a continuum of engagement across developmental stages.** Strengthen connections with other programs that support children past early childhood (K-8). Explore creation of “Family Alumni Networks” to support continued engagement. Longitudinal studies confirm that sustained, developmentally aligned family engagement strengthens academic achievement, social-emotional growth, and community connectedness.¹⁵

7 Organization Interviews, 2025.

8 Organization survey, 2025.

9 Cochran et al., 2022.

10 Best & Holmes, 2010.

11 Organization Interviews, 2025.

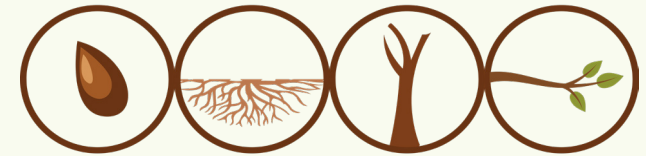
12 Parent and Caregiver and organization interviews, 2025.

13 Preskill & Gowdy, 2020.

14 Fawcett et al., 2017.

15 Weiss et al., 2010; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Sheldon & Jung, 2015.

COMMUNITY PROFILES



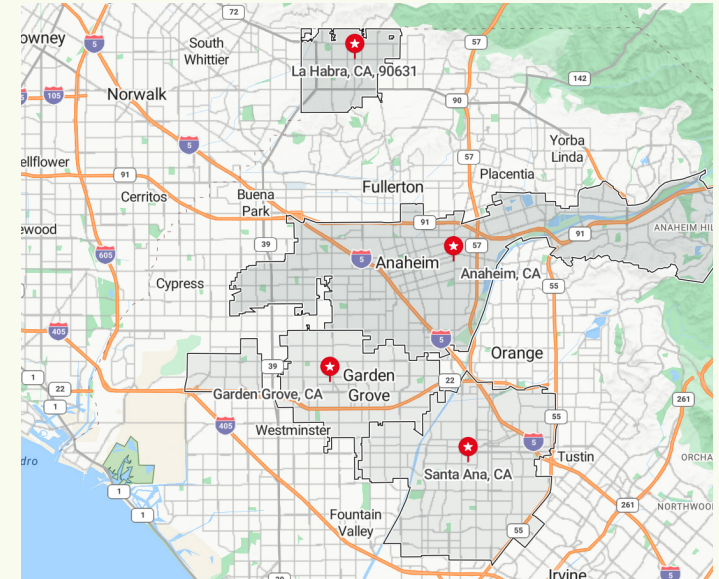
Cross-Neighborhood Insights (2014–2024)

Across all sites, the Engaged Neighborhoods initiative demonstrates how **resourced, relational, and resident-led approaches** transform systems.

- **Anaheim** demonstrates the power of data and resident advocacy.
- **Garden Grove** highlights rapid partnership building and system alignment.
- **La Habra** models city-level integration of early childhood priorities.
- **Santa Ana** shows how long-term investment builds civic power and policy impact.

These efforts have created a foundation for sustainability — anchored in family leadership, interagency coordination, and shared accountability.

Theory in Action: A Cumulative Snapshot



We prioritized:	Using these strategies:	To achieve this impact:
Kindergarten Readiness <i>So that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn</i>	5–10 percentage point reduction in vulnerability since launch* *(among ENs established pre-COVID)	EDI targeting supports sustained improvement
Parent and Caregiver Leadership <i>So that parents and caregivers can make change for their kids and communities</i>	0 --> 570 participants trained	Builds enduring community capacity
Cross-Sector Coordination <i>So that every child and family has access to the resources and supports they need</i>	4 --> 15 formal MOUs & plans	Institutionalizes early childhood priorities
Funding Diversification <i>So that this work is sustained long-term</i>	\$160K+ leveraged beyond F5 OC	Expands sustainability and local ownership

Performance Data: FCI-EN 2021–2024 Performance Data spreadsheets.

Qualitative Data: Bilingual group interviews and organizational reflections (2024–2025).

Spotlight Profiles: Garden Grove, La Habra, Network Anaheim, and Santa Ana (2023–2024).

Network Anaheim – Learn Well Task Force

Launch: 2014 | Partners: 12 | Families Engaged: 130 per year

Network Anaheim has built a culture of data-informed advocacy. Using Early Development Index (EDI) results to guide investments, the Learn Well Task Force unites schools, residents, and nonprofits across seven neighborhoods, transforming early childhood from a “program” into a shared civic responsibility. The initiative has strengthened relationships across the city and school district to partner with residents and nonprofits across several neighborhoods, transforming early childhood from a “program” into a shared civic responsibility.

