



International Early
Childhood Inclusive
Institute

Inclusive Systems and Early Relational Health

*Leadership Strategies for
Young Children and Families*

Yolanda Sosa

Assistant Director, Early Relational Health

Center for Autism and Early Childhood Mental Health

Montclair State University





Before we begin...

Think about one child.

A child who struggled to belong.



What made that child
feel included?



What barriers existed?



What role did adults play?





Strong relationships
build strong adults.

Strong adults
build strong systems.

Strong systems
create **belonging**
for every child and family.



**STRONG
ADULTS**



**STRONG
SYSTEMS**



**BELONGING
FOR EVERY CHILD
AND FAMILY**





Why This Conversation Matters

The field is experiencing unprecedented challenges.

Increasing:



Behavioral concerns



Family stress



Staff burnout



Exclusionary discipline



Workforce shortages



Inclusion needs



Fragmented services



Mental health concerns



Mental health needs



Yet...

Children do not experience systems separately.

They experience relationships.



Instead of asking:

Ask:



“What new program do we need?”



“How do we build systems where relationships thrive?”



RELATIONSHIPS



GROWTH



COLLABORATION



BELONGING





Today's Big Idea



Inclusion is not simply **where** children learn.

It is **how** systems create **belonging**.



Early relational health is **not** another initiative.

It is the **foundation** upon which **inclusive systems** are built.





Session Outcomes

By the end of today's session you will:



Deepen understanding of
Early Relational Health



Connect inclusion with
Pyramid Model implementation



Explore **family belonging**



Apply **reflective leadership**



Identify **systems-level leadership actions**





Chat Reflection

What is your greatest systems challenge?

- A** Staff capacity
- B** Family engagement
- C** Behavior support
- D** Leadership alignment
- E** Cross-sector collaboration



SECTION ONE

Understanding Early Relational Health

Relationships are the foundation of healthy development and inclusion.



RELATIONSHIPS



REGULATION



DEVELOPMENT



BELONGING



INCLUSION





What is Early Relational Health?

Early Relational Health refers to the quality of relationships that promote:



SAFETY



TRUST



CONNECTION



EMOTIONAL
REGULATION



BELONGING



RESILIENCE



Healthy development occurs through relationships.



Relationships shape brains.



Relationships shape systems.





Relationships Build Brains

Research tells us:
Secure relationships influence:



Brain architecture



Stress regulation



Executive functioning



Learning



Social competence



Mental health



Without relationships,
interventions have **limited impact.**



Safe
Connections



Supportive
Relationships



Responsive
Care



Brains are shaped
in relationship.

Relationships
change everything.



The Science



Relational experiences shape:



Neural pathways



Stress response systems



Emotional regulation



Learning



Social competence



Long-term mental health

From relationships to lifelong outcomes.



RELATIONSHIP

Safe, supportive connections



BRAIN

Healthy brain development



BEHAVIOR

Regulated, confident, and engaged



LEARNING

Curious, capable, and ready to learn



Inclusion Begins Before Instruction



Children ask:



Do I belong?



Am I safe?



Does someone
understand me?



Can I be myself?



**Belonging
precedes
engagement.**



Psychological Safety

Psychological safety means people feel safe to:



Ask questions



Make mistakes



Express ideas



Take risks



Seek help



Families need it.

So families feel respected, heard, and supported.



Educators need it.

So educators feel valued, supported, and empowered.



Leaders need it.

So leaders can lead with clarity, courage, and compassion.



Children need it.

So children feel safe, seen, and free to grow.





SECTION TWO


Systems Leadership

Collaboration

Equity

Partnership

Impact

STRONG
SYSTEMS
THRIVING 
CHILDREN





Systems that Support Belonging



Inclusive systems create the conditions where belonging can thrive.

Pyramid Model as a Systems Framework

Inclusion is not one practice—it's how the system works.

Every tier requires:



Relationships



Belonging



**Emotional
Wellness**



Family Voice

**Intensive
Individualized
Supports**



**Targeted
Prevention**



**Universal
Promotion**

Inclusion Across Every Tier



Individualized

Every child remains a valued member of the community.



