



WHEN PARENTS LEAD, FAMILIES THRIVE

FINDINGS FROM THE PARENTS GROWING TOGETHER PILOT: A PEER-TO-PEER, HEALING-CENTERED MODEL

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Executive Summary

Parents Growing Together is a Philadelphia pilot co-led by Children First and First Up. Children First and First Up designed a series of trainings to address the trauma that parents carry and to empower them with tools to reduce the trauma's impact on their parenting. It was built on a simple but powerful belief: families thrive when they are supported by people who share and understand their lived experiences. Through this pilot, parents and caregivers of children ages 0–5 participated in a series of healing-centered, trauma-informed workshops facilitated by parent leaders from their own communities. The workshops were designed to test two important questions:

1. Could a peer-to-peer model of teaching trauma-informed practices strengthen parents' engagement with their children's learning?
2. Could trauma-informed training reduce parental stress and improve parent–child relationships?

The pilot engaged 103 caregivers through a three-part workshop series, facilitated by trained parent leaders at eight early childhood sites and two parent-based organizations. Many participants were Black and brown caregivers from historically under-resourced communities. Recruitment was deliberate, reaching those too often left out of traditional supports - grandparents, foster parents, and parents of children with autism or other developmental needs – caregivers who carry immense responsibility with far too little support.

The workshops were led by facilitators, 83% of whom are Black parents from these very communities. By leading the sessions, they not only shaped supportive spaces for others but also created the kind of affirming environments they had once longed for themselves.

What We Learned

Parents Growing Together demonstrated that parent-led, peer-to-peer spaces can reduce stress, build confidence, and strengthen family relationships. Outcomes from surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder reflections consistently highlighted four areas of impact:

1. Parenting practices shifted: About 70% of parents reported noticeable changes in how they responded to their children – choosing patience, calmness, and empathy instead of frustration. Parents named concrete shifts such as pausing before reacting, listening more deeply, and teaching emotional regulation skills to their children.
2. Self-care became essential: More than 80% of parents entered the program struggling with self-care and stress. By the end, many reframed self-care as necessary rather than indulgent – building practices like journaling, resting without guilt, and grounding techniques.
3. Families found belonging: 72% of families in the focus groups described the workshops as healing, safe, and supportive. Nearly every parent spoke of the profound relief in realizing they were not alone, with many sharing that the space eased their 'mom guilt' and renewed their confidence as caregivers.

4. Breaking harmful cycles: Parents reflected on generational patterns – such as discouraging children from expressing emotions – and committed to parenting differently. Facilitators emphasized that when families are supported early, they can interrupt cycles of trauma and create new legacies of care, patience, and have the potential to strengthen children and communities for generations.

What the Data Shows

In addition to parents sharing the demonstrable impact of the model, they also commended the quality of the content, facilitation and approach to delivering the training, specifically noting the following:

- Engagement & design strength: Every participant agreed the workshop design, with respect to pacing and interaction, was just right.
- Exceeded expectations: Two-thirds said the workshop went beyond what they expected.
- High satisfaction: Nearly all rated the workshop as Very Good or Excellent, with more than three quarters selecting Excellent.
- Unanimous endorsement: 100% of participants said they would recommend the workshop to a peer.

Conclusion

Parents Growing Together demonstrates that authentic, parent-led spaces – voluntary, culturally responsive, and rooted in trust – can create the conditions for families to identify trauma and its impact on family dynamics. Participating families not only gained strategies to strengthen bonds with their children but also experienced healing, validation, and community belonging.

Two of the six facilitators had previously led peer-to-peer parenting classes for the City of Philadelphia – programs mandated by the Department of Human Services (DHS) in child welfare cases, where they described that parents often experienced those classes as punitive. In contrast, this model was voluntary and affirming. Parents chose to participate, creating space for vulnerability, reflection, and authentic growth. That voluntary choice seeded a genuine willingness to practice the tools and strategies they learned. Parent facilitators brought the cultural resonance and credibility that made the model work, serving as the vital bridge between theory and praxis.

Fundamentally, providers described Parents Growing Together as more than a parenting program: it offered parents a means of connection, healing, and transformation that touched them, the facilitators, and organizations alike.

Families, parent facilitators, and providers were unequivocal: this work must continue, specifically through the peer-to-peer model. Nearly half of the sample focus group participants explicitly called for more workshops, additional resources, and ongoing support groups, underscoring the urgent need for continued caregiver supports. Many described Parents Growing Together not as an end point, but as a starting place for building stronger families and healthier communities. They urged expansion both in-person and virtually so more families could benefit, and emphasized the importance of including caregivers across all ages.

Introduction & Background

At its core, Parents Growing Together set out to answer two key questions: *Could a peer-to-peer model of teaching trauma-informed practices strengthen parents' engagement with their children's learning and could trauma-informed training reduce parental stress and improve parent-child relationships?*

This idea emerges from an urgent reality. In 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General issued the advisory *Parents Under Pressure*, highlighting that parents are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress. In 2023, 33% of parents reported high stress in the past month compared to 20% of other adults, and nearly half (48%) said that on most days their stress felt completely overwhelming, compared to 26% of adults without children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2024).



Parents today are carrying immense pressures – balancing the demands of work, childcare, and household responsibilities while striving to nurture their children's growth. For too many, particularly Black, brown, and low-income families, these pressures are intensified by systemic inequities and limited access to supportive resources. The result is often chronic stress, isolation, and parenting from a place of survival rather than intention.

Where support is available, it is rarely designed to affirm strengths. Parenting programs are too often mandated after a crisis, framed as punishment rather than opportunity, and are disconnected from the lived experiences of the families they aim to serve. This points to a critical absence: spaces where parents can come together to learn, heal, and grow in ways that honor their voices, cultures, and lived experiences.

Strains on the Care Ecosystem

Meanwhile, early childhood providers are contending with low wages, high staff turnover, and increasingly complex behavioral and developmental needs among young children – all without the coordinated infrastructure needed from systems operating at the intersection of early learning and child development. Without sufficient investment from the state legislature, paired with coordinated support across the early learning system, providers face burnout and struggle to sustain the nurturing environments that families depend on – and that the broader economy relies upon.

