



**children's
defense fund**
unleashing the joy in growing up

*In the beginning there were no words.
In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew
what that sound sounded like.*

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Children, Ages 0-3, & Childbearing & Child-homing Humans

Resources for faith communities:

Love Note to Childbearing & Child-homing Humans

In a curved-out place, you hold the heartbeats of our children, curves of your body, and curves of your heart. In these sacred places, you desire love and abundance for your children, and we desire the same love and abundance for you. As you hold children in the womb of your bodies or wombs of your homes, we celebrate the diverse ways families are formed. These gifts from God are your children, and they are our children. Together, we hold each other in community, in families, and in sacred space.

We acknowledge that many claim to care about your wellbeing while failing to support your being well. We acknowledge you do not have enough of what you need to, with great ease, provide for yourself and your children, in the curved places. We plant ourselves alongside you and listen to, center, and lift your voice as you name your needs.

*Note: Can be read in worship services and shared via social media and print/digital material(s).

Curating a Listening Session:

Centering the needs of children, youth, and families from their perspective

Curating listening sessions with a womanist, trauma-informed approach means creating a safe, culturally humble, sacred, and empathic space that honors the unique experiences of children, youth, and families, extraordinarily considering the intersections of trauma, race, gender expression, and class. Through the practice of a womanist, trauma-informed approach, listening sessions will also begin to contribute to the social-emotional learning (SEL) of children. Faith communities host listening sessions to hear directly from young people and families. Below is a womanist, trauma-informed approach in curating a listening session and an optional guide to the order of service.



1. Opening Circle

a. Greeting

The greeting is an opportunity for young people and families to utter their names into the space, affirming their presence, the presence of their family, and the presence of their ancestors. Invite children, youth, and families to say their names to foster connection, belonging, and reclaiming of their narrative.

b. Grounding

Create a balanced and welcoming environment that sets the tone for nurturing a sacred space. This is an opportunity for a short activity inviting children, youth, and families to feel centered and rooted. An example of a grounding activity could be listening to music, dancing, deep breathing, meditation, etc.

2. Sacred Space

a. Curating Space

Curate an inviting space for children, youth, and families using warm colors, soft places to sit and touch (if in-person), soft sounds (if virtual); and make room for the fullness of children, youth, and families to be present and to feel seen and heard.

b. Cultural Humility

Center and honor diverse cultural backgrounds through a commitment of developing cultural awareness and an ongoing openness to learn. To understand the vastness of the space we hold for one another by being mindful of the multifariousness of identity and lived experiences.

3. Approach

a. Empathic Listening

A mindful and empathic approach to hearing and understanding. This practice surpasses the simple act of listening but invites the fullness of each human; in this case, children and families. It invites the fullness of our words, emotion, body, and spirit. The elements of empathic listening using a womanist, trauma-informed approach are presence, compassion, affirmation, openness, and curiosity.

4. Connection

a. Storytelling

Honoring the oral traditions of storytelling by inviting children, youth, and families to share their lived experiences.



b. Artist Expression

A gentle approach to sharing and expression. Offer an alternative modality for connection by inviting children, youth, and families to use creative materials to express feelings and thoughts.

5. Care

a. Choice and Consent

The openness to children and youth exercising their agency to say “yes” or “no.” Children and youth get to determine if they would like to share, be touched, participate, or employ their boundaries.

b. Gentle Prompts

Open ended questions that also exercise the patience for children and youth to share, engage, and learn at their open pace.

c. Honoring Boundaries

Exercising the values of children and young people’s agency to establish their limits and comfort levels. To honor the boundaries of children and youth makes room for cultivating safety, trust, and their own realization that they have agency.

d. Validating Feelings

As children and youth discover their feelings, both big and small, create a space where children and youth understand that the fullness of their feelings are welcome. Affirm that their feelings are heard and seen. We may validate the feelings of young people by using statements like, “it’s okay to cry.”

6. Closing Circle

a. Gratitude

“Thank you’ is the best prayer that anyone could say. I say that one a lot. Thank you expresses extreme gratitude, humility, understanding.”
—Alice Walker

At the close of a listening session, expressing gratitude for the time and commitment of children, youth, and families represents an honoring of the journey that we’ve taken alongside one another. The invitation is to express gratitude for all those participating in the listening session but also to invite children, youth, and families to name something that they are grateful for, contributing to a practice of expressing appreciation for each other, sacred space, love, right relationship, and future.




b. Celebration

A listening session is not complete without the excitement of closing the circle together, signifying that we have completed a journey alongside one another. A celebration activity may be clapping, dancing, or music, sealing the sacred circle cultivated in order to apply this listening session model.