Progress Highlights (2021–2024)

Indicator	2021	2024	Change
Families Engaged	80	130	+63%
Leadership Graduates	13	35	+169%
Partner Meetings	6	12	+100%



Theory in Action: Snapshot

We prioritized:	Using these strategies:	To achieve this impact:
Kindergarten Readiness	Data literacy training; EDI workshops	+7 percentage points in social competence and emotional maturity
Parent and Caregiver Leadership	Trusted messengers and Resident Leadership Academies	25+ residents trained in leadership academy
Cross-Sector Coordination	Collaboration with city and school district	4 --> 10 partnerships
Funding Diversification	Local philanthropy and redevelopment funds	\$25K leveraged

Network Anaheim – Learn Well Task Force

How We work:

Parents and caregivers who once came to family exercise classes now lead community events with Kid Builder activities and advocacy campaigns for safer routes to school and affordable housing.

“I started coming to Zumba just to move — but then I found out about the leadership group. Now I help organize events for our kids.”
– Parent/Caregiver

“Parents now understand what the data means for their children and neighborhood.” – Organization

Challenges: ICE-related fears and staff turnover.

Opportunities: Expand multilingual data literacy and cross-agency advocacy.



Growing Up Garden Grove (GUGG)

Launch: 2021 | Partners: 15 | Families Engaged: 120 per year

As the newest Engaged Neighborhood, Garden Grove demonstrates how infrastructure and partnership can scale quickly when grounded in trust. Co-led by the City of Garden Grove and the Boys & Girls Club, GUGG aligns health, literacy, and family engagement efforts.

Progress Highlights (2021–2024)

Indicator	2021	2024	Change
Families Engaged	60	120	+100%
Workshops/Events	10	25	+150%
Partner Organizations	8	15	+88%



Theory in Action: Snapshot

We prioritized:	Using these strategies:	To achieve this impact:
Kindergarten Readiness	Data-informed targeting	Baseline established via EDI + Neighborhood Equity Index (NEI) data
Parent and Caregiver Leadership	Family workshops and Family Resource Center partnerships	45 parent leaders trained
Cross-Sector Coordination	Collaborating with and aligning institutions and organizations	Co-backbone model with City and BGC
Funding Diversification	Strategic partnerships with organizations	\$8.6K leveraged

Growing Up Garden Grove (GUGG)

How We work:

In a short time, GUGG has built bridges between families, schools, and libraries — centering belonging and early literacy.

“It feels like a bigger community — staff always remember our names.”
– Parent/Caregiver

“We’re helping families see early learning as a shared responsibility.”
– Organizations

Challenges: Maintaining consistent staffing and communication.

Opportunities: Deepen literacy and health integration across neighborhoods.



La Habra Little Learners

Launch: 2017 | Partners: 20 | Families Engaged: 150 per year

La Habra’s Engaged Neighborhood is coordinated by the **La Habra Collaborative** with **Vista Community Clinic (VCC)** as fiscal agent. The initiative builds on long-standing partnerships with the city, school district, and local businesses to make early learning a visible community priority. Programs operate in parks and public spaces, creating a safe and familiar environment where families feel known and supported. La Habra has embedded early childhood into its civic identity, using data and family voices to drive policy. With the city’s Child-Friendly City Resolution, La Habra has institutionalized its commitment to children and families.

Progress Highlights (2021–2024)

Indicator	2021	2024	Change
Families Engaged	100	150	+50%
Partner Organizations	10	20	+100%
EDI Vulnerability	45%	37%	–8 pp



Theory in Action: Snapshot

We prioritized:	Using these strategies:	To achieve this impact:
Kindergarten Readiness	EDI targeting and Readiness on the Road events	8 percentage point reduction in Museum area; 7 pp in Central
Parent and Caregiver Leadership	Promotora model and leadership cohorts	100+ parent and caregiver leaders trained
Cross-Sector Coordination	City departments, nonprofits, and school district	3 --> 7 formal partnerships
Funding Diversification	City and public health grants	\$25K leveraged

La Habra Little Learners

How We work:

La Habra's "Readiness on the Road" mobile model brings early learning directly to families — turning parking lots and parks into classrooms. Parents and caregivers have become advocates for safe, equitable play spaces and early literacy programs.

**"When they see my little one, they ask how he's doing — it feels like family."
– Parent/Caregiver**

"We have the full support of community leadership, our schools, churches, city government and programming, non profits like VCC and our business community taking ownership and pride in the community of La Habras Little Learners.." – Organization

Challenges: Sustaining volunteer momentum and reaching underrepresented families.

Opportunities: Expand bilingual outreach and deepen city-school partnerships.



Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative (SAELI)

Launch: 2015 | Partners: 30 organizations
| Families Engaged: 250+ per year

Santa Ana’s Engaged Neighborhood has become a model for resident-led systems change. What began as a small circle of mothers seeking equitable early learning has evolved into a citywide collaborative influencing policy, practice, and public will. With 30 partner organizations and 25 active school sites, SAELI is redefining what it means for families to lead.