Targeted

Some need additional supports.



Universal

Everyone belongs.



No child loses belonging.





Reflective Activity

Thinking



Think about your own organization.



Where does **inclusion** live?



Where does **mental health** live?



Where does **family engagement** live?



Are they **connected**?



When systems connect, people thrive.





Moving from Programs to Systems

Many organizations have:



Family engagement



Mental health consultation



Pyramid Model



Inclusion initiatives



Professional development



Coaching

The challenge:

They often function independently.



Leadership connects them.



STRONGER
SYSTEMS
THRIVING
CHILDREN &
FAMILIES



Connected leadership builds systems where children, families, and educators can thrive.



SECTION THREE

Family Belonging

When families belong,
children thrive.



Partnership



Voice



Respect



Belonging



Family Belonging



Families do not simply participate.

Families belong.

1. Are Welcomed

Families feel genuinely welcomed and valued.



2. Are Heard

Families' voices are listened to and respected.



5. Co-Create Solutions

Families and professionals design solutions together.



3. Share Leadership

Families are partners in leading and shaping the work.

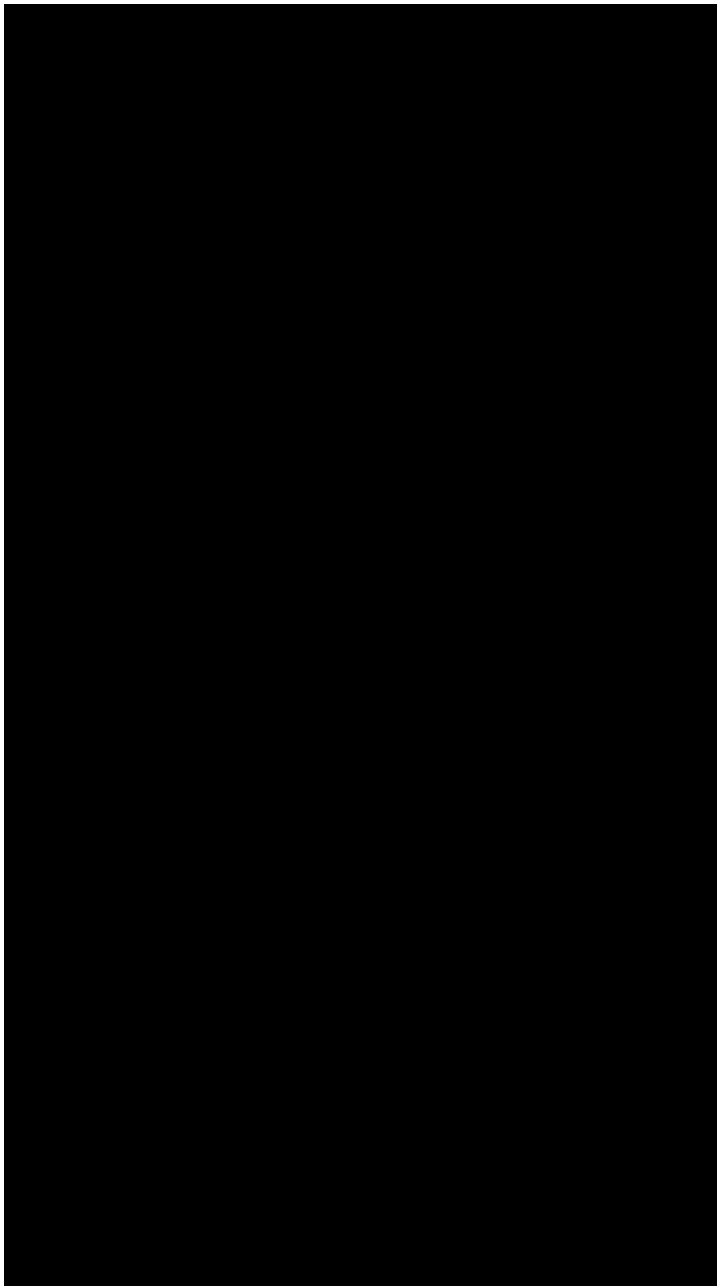


4. Influence Decisions

Families have real influence in decisions that affect their children and communities.