Order of Service: Listening Session


- Opening
 - a. Greetings/Naming
- Grounding Inspiration
 - a. Quote, sacred texts, music, ritual
- Opening prayer
- Framing of advocacy for children, youth, and families
 - a. reason for gathering—share background information
- Framing of a listening session
 - a. how we are gathering— what a listening session is and what we hope to learn
- Questions (options for full group or small groups)
 - a. Harriet Tubman, “If you want to taste freedom, keep going.”
What does freedom taste like, sound like, smell like, feel like, look like?
 - b. What is most difficult about being a parent (or guardian)?
 - c. What is most joyous about being a parent (or guardian)?
 - d. If you can think of anything, absolutely anything that can be supportive to you as a parent, what would it be?
 - e. What do you need to be the best parent (or guardian)?
 - f. How is your parenting style different from the way you were parented?
 - g. How can faith spaces be safer for children, youth, and families?
 - h. What are some of the lessons you were taught as a young person that you will teach your children? What are some of the lessons that you were taught as a young person that you will not teach your children?
 - i. What’s your favorite color? Has your favorite color changed over time and why?
 - j. What do you need from your faith spaces for your children and family?
- Processing/Metabolizing what we heard/shared

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- Next steps
 - a. How to share learnings - before leaving determine who is going to organize next steps
 - b. Be creative.
 - Make a visual representation of what was shared.
 - Make a song of what was shared.
 - Document for those of your faith community and beyond not present during the listening session.
 - c. Send learning to Children's Defense Fund at (email)
 - d. Share via email and social media.
 - Closing
 - a. Gratitude, Celebration, Music, Ritual, Prayer

Sociopolitical/Advocacy Education and Organizational Resources:

www.startearly.org

- More than one million new neural connections are formed every second in the first few years of life.
- Priority areas: Our goal is to create effective, equitable, and interconnected educational opportunities for our youngest learners and their families. We do that by advocating for robust policies and programs that prioritize and provide prenatal care, early learning, early intervention, and other health and family supports.
- Approach: Start Early's policy and advocacy efforts are grounded in our decades of work with children, youth, families, the workforce, and systems leaders, as well as our work to advance equity. Through systems building, legislative, administrative, and grassroots advocacy, and consultation and thought leadership, we aim to:
 - Improve early childhood experiences for all young people through programs and policies that support early learning and care, maternal and child health and family engagement;
 - Sustain and increase public investments for quality, comprehensive early childhood education; and ○ Support policies and service delivery systems that increase access to high-quality, affordable early childhood education, and positively impact young children's learning, health, and family outcomes.

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- Policy Agenda: Our approach to policy and advocacy is outlined in our [Policy Agenda](#). As our vision for policy and systems change nationwide, the Agenda outlines opportunities at the federal, state, and community levels that will help create early childhood systems that promote quality and effectively meet the needs of children, families and providers.
 - As our road map for the next three years (2021-2023), this agenda articulates our commitments, our views on critical early learning and care issues, and the policy levers we aim to pull across three areas: next generation program quality; building connected, comprehensive, and equitable systems; and elevating family voice and the role of families
 - The Start Early Policy Agenda is our foundation as we work broadly across child, youth, and family-serving systems to influence policy and drive investments that help us advocate for change. We do this work with a recognition that—because of the root causes of structural and institutional racism—many of the practitioners, children, youth, and families whom we serve experience inequitable access and outcomes in early learning and care. Alongside our partners, we aim to advance policies that center equity and amplify the strengths, innovations, needs, and desires of the children, families, and partners who participate and contribute to our unique early childhood systems. We view the process of setting forward an equity-centered policy agenda as a learning journey and aim to interrogate our biases, weak spots and be accountable to addressing and repairing our mistakes along the way. We aim to work with intentionality and accountability to drive system improvements and policy change for children, youth, and families historically and currently impacted by racism.
 - [Congress has failed our youngest generation and their families](#)
 - Kindergarten Readiness [Core Education Measures](#) | [The Forsyth Promise](#)

The years before kindergarten are critical for the healthy development of a child’s mind, body, and capacity to learn later in life. Many children enter kindergarten without the skills necessary to excel in reading and are at risk of falling behind their peers.



[Momentum Building \(pritzkerchildrensinitiative.org\)](https://pritzkerchildrensinitiative.org)

Infant Behavior Recognition

Does your baby:

- Look at you and follow the sound of your voice?
- Get fussy when left alone?
- Calm or settle with you?

Verbal Language

- Coos with ooh and aahs?
- Become startled by unexpected changes in surroundings?
- Cry differently for hunger or tiredness?

Motor Skills

- Move all limbs around?
- Hold chin up?