Together, these realities create a cycle: stressed parents bring that strain into relationships with children, and overburdened providers struggle to meet their learners and their family's needs. Traditional interventions – often mandated, deficit-based, or disconnected from lived experience – do little to break this cycle. Parents Growing Together was designed to interrupt it with a different approach: voluntary, culturally grounded, and rooted in peer leadership.

Implementation

Implementation of the Parents Growing Together pilot relied on strong collaboration between Children First and First Up. Each organization contributed its expertise and played a critical role in ensuring the program was developed, delivered, and evaluated with both rigor and responsiveness. The table below outlines the responsibilities that were carried out by each organization across key areas of the pilot, including curriculum development, recruitment, training, workshop implementation, outcomes, and stipend allocation.

Area	Children First	First Up
Curriculum	Developed a new group facilitation and leadership curriculum	Developed a new trauma-informed, healing-centered curriculum
Recruiting	Recruited parent leaders from the Parents Empowered for Change program to train in facilitation	Identified and recruited directors and early childhood education centers to host the workshops
Training	Trained parent leaders in group facilitation and leadership	Trained parent leaders on the new trauma-informed, healing-centered curriculum
Workshop Implementation	Attended and supported workshops	Attended and supported workshops
Outcomes	Assisted with documentation of outcomes	Met regularly with Children First to manage the project and report on outcomes
Stipend Allocations	Paid parent leader stipends and provided stipends to childcare programs for dinners served at workshops	Paid stipends directly to parent participants

This collaborative structure ensured that the strengths of both organizations were fully leveraged, creating a strong foundation for the curriculum, training, and evaluation phases that followed. By clearly defining roles and responsibilities, the Parents Growing Together pilot not only strengthened implementation but also modeled the kind of shared leadership and accountability it aimed to foster among parents and caregivers.

What Worked and Why

Feedback from the participating child care centers, facilitators and parents illuminated several elements that contributed to the effectiveness of the pilot:

- Parent Leaders at the Center – Recruiting and training leaders from Children First’s Parents Empowered for Change program proved transformative. As facilitators, parents brought the depth of their lived experience, community ties, and cultural wisdom. Their authenticity and the trust they carried within their communities created the foundation for genuine engagement and meaningful dialogue.

- **A Resilience-Based Curriculum** – First Up’s curriculum, grounded in resilience and trauma-informed principles, resonated deeply with families. Its culturally relevant strategies helped parents make sense of trauma while equipping them with practical, healing-centered tools they could use right away to parent from a place of strength, guided by child development best practices.
- **Partnership Strengths** – Children First brought deep community organizing expertise, while First Up contributed curriculum design and experience with early childhood providers. Together, these strengths created a well-rounded and responsive program.
- **Supportive Infrastructure** – Providing stipends, childcare, and meals removed common barriers and signaled that families’ time and contributions are valued and respected.

Recruitment

The design of the project relied on three stakeholders to engage in recruitment activities to interest parents to participate in the workshop series: early childhood providers and partners, parent facilitators, and participating parents.

- **Providers and Partners:** The pilot was implemented in partnership with eight early childhood centers and two parent-facing organizations: Beautiful Beginnings (Frankford and Bustleton locations), Children’s Playhouse II, Kinder Academy, Parents Empowered for Change, Provider Council – Parent and Family Council, A Secure Future, Somerset Academy, Tots Yearn to Learn, and Wonderspring (New Market location). These childcare centers were selected because of their participation in First Up’s Flourishing Together, a program aimed at training early childhood providers in trauma-informed practices, and their deep connection to families who rely on childcare subsidies and navigate significant economic challenges.
- **Parent Facilitators:** Parent facilitators for this project were recruited directly from an existing network; Parents Empowered for Change – a parent-based initiative of Children First. To ensure a fair, inclusive, and culturally sensitive process, interested parents were invited to complete an application that included basic contact information, a résumé, and responses to thematic questions. These questions encouraged parents to share their lived experiences and perspectives, particularly how cultural, social, and economic factors shaped their access to resources and supports, as well as their views on leadership and community engagement. As part of the application, they were also asked how they would approach building trust and rapport with parents when delivering sensitive or challenging topics. To ensure equity and transparency in the recruitment process, applicants participated in interviews and were evaluated using a standardized scoring rubric.
- **Participating Parents:** Children First and First Up supported partners with a thorough orientation that outlined expectations, provided an in-depth overview of the pilot, and shared ready-to-use communication and outreach templates – lightening the burden of family recruitment.

Participating Parents (continued): Outreach by providers and facilitators engaged approximately 103 families across Philadelphia. Participating families received \$20 for each of the three workshops, earning a total of \$60 for their full participation. The majority were Black and low-to moderate-income parents and caregivers, including grandparents, foster parents, and families raising children with autism and other developmental needs.

Curricula - Building a Healing-Centered Approach

The pilot introduced a three-part workshop series designed to strengthen caregiver well-being and foster child resilience. Grounded in trauma-informed practice, the series combined foundational knowledge, practical strategies, and opportunities for reflection.

Each session was intentionally sequenced to deepen understanding, equip caregivers with tools for everyday application, and build a supportive community.

- **Session One: Foundations** – Explored the impact of trauma and stress on both children and caregivers, highlighting the protective role of nurturing, consistent care.
- **Session Two: Strategies** – Offered practical approaches for co-regulation, routines, and play as pathways to healing, reframing everyday moments such as bedtime and mealtime as opportunities to build resilience.
- **Session Three: Reflection & Community** – Created space for caregivers to share experiences, celebrate progress, and develop personalized stress-management plans.

While the series was designed to provide support, parents entered the pilot carrying significant challenges that shaped the context for the work. Many described parenting as exhausting and isolating, with key themes emerging:

- More than 80% of responses cited **self-care and stress management**.
- At least seven participants brought up **childcare and time management challenges**.
- Five parents identified **supporting children with autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, or trauma histories**.

Caregivers often described their starting point with words like “overwhelmed,” “overstimulated,” and “alone.” Self-care rarely fit into their daily routines, underscoring the emotional and mental strain families carried into the pilot.



These reflections reveal that many participants did not feel well-supported or equipped to meet their own needs at the outset.

To address these realities, the workshops were intentionally designed as non-judgmental, healing-centered spaces. Facilitators modeled resilience, authenticity, and openness – qualities that built trust and credibility. While the pilot initially faced timing challenges, a scaffolded re-launch with improved recruitment materials, provider coaching, and flexible formats helped secure strong participation.