When families belong, children thrive and communities grow stronger.





Building the Adult System

Now shift attention to adults.



Because

Children experience the emotional climate adults create.



Care for ourselves.



Support each other.



Lead with empathy.



Create positive environments.

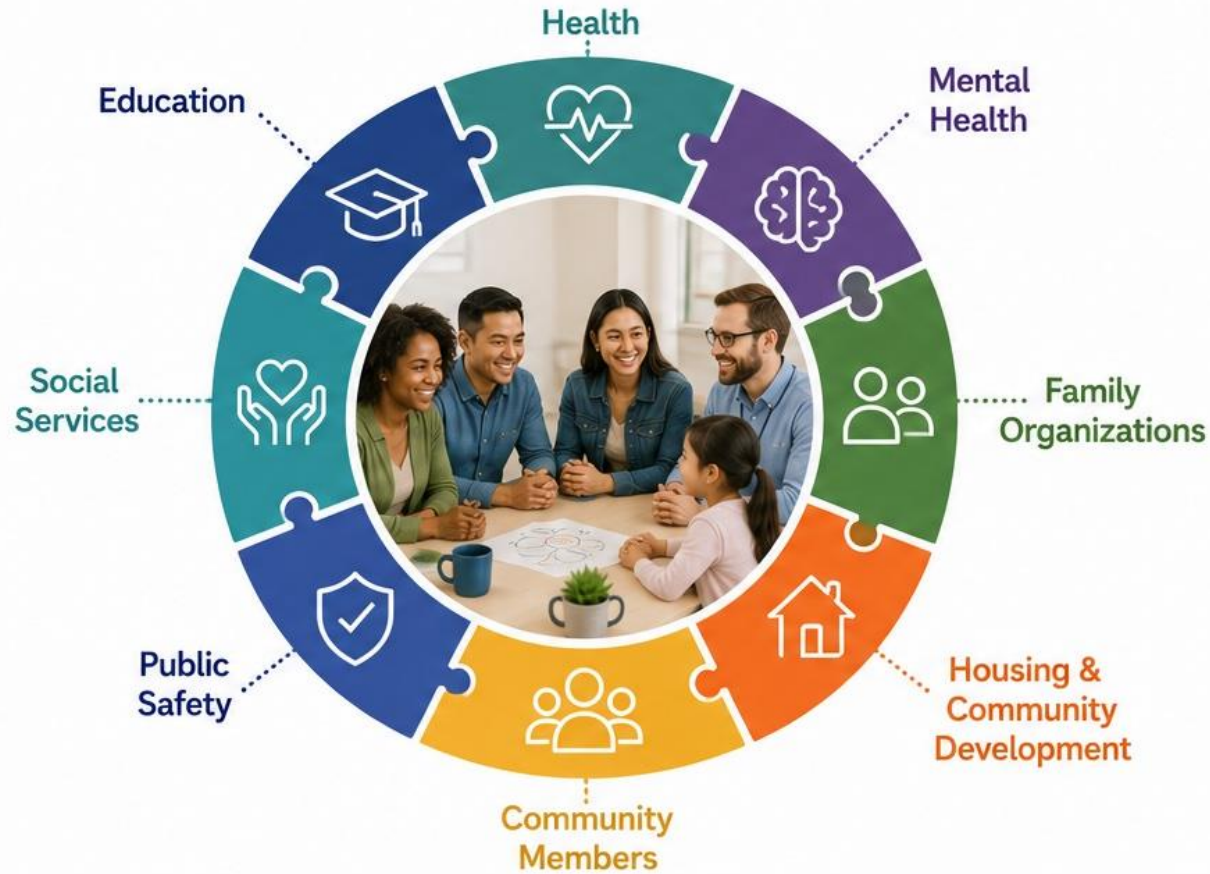


Stronger adults.
Stronger outcomes.