Progress Highlights (2021–2024)

Indicator	2021	2024	Change
Families Engaged	180	250	+39%
Leadership Trainings	20	50	+150%
Partner Organizations	15	30	+100%



Theory in Action: Snapshot

We prioritized:	Using these strategies:	To achieve this impact:
Kindergarten Readiness	Targeted literacy, bilingual parent programs	6 percentage point reduction in vulnerability since 2015
Parent and Caregiver Leadership	Promotora model and stipends for leadership	200+ parent and caregiver leaders trained
Cross-Sector Coordination	Cross-agency coordination and data use	6 MOUs formalized with city, school district, and partners
Funding Diversification	City mini-grants and philanthropic support	\$100K+ leveraged beyond F5 OC

Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative

How We work:

Through bilingual promotora networks, SAELI parents and caregivers lead early literacy programs and engage communities in park equity and rent stabilization systems change. Many have gone on to serve on advisory councils, modeling intergenerational leadership. SAELI works in partnership with the School District and Community Schools, alongside Family and Community Engagement (FACE) liaisons, to address early learning and developmental milestones.

**“They treat us like family. We learn, we lead, and our voices are heard.”
– Parent/Caregiver**

“Seeing parents and caregivers go from asking for help to leading campaigns — that’s the heart of SAELI. They’ve shown the city what families can do.” – Organization

Challenges: Leadership burnout and sustaining bilingual facilitation capacity.

Opportunities: Create formal leadership pipelines and intergenerational mentorship programs across neighborhoods.



CONCLUSION

Conclusion & Future Directions

The Engaged Neighborhoods initiative demonstrates how authentic, resourced, and relational collaboration can transform the systems that shape early childhood well-being. Across Orange County, parents, caregivers, and partners have built trust, shifted policies, and strengthened the infrastructure for sustained community-led change.

Data Collection and Limitations

This evaluation unfolded in a dynamic context shaped by real-world challenges. Midway through data collection, heightened ICE activity across several Orange County neighborhoods disrupted participation. To maintain safety and trust, the evaluation team and the Evaluation Task Force adapted by moving to virtual engagement, using smaller group dialogues, phone interviews, and partner-led reflections in place of large community events. While this flexibility honored participant safety, it resulted in a smaller sample size and limited

our ability to gather detailed data from underrepresented groups.

Despite these challenges, the Evaluation Task Force continued to show up — helping refine tools, conduct outreach, analyze findings, and co-develop recommendations. Their commitment ensured that the evaluation remained grounded in community realities, even under constraints.

Sustainability and Equity

One of the clearest insights from this evaluation is that sustainability cannot rest on volunteer labor or part-time coordination alone. Family leaders and backbone staff repeatedly described burnout, turnover, and the strain of maintaining engagement even when incentives were provided. Meaningful systems change requires structural investment — multi-year funding, local government buy-in, and resource alignment across sectors.

To sustain this work beyond First 5 OC's direct investment, future funding strategies could include:

- **Multi-Sector Investment:** Develop pooled funding models among cities, school districts, and philanthropy to co-finance early childhood and family engagement initiatives.
- **Cross-Issue Framing:** Position early childhood outcomes as directly linked to housing, transportation, and economic mobility to attract broader support from civic agencies and funders.
- **Ongoing Capacity Support:** Provide flexible, dedicated funding for backbone coordination, peer-learning networks, and inter-neighborhood knowledge exchange.
- **Participatory Data Systems:** Maintain the community task force model as a living structure that guides ongoing learning, evaluation, and accountability.

Future Study and Learning

Areas for continued inquiry include:

- **Barriers to Participation:** Conduct targeted outreach and participatory

research with underrepresented families — particularly fathers, immigrant communities, and linguistically diverse groups — to understand persistent barriers to engagement.

- **Longitudinal Impact:** Track family, community, and systems outcomes over time to assess how early investments in leadership and collaboration influence child well-being and civic engagement beyond age five.
- **Cross-Neighborhood Learning:** Examine how innovation spreads and takes root across EN sites, and identify the conditions that accelerate collective impact.
- **Workforce Pathways:** Explore how parent and caregiver leadership connect to workforce development and economic mobility, deepening the case for systemic investment.

Closing Reflection

The Engaged Neighborhoods initiative equips families and partners with the tools, relationships, and resources to shape systems that once felt out of reach. This evaluation affirms that community transformation begins with belonging, grows through collaboration, and endures through shared power and sustained commitment.

The seeds of change have already taken root. The next chapter depends on nourishing those roots — ensuring that families, partners, and systems continue to grow together toward an equitable, thriving Orange County where every child can flourish.



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