Training and Facilitation

Parent facilitators completed intensive training, co-designed by Children First and First Up. This training drew directly on First Up's decades of expertise in trauma-informed practice and healing-centered engagement – expertise that has shaped thousands of early childhood professionals across Philadelphia. The innovation of this initiative lay in expanding a proven professional training model into direct work with parents and caregivers, centering families as leaders in their own communities.

Partnership Strengths

Children First brought complementary expertise to the partnership, with decades of experience advancing the lives and life chances of children at both the grassroots and grasstops levels. Through its Parents Empowered for Change portfolio, Children First has cultivated a strong pipeline of parent leaders and advocates across the city. This history of working side by side with families positioned Children First to help bridge the new terrain First Up was entering – ensuring that the expertise of both organizations was fully leveraged to elevate parent leadership.

Training Components

Preparation for facilitators included 16 hours of full days training on the content of the workshop series, including:

- Five hours of rehearsal across the series – one dedicated dry run per workshop – to strengthen delivery and build confidence.
- At least five hours of one-on-one coaching per facilitator with real-time feedback.
- Ongoing support through access to materials, on-demand coaching, and in-person staff presence at workshops.

Parent facilitators advised both Children First and First Up on tools for authentic family engagement and offered feedback that helped refine curriculum delivery. This created a feedback loop in action: curriculum → tested by parent facilitators → refined based on lived experience → delivered to families.



Pilot Reach

With the engagement of 10 childcare centers and parent-focused organizations, the pilot entailed the following:

- Twenty-seven workshops were delivered at seven early childhood education sites, and meetings of Parents Empowered for Change, and the Parent and Family Council within the Provider Council.
- Every workshop was facilitated by parent leaders.
- Participating families engaged for a total of 6 hours over the series.

Evaluation Methodology

With the workshops implemented and strong participation secured, the next step was to understand how parents experienced the pilot and what impact it had on their well-being and resilience. The evaluation of the Parents Growing Together pilot was intentionally designed to reflect both the goals of the program and its trauma-informed, healing-centered approach. Rather than focusing only on outcomes, it aimed to honor the lived experiences of parents, capture the nuances of their growth, and document how peer-to-peer learning could strengthen family well-being.

The evaluation was guided by two central questions:

1. Could a peer-to-peer model of teaching trauma-informed practices strengthen parents' engagement with their children's learning?
2. Could trauma-informed training reduce parental stress and improve parent-child relationships?

These questions reflected the dual focus of the pilot: supporting parents as active partners in their children's education while also addressing the stressors that can undermine healthy family relationships. By centering both engagement and stress reduction, the design recognized the deep connection between parent well-being and children's learning.

To answer these questions, the evaluation employed a mixed-methods design that combined quantitative tools with qualitative input. Pre/post assessments, workshop surveys, and focus groups created multiple avenues for capturing change, ensuring that both measurable shifts and personal experiences were documented.

This approach not only assessed program effectiveness but also revealed the how and why behind those changes – what strategies resonated, what challenges persisted, and what parents valued most.



Trauma-Informed Evaluation Approach

The evaluation was structured to align with the program’s values of safety, empowerment, shared leadership, and relational trust. Parents were engaged as co-creators of knowledge, encouraged to reflect on what they learned, how they applied new strategies at home, and how their relationships with their children evolved.

This approach elevated lived experience as evidence of growth, capturing subtle but meaningful changes – such as improved patience, stronger communication, and reduced conflict – that standardized tools often miss. In doing so, the methodology reinforced the program’s core purpose: to build trust, amplify parent agency, and strengthen the emotional foundations that support children’s learning and family well-being.

Pre/Post Surveys – Parent Stress Scale

To capture changes in parental well-being, families completed the Parenting Stress Scale (PSS) before and after session. The PSS is a widely used tool for measuring the level of stress parents experience in their caregiving role.

The scale includes items that assess both the positive aspects of parenting (emotional rewards and closeness with children) and the challenges (demands, restrictions, and feelings of being overwhelmed). By balancing these perspectives, the PSS provides a holistic view of how parents perceive their responsibilities and relationships with their children.

In this project, the PSS was used to evaluate how participation in the workshops influenced parents’ stress levels and coping strategies over time. When paired with workshop evaluations and qualitative feedback, the PSS offered valuable insights into whether the trauma-informed, peer-led approach contributed to reduced stress and healthier parent–child interactions.

Quantitative Tools – Workshop Evaluation Surveys

After each workshop, families completed evaluation surveys to provide immediate feedback on the training experience. Surveys assessed:

- Usefulness and relevance of the content
- Quality of facilitation, including the peer-led model
- Opportunities for engagement and interaction
- Connections to everyday parenting challenges
- Topics that resonated most and areas needing further support

Survey data was reviewed after each session by Children First and used to make real-time adjustments. At the end of the series, the surveys were revisited collectively to capture a full picture of how families engaged with the workshops and how well the program met their needs.

Qualitative Tools – Focus Groups and Open-Ended Feedback

At the close of the pilot, families were invited to participate in focus groups designed as open, supportive discussions. These sessions were held after the completion of the three-session workshop series and brought together:

- **Parent participants** who shared their personal stories, reflected on challenges, and described progress made during the program.
- **Parent leaders** who offered insights into how peer facilitation shaped family engagement and supported learning.
- **Providers from host sites** who contributed their perspectives on how families interacted with the program in community-based settings.



These diverse voices enriched the evaluation by capturing the program’s impact from multiple vantage points – parents experiencing change at home, leaders facilitating peer learning, and providers observing the program’s delivery context.

Open-ended surveys complemented these sessions, allowing parents to document their growth in their own words. Together, these tools created a layered picture of impact while affirming the value of community, relational trust, and the peer-to-peer model.

Indicators of Change

Through this layered evaluation design, the program tracked:

- Reductions in parental stress and conflict
- Increases in closeness and emotional attunement
- Greater caregiver confidence, patience, and empathy

By blending the PSS, session evaluations, and parent-led narratives, the evaluation provided a credible, nuanced account of how families experienced the program and where further support may be needed.

The evaluation methodology mirrored the principles of Parents Growing Together – trauma-informed, relational, and grounded in parent leadership. By combining standardized measures with lived experiences, the evaluation not only measured outcomes but also captured how families experienced change. This mixed-method approach reinforced the value of peer-to-peer learning, elevated community and parent voice, and documented the small relational shifts that lay the foundation for lasting family well-being.