Cross-Sector Collaboration

Stronger together. Better for families.



Questions leaders should ask:



Who is missing?



Who shares responsibility?



Where are families repeating their stories?



How can we coordinate instead?



Aligned systems. Shared responsibility. Stronger communities.



Connect to Positive Solutions for Families

Instead of presenting PSF as parenting curriculum, position it as a **systems strategy**.



Positive Solutions for Families helps systems



Build caregiver confidence



Strengthen parent-child relationships



Promote emotional regulation



Increase collaborative problem-solving



Create consistent home-school partnerships



Leadership Implication

Family capacity strengthens system capacity.

When families are empowered, systems become more responsive, connected, and effective for every child.





SECTION FOUR

Reflective Leadership

Great systems begin with leaders who **reflect, listen,** and lead with **purpose.**



Self-Aware

I know my impact.



Deep Listener

I value every voice.



Purpose-Driven

I lead with intention.



Equity Focused

I lead for inclusion and belonging.





Reflective Leadership

Leadership is relational.



PEOPLE
PURPOSE
REFLECTION
IMPACT

Great leaders reflect to lead better.



When leaders reflect, relationships deepen, decisions improve, and **systems grow stronger.**

Reflective leaders ask:



1. What happened?



2. What am I feeling?



3. What might others be experiencing?



4. What assumptions am I making?



5. What does this system need?



♥ Reflection creates awareness. Awareness drives better choices. Better choices build stronger systems for children and families. ♥



Creating Reflective Organizations

Healthy people. Strong relationships. Thriving systems. ♥

Reflective organizations:

Create the conditions where people feel safe to reflect, connect, and grow— together.



6. Encourage learning

Learn together.
Grow together.
Improve together.



5. Prioritize wellness

Well-being fuels compassion, creativity, and resilience.



1. Slow down

Make space to pause, reflect, and respond with intention.



*People
Purpose
Connection
Growth* ♥



2. Listen deeply

Value every voice.
Seek first to understand.



3. Support staff

Invest in people.
Well-supported staff support families.



4. Normalize uncertainty

Embrace the unknown.
Stay curious.
Keep learning.



Reflection is not a luxury. ♥ It's how we lead with heart and impact.





When adults are supported, children thrive.





SECTION FIVE

Practical Leadership Strategies

*Ideas into action.
Leadership that strengthens
systems and supports families.*



Collaborate
Build strong partnerships across sectors and roles.



Plan
Use data and insight to guide smart decisions.



Support
Invest in people and the conditions for success.



Reflect
Ask, learn, and adapt with intention.



Sustain
Create lasting impact through aligned systems.

♥ *Small steps. Strong systems. Lasting impact.* ♥





Small leadership actions create large systems change.





Systems Alignment Tool

Give participants something practical. ♥

Reflection Matrix

Question	Yes ✓	Not Yet ○
 Families help make decisions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Staff experience psychological safety	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Reflective supervision is embedded	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Inclusion goals align with mental health goals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Community partners share responsibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
 Professional learning supports relational health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Discussion Questions

- What areas show the strongest alignment?
- What gaps are emerging?
- Which action would have the greatest impact?

Alignment creates consistency. Consistency creates belonging. ♥



Key Messages



1



**Relationships
are infrastructure.**



2



**Inclusion is
belonging.**



3



**Mental health begins
in relationships.**



4



**Leadership
shapes culture.**



5



**Culture shapes
outcomes.**



Strong relationships. Inclusive systems. Thriving children.





Final Reflection

Leadership is the bridge to belonging.



When relationships
are strong,
systems thrive
and children flourish.

Every child deserves:

-  to belong
-  to be understood
-  to feel safe
-  to experience connection



Every family
deserves dignity.



Every educator
deserves support.



Leadership makes that possible.

Together, we build inclusive, nurturing systems where every child, family, and educator can thrive.





Thank You



Together, we build inclusive,
nurturing systems where every
child, family, and educator can thrive.





Montclair State University

Yolanda Sosa
Speaker



Instagram
yolandasosa_sm



Email
sosaortizy@montclair.edu