

Early Childhood x Oakland, CA

Advancing Community Solutions: A Spotlight

By Mark Swartz

This spotlight looks at ways of transforming community systems that affect Black males in Oakland. Healing the community, advocates and activists contend, involves taking into account the social and historical forces that affect relationships between caregivers and children—which ultimately shapes children’s well-being. Oakland is located in Alameda County. You can read more about how organizations in Alameda County are shaping the early childhood landscape in an upcoming case study from the Stanford Center on Early Childhood.



Bringing community members together to draft statements of principles may seem like a purely intellectual exercise, but the process of finalizing these documents can say a lot about the community’s values and visions. Two such documents that recently emerged from Oakland showcase a deep commitment to transforming systems:

- An “action toolkit” from [Oakland Starting Smart and Strong](#) titled [10 Promising Practices in Early Learning for Black Boys](#)
- [Father-Friendly Principles for Agencies and Organizations in Alameda County](#)

Priya Jagannathan, co-director of [Oakland Starting Smart and Strong](#), stresses that the iterative process of drafting these tenets matters just as much as the workshops for disseminating them. “Publishing isn’t a quick process for us,” she explains. “We take the time and listen to the community to ensure what we create is meaningful, practical and reflects their lived experiences.”

Preschool and Punishment

Black children are expelled from their early learning environments at [much higher rates than white children](#). “Preschool expulsion disrupts children’s education,” states Dr. LaWanda Wesley, former Director of Quality Enhancement and Professional Development, Early Learning for Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). She explored this issue in her 2017 research paper for the *Journal of African American Males in Education*. [Exclusionary Discipline in Preschool: Young Black Boys’ Lives Matter](#) argues that disproportionate punishment for Black boys amounts to a civil rights violation.

Wesley argues that we’ve been thinking about “challenging behavior” all wrong, putting the onus on the children and not looking at the systems that tolerate these responses.

When Dr. Wesley hears about a young child with behavior issues, she doesn’t think, “*What’s wrong with him?*” Instead, she examines the system in which the child is growing up and asks, “*What can we do systemically to alleviate all the pressures that are popping up and boiling up?*”

“We know that we can’t alleviate poverty,” she says. “But we can say, ‘When children come into this space, we will make it well for families. We will make it well for teachers. We will make it well for children.’”

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The issue is personal for Wesley, who thinks about the world her grandsons are growing up in: “We’re watching young Black males pulled over and interrogated right in front of their own homes. What kind of message does that send about where they belong in their community?”

Dr. Tasha Henneman describes an instance of a mother visiting her son’s child care program during naptime and finding him wide awake—and very upset—in a closet. “There was no sort of awareness of how harmful it is to separate a child and put him in a closet while the other kids are napping, just because he wouldn’t nap,” laments Henneman, currently chief of policy and government at [PRC](#). Educating the educators remains a critical part of creating spaces that heal.

Wesley and Henneman both contributed to the California Department of Education’s 2022 publication, [Creating Equitable Early Learning Environments for Young Boys of Color: Disrupting Disproportionate Outcomes](#), which celebrates strengths-based environments and reciprocal partnerships with families.

The [10 Promising Practices in Early Learning for Black Boys](#) represent a deep partnership involving educators from OUSD and longstanding community members and relative newcomers alike. Organized into four categories—culturally responsive and sustaining practice, family engagement, teacher anti-racism and racial justice, and systems equity capacity—each practice comes with action steps for educators to consider.

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Dr. Wesley says that the first two cohorts (50 educators total) that have adopted the practices report changes in classroom behavior and family engagement. “It works in just a short amount of time,” she says, “because they're such practical strategies.”

Da Monica Robinson, an OUSD teacher and trainer, adds that the 10 Promising Practices for Black Boys “can and should be used for every child who has struggles.”

Father-Friendly Principles

A parallel set of principles guides the way family-serving public and nonprofit agencies and organizations treat fathers. Oakland Starting Smart and Strong has joined [First 5 Alameda County](#) in championing the [Father-Friendly Principles for Agencies and Organizations in Alameda County](#). Kevin Bremond, cofounder and program administrator of the [Alameda County Fathers Corps](#) at First 5 Alameda County, emphasizes that they aren't fathering principles for dads to follow. Instead, they're intended to guide service providers—who, as a profession, tend to focus on moms. Changing the practices of family-serving systems and organizations is part of First 5's “whole community, whole family, whole child” approach which advocates for public systems to partner with parents, hear their needs, and follow their lead.

An unprecedented range of father-specific and father-focused programming has resulted, including one for OUSD’s Child Development Center. Educator Da Monica Robinson recalls eye-opening conversations with fathers in this group: “I spoke to four men. Two were in a custody battle; two were married and were having difficulties in their life. Coming from a Black woman’s perspective, I always think we’re the ones carrying the load. And these were Black males who were speaking to me about how they felt *they* were carrying the load.” This is why she created Honoring the Men of Lockwood, so that fathers of her school site would have a space for them to communicate with each other and support each other.

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A related strategy, the [Diversity of Fatherhood Photo Bank](#), offers a wide range of stock photos showing fathers of color that agencies and organizations can use to make their spaces more welcoming. The Alameda County Fathers Corps started by hosting photo shoots with local fathers in 2018. The demand for these images has been strong, and not just locally; the free images have been downloaded in 39 countries.

Bremond aims to establish a new normal where parents see each other as teammates and want the best for each other. “Nothing good comes for a child when one of their parents is struggling,” he observes. “And we as parents shouldn’t want this person that we had kids with to struggle.”

One father who was experiencing a chronically toxic relationship with the mother of his children attended a workshop that encouraged shifting to a “teammate” mindset, and the whole dynamic of the relationship changed. As Bremond recalls, a few weeks later, he found the facilitator and thanked him for changing his life.

“Now this dad is a facilitator,” Bremond adds with a smile.

Given the history of structural and systemic inequalities, local advocates say, it is critical that service providers honor the role, love, and relationship of Black fathers and father figures. Adopted by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in 2015, the Father-Friendly Principles continue to guide the design and implementation of social service programs.



This Spotlight is part of the Stanford Center on Early Childhood's new initiative to advance early childhood systems solutions. Communities everywhere are turning their focus to ways in which they can support young children and the adults in their lives. Early Childhood X (ECX) was created to celebrate and amplify these transformative place-based efforts. To read more ECX publications, visit earlychildhood.stanford.edu/publications.

About the author: [Mark Swartz](#) is a regular contributor to [Early Learning Nation](#). The author of the children's books *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*, *Lost Flamingo*, *Magpie Bridge* and *The Giant of the Flood*, as well as a few novels, he lives in Takoma Park, MD, with his wife and two children.