Data Collection

The data collection findings were gathered from assessment surveys, focus groups, and interviews with families, parent facilitators, and provider partners.

Workshop Evaluation Surveys

A total of 182 evaluation surveys were gathered at the close of each session. The evaluations captured broad themes, including overall impressions of the workshops, how well they met expectations, the quality of content and facilitation, participant engagement and materials, pacing and interaction, and whether families would recommend the workshops to others.



The results were overwhelmingly positive:

- **Overall Ratings:** Nearly all participants (96.7%) rated the workshop as Very Good or Excellent, with more than three-quarters (76.4%) selecting Excellent.
- **Expectations:** Two-thirds (65.9%) reported the workshop exceeded their expectations, while nearly one-third (31.3%) said it met them.
- **Content and Facilitation:** Participants gave high marks to content quality (94.5%), presentation style (93.9%), and relevance (94.5%).
- **Engagement and Materials:** Ratings were equally strong for engagement and interactivity (94.5%) and for materials provided (94.5%).
- **Pacing and Interaction:** Every participant agreed the pacing was just right (100%) and that interaction was well balanced or better (100%).
- **Recommendations:** All participants (100%) said they would recommend the workshop to a peer, with nearly 90% saying they were very likely to do so.

Together, these findings highlight not only the strength of the workshop design and facilitation, but also the consistency of participant satisfaction across multiple dimensions of the learning experience.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were held to enrich the reflections that were collected from the participants of the pilot, and 25% of the pilot's families participated in formal focus groups, including biological parents, grandparents, foster parents, four parent facilitators, and four early childhood providers. Together, this group represents a broad sample of the stakeholders engaged in the pilot. Their voices revealed a consistent story of transformation: families entered the pilot feeling overwhelmed and isolated, and left with stronger tools, deeper connections, and renewed confidence.

Shifts in Parenting & Self-Care: Participation in the workshops sparked tangible change. Seven out of ten families reported responding to their children with greater patience, calmness, and intentionality. Just as importantly, many reframed self-care from something indulgent to something essential. Caregivers described moving from “not prioritizing myself at all” to embracing concrete practices such as journaling, resting without guilt, and using emotional regulation tools.

Emotional & Community Impact: The workshops also fostered profound emotional shifts. Eighteen participants (72%) described the space as healing, supportive, motivating, relieving, or safe. Nearly every parent spoke of the powerful relief that came with realizing they were not alone. This validation proved critical; hearing other parents voice similar struggles eased feelings of “mom guilt” and bolstered caregivers’ confidence.

Parent Perspectives: Parents were nearly unanimous in their endorsement of the program. Almost all said they would recommend the workshops, often urging peers, “Join, be open, you are not alone, and you’ll always take something away.”

They also had strong messages for funders and policymakers:

- These workshops support children’s emotional development and school readiness.
- Caregiver stress is a public health issue requiring investment.
- Prevention matters because relieving parent stress reduces risks of family separation, school pushout, and mental health crises.

Parent Facilitator Perspectives: Parent facilitators emphasized that their role extended far beyond curriculum delivery. Their presence-built trust, credibility, and cultural resonance, ensuring families felt seen and understood.

They also underscored the importance of flexibility – adapting scenarios like discipline or tantrums to fit the cultural context of families in the room. This ability deepened trust, affirmed families’ lived experiences, and made the workshops resonate more deeply.

Two of the six facilitators had previously led peer-to-peer parenting classes for the City of Philadelphia – programs mandated by DHS in child welfare cases, where they described that parents often experienced those classes as punitive. In contrast, this model was voluntary and affirming. Parents chose to participate, creating space for vulnerability, reflection, and authentic growth.

Finally, facilitators pointed to the long-term stakes. Investing in families during a child’s earliest years reduces conflict, interrupts cycles of trauma, and strengthens connections between home and school.

Provider Perspectives: Focus groups and informal conversations with providers and facilitators added another dimension to the evaluation, capturing how the pilot shaped not only families but also the broader early learning environment. Providers consistently highlighted the program’s ability to create safe, affirming spaces where families felt valued and supported.

Providers observed that the workshops encouraged self-reflection and empowered parents to recognize and shift unhelpful patterns. They noted powerful turning points – parents apologizing to children, adopting calming techniques, or creating “safety words” to de-escalate conflict. These practices led to more intentional parenting and tangible improvements in daily interactions, from fewer tantrums, and greater cooperation to warmer parent–child connections.

Conversations about trauma proved especially impactful. Naming and normalizing parents’ experiences helped families better understand their own stress responses, experiment with regulation strategies, and model healthier coping skills for their children. This awareness fostered compassion – both for themselves and for their families.

Providers also reflected on challenges with recruitment and retention, noting that personal invitations and trusted relationships were far more effective than flyers or announcements. Once families attended, however, they almost always returned, underscoring the value parents placed on the sessions.

Importantly, the program’s benefits extended to staff themselves. Providers reported applying workshop strategies in their own lives and work, while gaining deeper empathy and insight into parents’ realities. This strengthened relationships between families and staff, reshaping how providers viewed parents – not just as recipients of services, but as leaders.

Conclusion on Outcomes

Together, the findings show that Parents Growing Together fostered meaningful shifts in parenting practices, self-care, and community connection. In just a short period, families not only gained tools to manage stress but also discovered belonging, validation, and the confidence to parent from a place of strength rather than survival. This impact underscores the promise of the work; Children First and First Up see this as the starting point for deeper investment in peer-to-peer models that uplift caregivers, with strong potential for future support from philanthropy and public funding to sustain and scale the next iterations.

Parent facilitators affirmed that the experience itself is powerful evidence – peer-to-peer, parent-led approaches can transform how families are supported, cultivating healing and resilience that ripple out from individual households to entire communities.

Discussion & Implications

What Worked and Why: Several elements made this pilot effective and resonant for families:

- **Parent Leaders at the Center** – Recruiting and training leaders from Children First’s Parents Empowered for Change program proved powerful. The parent facilitators reflected the experience of lived, communities, and culture. Their authenticity and community trust created the conditions for engagement and meaningful dialogue.
- **A Resilience-Based Curriculum** – First Up’s curriculum, grounded in resilience and trauma-informed principles, resonated deeply with families. Its culturally relevant strategies helped parents make sense of trauma while equipping them with practical, healing-centered tools they could use right away to parent from a place of strength, guided by child development best practices.
- **Partnership Strengths** – Children First brought deep community organizing expertise, while First Up contributed curriculum design and experience with early childhood providers. Together, these strengths created a well-rounded and responsive program.
- **Supportive Infrastructure** – Providing stipends, childcare, and meals removed common barriers and signaled that families’ time and contributions are valued and respected.

Lessons Learned: The pilot also surfaced challenges that offer important lessons for future parent-led initiatives:

- Parents reported high satisfaction and strong recommendation rates (100% would recommend; 96% rated excellent or good). They emphasized the value of peer support in reducing isolation and building community, as well as supporting
- Parent Facilitators pointed to the need for a slower rollout with more practice and reflection. Additional time to internalize content would bolster confidence and effectiveness. Facilitators highlighted the need for greater curriculum flexibility and cultural alignment. They also underscored the importance of being involved in curriculum design from the start.
- The pilot engaged 103 parents and provided a \$20 stipend per session. Flexibility is essential; testing virtual formats and other approaches to reduce barriers and boost retention. Additionally, more than half of the early education sites needed greater support than anticipated. Stronger onboarding, staff orientation, and a long recruitment timeline with accompanying toolkits will be critical to help sites effectively promote workshops and carry forward future iterations of the work.

Implications for Future Parent-Led Initiatives: The pilot confirmed what we know to be true: parents are powerful change-agents when they are trusted, equipped, and supported. To expand the impact of parent-led initiatives, several priorities stand out:

- **Invest in Leadership Development** – Building the skills and confidence of parents is essential for sustainability and impact. Ongoing training, mentorship, and opportunities to lead should be embedded throughout the model in future iterations.
- **Center Cultural Relevance** – Engagement must reflect the lived experiences and cultural identities of participating families. This is not an add-on – it is central to building trust, resonance, and effectiveness.
- **Ensure Accessibility** – Eliminating logistical barriers and providing compensation for parents’ time are non-negotiables. Stipends must reflect the cost of living and align with comparable parenting support programs, making participation not just possible but genuinely equitable.

Replication and Lessons for the Future

The Parents Growing Together pilot was intentionally designed as a learning model. Beyond demonstrating the power of peer-to-peer engagement, it offered clear lessons about what it takes to replicate and scale this work with integrity. Four elements emerged as essential: recruitment, training, curriculum flexibility, and stronger evaluation systems.

Recruitment Strategies

The success of Parents Growing Together hinged on who was at the center. Recruitment of parent leaders worked because it was both targeted and intentional. Outreach was conducted through Children First’s Parents Empowered for Change network, information sessions, and a competitive application process. This generated 21 applicants for seven facilitator roles, evidence of eagerness and readiness among parents to lead. The facilitators selected reflected a wide diversity of caregiving experiences, including grandparents, foster parents, and new parents, with 93% sustaining participation throughout the pilot.

For replication, recruitment must continue to elevate parents who already hold informal leadership in their communities. Pairing trusted early childhood providers with parent leaders also proved critical. Providers served as entry points to families, while facilitators built cultural resonance and credibility.

Together, this dual strategy strengthened recruitment of the 103 families who participated, the majority of whom were Black, brown, and low-income caregivers, including those raising children with autism and developmental needs.



Training Design

Training was more than a one-time orientation; it was a sustained investment in parent leadership. Facilitators completed a two-day intensive training co-designed by First Up and Children First, blending trauma-informed curriculum with facilitation practice.

This was reinforced through:

- Multiple dry runs with real-time feedback,
- At least five hours of one-on-one coaching per facilitator, and
- On-demand supports during workshop delivery.



This combination of intensive preparation and ongoing coaching built both confidence and skill. For replication, this structure should remain a cornerstone, ensuring facilitators feel supported not just at the start, but throughout implementation.

Curriculum Adjustments

The Parents Growing Together curriculum drew from the latest research on resilience and trauma-informed practices. However, its strength came from facilitators' ability to adapt scenarios to cultural realities – for example, tailoring discussions of discipline or tantrums to reflect families' lived experiences. Parents consistently named this flexibility as what made the workshops relevant and impactful.

Future replication must maintain this adaptability. While the core framework should remain consistent, facilitators should be encouraged and equipped to make cultural and contextual adjustments that honor families' experiences.

Data Collection Improvements

While the quantitative findings from the pilot are promising, they were limited to workshop evaluations. The original design intended to pair those evaluations with pre- and post-stress surveys to provide a dual quantitative measure. However, a design flaw in the pre-established survey allowed families to remain anonymous, making it impossible to reliably match responses over time. Of the 240 surveys collected, only 26 could be matched across 103 families – too few to yield meaningful analysis. As a result, this data was excluded from the final outcomes. Instead, the pre- and post-survey tool primarily served as a reflection exercise for parents, while the evaluation team focused on the more robust workshop evaluation data.

For future implementation, the evaluation design can be strengthened by:

- Introducing simplified survey tools with identity markers to meaningfully match data and track changes at the participant, site, and pilot levels,

- Employing mixed-method approaches that balance quantitative outcomes with families' lived narratives, and
- Extending the workshop series over a longer period to capture deeper shifts and sustained impact over time.

These improvements will make outcomes more robust and help demonstrate impact at scale.

Moving Forward

The pilot showed that replication is not only possible but highly promising when key elements are preserved: authentic recruitment, sustained training, flexible curriculum delivery, and rigorous evaluation. Together, these components ensure that Parents Growing Together can grow into a scalable model that strengthens families, communities, and the early childhood ecosystem.

Conclusion & Next Steps

The Parents Growing Together pilot surfaced powerful insights about how parent-led, trauma-informed models can shift the landscape of early childhood engagement. By centering the expertise, voices, and leadership of parents, the initiative not only strengthened relationships between caregivers and children but also redefined what meaningful family engagement can look like in early learning spaces.

The pilot's outcomes point to a clear conclusion: when parents lead, families thrive. Caregivers entered the workshops overwhelmed and isolated, and left with stronger tools, deeper connections, and renewed confidence. Facilitators confirmed that parents' willingness to opt in – rather than being mandated – was central to the program's impact, creating a foundation of authenticity, trust, and cultural resonance.

Key takeaways include:

- Parents are eager for trauma-informed, resilience-based support when it is delivered by trusted peers. Families consistently described the workshops as “eye-opening,” “validating,” and even “life-changing.”
- Peer-led facilitation fosters authenticity and trust, enabling honest conversations, deep reflection, and greater uptake of strategies.
- Training tools and reflective practices – such as visual aids, role-playing, and Child Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS) – helped parents apply strategies in real time at home.
- Healing-centered engagement is a foundation, not a luxury. Families want spaces of compassion, connection, and care to be built into early childhood systems.

Most striking was the depth of authentic engagement. Even amid competing demands on parents' time, families showed up, returned, and asked for more.

Parents' recommendations were unanimous, with many not only requesting additional sessions but also expressing interest in stepping into facilitator roles themselves.

This level of commitment underscores an urgent demand: families are looking for programs that are relational, culturally responsive, and rooted in lived experience – not transactional. Parents Growing Together demonstrated that when families are treated as partners and leaders, the result is not just stronger parent–child relationships, but stronger communities.

Opportunities for Partnership

Scaling this work will require collaboration. Key opportunities include:

- **Policy Advocacy:** Leverage findings to inform city and state policies that support parent leadership, trauma-informed care, and culturally responsive engagement.
- **Career Pathways:** Formalize facilitator roles as professional opportunities with credentials and career ladders.
- **Cross-Sector Integration:** Partner with health, behavioral health, and family-serving systems to extend trauma-informed practices beyond education and into holistic family care.

Parents Growing Together is more than a pilot – it is a blueprint for what's possible when families are trusted, supported, and equipped to lead. With authentic recruitment, sustained training, flexible curriculum delivery, and stronger evaluation, this model can scale to strengthen families, communities, and the broader early childhood ecosystem.

Appendix A: Workshop Curriculum Outline

The materials included here are illustrative excerpts from the Parents Growing Together curriculum. Full curriculum content and training materials remain the intellectual property of First Up and are available upon request for partners engaged in implementation.

Three-Session Workshop Overview

Session One Course Description: This introductory session defines trauma in an early childhood context, explains the pertinent parts of the nervous system and nervous system regulation, and empowers parents with the simple fact that the way they interact with their children has the power to build their resilience.

Session Two Course Description: The second session offers practical ideas for using trauma-informed/resilience-building parenting practices, including creating consistent routines, responding to children's behaviors and emotions, and valuing play as an important tool for healthy development and attachment.

Session Three Course Description: The final session provides participants with the opportunity to share their experiences over the previous weeks as they put strategies from Session One and Session Two into practice. Facilitators will offer safe, nonjudgmental space for participants to reflect on their successes and ongoing challenges, while providing feedback with additional strategies, and eliciting supportive ideas from other participants.

Learning Objectives

Session One Objectives:

- Define the term “trauma” in the context of an early childhood;
- Explore the role of the nervous system in children and adult behaviors;
- Gain strategies for managing a dysregulated nervous system.

Session Two Objectives:

- Review information from session one;
- Understand the role of consistent routines in maintaining a regulated nervous system;
- Identify strategies for supporting children’s emotional development;
- Define “play” and explore its role in resilience-building.

Session Three Objectives:

- Review information from Session One and Session Two to ensure that concepts are clear and able to be applied to real life scenario;
- Analyze applied resilience-building parenting strategies;
- Practice resilience-building parenting strategies;
- Create new goals as the participants continue to build resilience-based parenting practices.

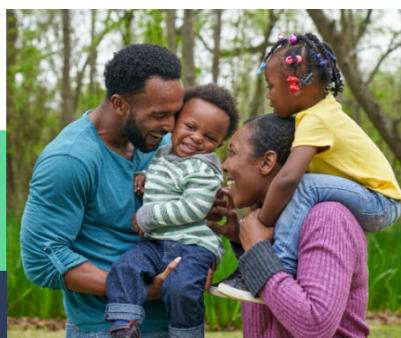
Appendix B: Training Materials

Please see the attached appendices document for the materials that should be included under training materials

- Curriculum manual
- Slide decks for each session
- An assortment of sensory tools and self-regulation devices
- Handouts
- Sticky notes
- Chart Paper

Appendix C: Recruitment Materials - Outreach Flyer



PARENTS GROWING TOGETHER

First Up is Partnering with Children First!

This new initiative aims to **teach healing-centered practices to parents and program directors**. Participants will then run a series of workshops for parents of young children in early education programs.

WHAT THIS PROGRAM OFFERS YOU!

- You will receive **\$60** for participating in **ALL** sessions.
- At drop off time leave the kids with their teacher, and join us for **dinner** and a workshop.
- You will learn concepts to **help with stress, self-care, and resilience**.
- You will learn how to **enhance your engagement in your children's learning**.
- You will learn how to effectively **respond to your children's behaviors and emotions**.

First Up is a 501c3 nonprofit organization



SESSION BREAKDOWN

This three-session course empowers parents to support their children's resilience by teaching nervous system regulation, resilience-building parenting practices, and the importance of play for development and attachment.

SESSION TIMES FOR PARENTS EMPOWERED FOR CHANGE:

- MAR. 5TH, 6:00PM-7:30PM
- MAR. 12TH, 6:00PM-7:30PM
- MAR. 26TH, 6:00PM-7:30PM

VIRTUAL MEETINGS WILL TAKE PLACE ON ZOOM

SCAN BELOW TO REGISTER FOR SESSIONS

Contact Your Director For More Information



Appendix D: Evaluation Tools

Parent Stress Scale

The following statements describe feelings and perceptions about the experience of being a parent. Think of each of the items in terms of how your relationship with your child or children typically is. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following items by placing the appropriate number in the space provided.

1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Undecided 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree

1	I am happy in my role as a parent.	
2	There is little or nothing I wouldn't do for my child(ren) if it was necessary.	
3	Caring for my child(ren) sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give.	
4	I sometimes worry whether I am doing enough for my child(ren).	
5	I feel close to my child(ren).	
6	I enjoy spending time with my child(ren).	
7	My child(ren) is an important source of affection for me.	
8	Having child(ren) gives me a more certain and optimistic view for the future.	
9	The major source of stress in my life is my child(ren).	
10	Having child(ren) leaves little time and flexibility in my life.	
11	Having child(ren) has been a financial burden.	
12	It is difficult to balance different responsibilities because of my child(ren).	
13	The behavior of my child(ren) is often embarrassing or stressful to me.	
14	If I had it to do over again, I might decide not to have child(ren).	
15	I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent.	
16	Having child(ren) has meant having too few choices and too little control over my life.	
17	I am satisfied as a parent.	
18	I find my child(ren) enjoyable.	

Appendix D: Evaluation Tools

Workshop Evaluation Form

Workshop Session (Circle one): 1 2 3 Date: _____

Location (Childcare Center): _____

Facilitator(s): _____

1. Overall, how would you rate the workshop? (Circle one)

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

2. How well did the workshop meet your expectations (Circle one)?

- Exceeded my expectations
- Met my expectations
- Did not meet my expectations

3. How would you rate the following aspects of the workshop: Excellent | Very Good | Good | Fair | Poor |

- Content quality
- Presentation style of facilitator
- Relevance
- Engagement and interactivity
- Materials provided

4. What is your preferred learning style/s (Circle One):

- Visual
- Auditory
- Kinesthetic
- Reading/Writing

5. How would you describe the pacing of the workshop:

- Too fast
- Just right
- Too slow

6. How would you describe the interaction level (Circle One):

- Needing more interactive activities
- Needing more lecture
- Having a balanced mix

Workshop Evaluation Form (continued)

7. What was the most valuable part of the workshop for you?

8. What could be improved in future workshops?

9. How likely are you to recommend this workshop to a peer (Circle One)?

- Very Likely
- Likely
- Neutral
- Unlikely
- Very Unlikely

10. Additional comments or suggestions:

Thank you for your feedback!

Optional: If you would like to be contacted for further follow-up, please provide your contact information:

- Name:
- Email:
- Phone:

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Parent Participant

1. Welcome + Grounding

- Facilitator Opening Script: Thank you all for being here and for the courage you bring to this space. This is not just a focus group, it's a moment for us to reflect on how the tools and conversations from this workshop series have shaped you, your families, and how you show up as parents. What you share here may be used to help others understand the power of this work and why it deserves to grow and be sustained.
- Opening Grounding Question: What's one word or phrase that describes how you're feeling as a parent today?

2. Warm-Up: Lived Experience Before the Series

- Before starting this workshop series, what were some of your biggest challenges as a parent?
 - Prompts: What did your day-to-day look like? How did you respond to your child's behaviors or emotions?
- How did you used to care for yourself, or not care for yourself, before you joined this space?

3. Impact + Transformation

- Was there a moment in the workshop series that really shifted something for you?
 - Prompt: Was there a topic, tool, or conversation that stands out?
- Have you noticed changes in how you respond to your child since participating?
 - Follow-up: Can you share a story or situation where you handled something differently because of what you learned here?
- How has this space supported you emotionally or mentally?
 - Prompt: Did it help you feel less alone, more confident, more hopeful?
- How did it feel to be in a space with other parents, reflecting and healing together?
 - Follow-up: What did community and connection mean to you in this setting?

4. Looking Ahead: Motivation + Leadership: These questions are aimed at capturing aspirations and building sustainability.

- What would you say to another parent who is considering joining this kind of workshop?
 - Prompt: Why do you think this work is needed?
- Would you consider leading or co-facilitating a future workshop? Why or why not?
 - Follow-up: What would help you feel ready to step into a leadership role?

5. Final Reflections + Closing

- If you could tell a funder or policymaker one thing about why this work matters, what would it be?
 - Prompt: What would you want them to understand about families like yours?
- What do you hope continues or grows because of this work?
 - Prompt: More sessions? School partnerships? Supports for dads, kinship caregivers?

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Parent Facilitator and Early Childhood Education Partner

1. Welcome + Grounding

- Facilitator Opening Script: Thank you for showing up today – and for the leadership, care, and dedication you’ve brought to this work. Whether you were helping spread the word, or you were in the room facilitating healing conversations, your role has been critical. This space is for you to reflect on what this experience has meant and what you believe is possible as we move forward. What you share today may help funders, policymakers, and other leaders understand the importance of investing in parent-led healing and resilience work.
- Opening Grounding Question: What’s one word or phrase that describes how you’re feeling in your leadership or advocacy journey right now?

2. Warm-Up: Anchoring in Motivation + Purpose

- What inspired you to get involved in this work – either by helping recruit other parents or by stepping up to facilitate?
- Prompts: What did you see in your community, or in yourself, that made you say this is something we need?
- What hopes did you carry into this experience? What did you want other parents to walk away with?

3. Impact + Observations

- As someone who supported or facilitated this work, what shifts or changes did you witness in the parents who participated?
- Prompt: Was there a moment that stuck with you? A breakthrough or transformation you witnessed?
- What did you gain personally from being involved in this work?
- Follow-up: Did it change how you see yourself – as a parent, a leader, or a healer?
- What were some challenges you navigated – whether in outreach, recruitment, or facilitation – and what helped you move through them?
- What did it mean to be in a space that honored both healing and parent leadership?
- Follow-up: Did it change how you see yourself – as a parent, a leader, or a healer?

4. Looking Ahead: Strengthening Parent Power

- If we were to grow this work, what would you want to see more of next time – for parents, for facilitators, and for the community?
- Prompt: More prep time? Additional supports? Different topics?
- What would help you continue to grow as a parent leader, facilitator, or advocate?
- Follow-up: Training, mentorship, compensation, something else?

5. Final Reflections + Closing

- If you were sitting with a funder or policymaker, what would you want them to know about the impact of Parents Growing Together?
- Prompt: What’s the cost of not investing in this kind of work?
- What legacy do you hope this work leaves behind in your community and in your own family?

Post-Workshop Survey Questions for Parents

1. Before starting this workshop series, what were some of your biggest challenges as a parent?
2. How did you used to care for yourself – or not care for yourself – before you joined this space?
3. Was there a moment in the workshop series that really shifted something for you?
4. Have you noticed changes in how you respond to your child since participating?
5. How has this space supported you emotionally or mentally?
6. How did it feel to be in a space with other parents, reflecting and healing together?
7. What would you say to another parent who is considering joining this kind of workshop?
8. If you could tell a funder or policymaker one thing about why this work matters, what would it be?
9. What do you hope continues or grows because of this work?
10. What is one thing you're taking with you from this experience?

Appendix E. Recommendations for Scaling

Recommendations for Scaling

To build on this momentum and replicate Parents Growing Together in other communities, future iterations should:

1. Invest in Parent Leadership Pipelines: Expand training and create pathways for parent facilitators to develop ongoing skills and credentials.
2. Customize Curriculum to Community Contexts: Retain flexibility so facilitators can adapt content to cultural realities.
3. Build Provider Buy-In: Offer orientation and toolkits for providers to champion and sustain workshops.
4. Maintain Structural Supports: Provide stipends, childcare, food, and accessible locations to ensure equitable participation.
5. Offer Flexible Delivery: Expand hybrid and virtual options to reach more families.
6. Strengthen Evaluation: Improve survey response rates and use mixed-methods to capture both quantitative and qualitative impact.

Appendix F: Parents Growing Together Manual

Table of Contents

Session 1: Let's Get Started!	Session 1: Let's Get Started!	Session 3: Let's Make It Stick!
1.1 Stress & Trauma	2.1 Stress & Trauma	3.1 Review of Sessions 1 & 2
1.2 Emotional Volume Plans	2.2 Emotional Volume Plans	3.2 Play as a Resilience Tool
1.3 Co-Regulation & Self-Regulation	2.3 Co-Regulation & Self-Regulation	3.3 Supporting Play
1.4 Dr. Bruce Perry's 3 Rs	2.4 Dr. Bruce Perry's 3 Rs	3.4 Activities
1.5 Respect & Relationships	2.5 Respect & Relationships	3.5 Final Reflection and Gratitude
1.6 Activities	2.6 Activities	

Session One Outline

Session 1: Let's Get Started!

Focus: Foundations of trauma-informed parenting and emotional regulation.

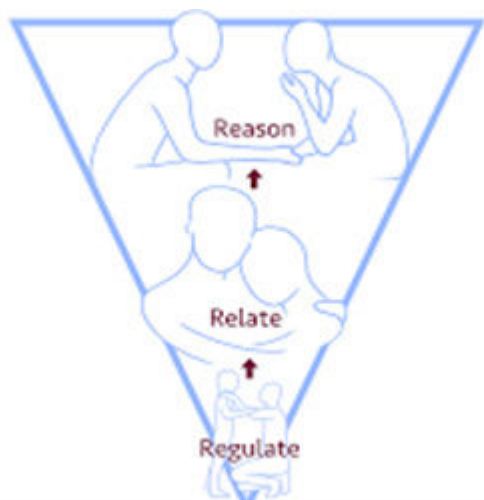
Key Topics:

- Stress & Trauma: Definitions, types (Big T vs. little t), and impacts.
- Emotional Volume Plans: Tools for self-regulation.
- Co-Regulation & Self-Regulation: Nervous system basics and how children learn to regulate.
- Dr. Bruce Perry's 3 Rs: Regulate → Relate → Reason.
- Respect & Relationships: Reframing respect through a trauma-informed lens.

Activities:

- Emotional Volume Plan creation.
- Group discussion on respect.
- Role-play using the 3 Rs.

Session One Handouts: Regulate, Relate, and Reason



REGULATE | calm the nervous system, get them out of fight, flight, freeze

RELATE | connect, build a sense of security

REASON | ability to think and understand

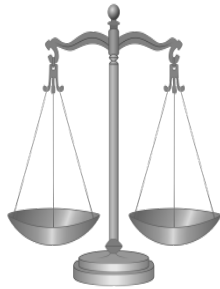
Appendix F: Parents Growing Together Manual

Session One Handouts (continued)



The Power of Relationships

"Connectedness has the power to counterbalance adversity."



"Human beings are social creatures, and because of that, we are neurologically designed to be in relationships with other people. When you see another person and they send a signal that you belong, or they smile and give you a gentle touch, that literally changes the physiology of your brain and body in ways that lead to a more regulated stress response system, healthier heart, healthier lungs, and literally **it will influence your physical and mental health**."

Dr. Bruce Perry - Neuroscientist Who Studies Childhood Trauma And Its Impacts

THE STRESS RESPONSE IN KIDS

FIGHT

Yelling, Screaming,
Using Mean Words

Hitting, Kicking, Biting,
Throwing, Punching

Blaming, Deflecting
Responsibility, Defensive

Demanding,
Controlling

"Oppositional",
"Defiant", "Noncompliant"

Moving Towards What
Feels Threatening

Irritable, Angry,
Furious, Offended
Aggressive

FLIGHT

Wanting to Escape,
Running Away

Unfocused, Hard
to Pay Attention

Fidgeting, Restlessness,
Hyperactive

Preoccupied, Busy with
Everything But the Thing

Procrastinating, Avoidant,
Ignores the Situation

Moving Away From What
Feel Threatening

Anxious, Panicked
Scared, Worried,
Overwhelmed

FREEZE

Shutting Down,
Mind Goes Blank

Urge to Hide,
Isolates Self

Verbally Unresponsive,
Says, "I don't know" a lot

Difficulty with
Completing Tasks

Zoned Out,
Daydreaming

Unable to Move,
Feeling Stuck

Depressed, Numb,
Bored/Apathetic,
Helpless

Children First, serves as the leading child advocacy organization that improves the lives and life chances of children across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Children First undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice, and child welfare.

Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects, and budget analysis, Children First watches out and speaks out for children and families.

We are a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of all our children.

Follow our socials: @childrenfirstpa
Web: www.childrenfirstpa.org

Children First
990 Spring Garden Street
Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19123
215-563-5848

For over 50 years, First Up has been making a significant, positive impact on the early childhood education (ECE) sector in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Their coaching, training and technical assistance teams have helped hundreds of early childhood programs reach statewide or national accreditation standards. Their advocacy team has created a statewide grassroots advocacy network that has grown to more than 3,000 individuals and organizations that work each day to influence public policy. Their focus on supporting all caregivers (providers and families) who strengthen young children's lives fosters a future of success for all children.

First Up's Vision: We envision a society in which early childhood professionals are highly skilled and valued; families have the knowledge, capabilities, and resources to guide their children's learning; and every young child has a quality start that lasts a lifetime.

Follow our socials: @firstupearlyed
Web: www.firstup.org

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