Beyond Welcome: Building a Culture of Belonging in Early Childhood Education

Building a culture where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

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For more than two decades, I served as Director of Early Learning and Family Engagement within a large community-based institution. Working alongside children, families, educators, colleagues, and lay leaders taught me that some of the most meaningful experiences in education extend beyond curriculum and classroom materials.

They are found in the relationships we nurture and the everyday interactions that help people feel seen, heard, and valued.

Then, in 2020, everything changed. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted how we lived, worked, and connected.

At the same time, I moved from Cleveland, where I had spent decades building relationships, to Columbus, Ohio. I found myself navigating a new city just as familiar ways of finding community had dramatically shifted.

For years, I had worked to create welcoming environments for others. Suddenly, I was the newcomer, discovering firsthand that being welcomed and truly feeling you belong are not necessarily the same thing.

A family can attend an event without feeling connected. An educator can be part of a team without feeling heard. A child can be present in a classroom without feeling seen.

These experiences left me with a question:

How do we move beyond welcoming people into our programs to building a culture where everyone experiences belonging?

Belonging Begins with Relationships

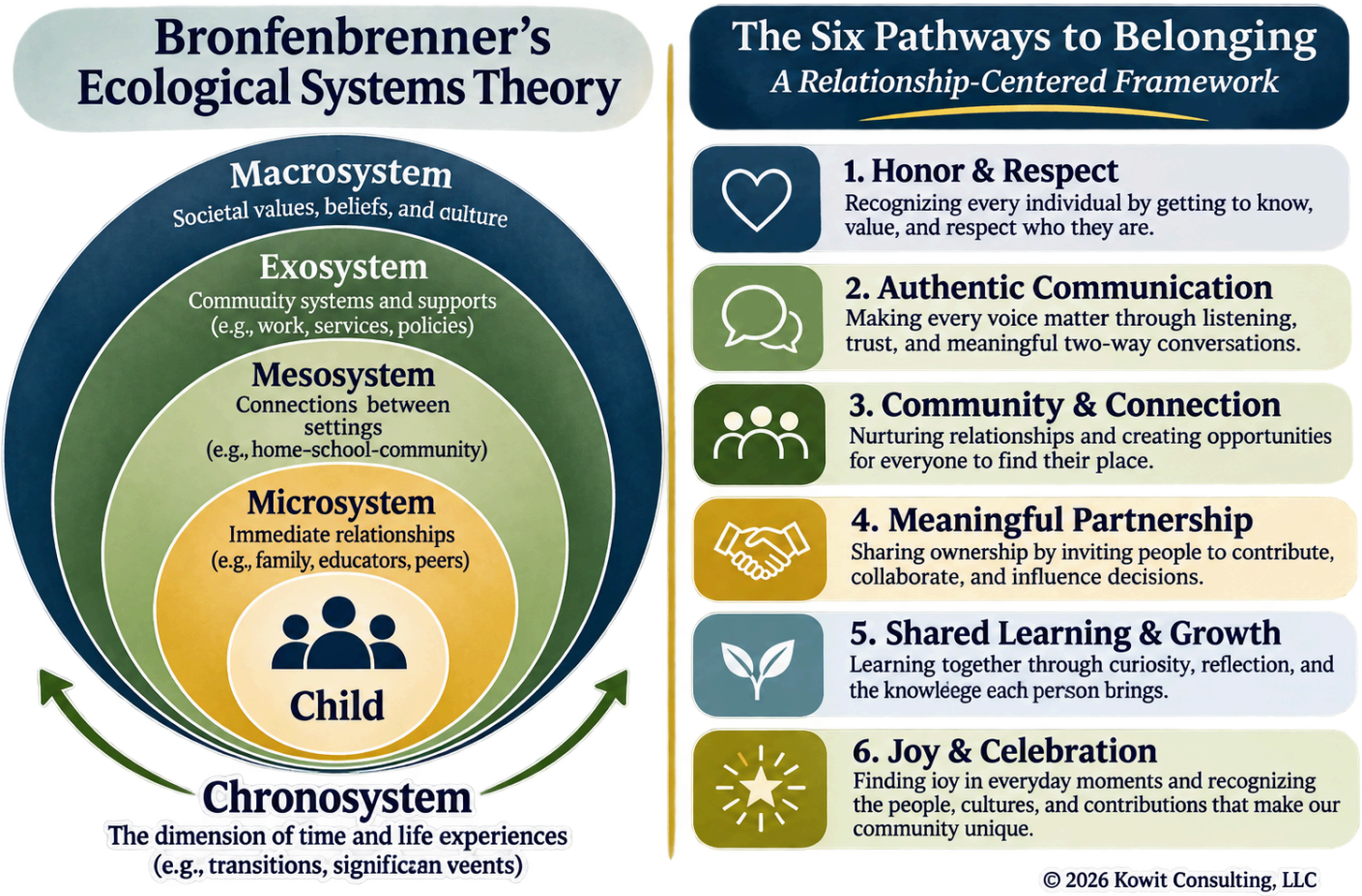
The familiar proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” reminds us that children grow within communities of relationships and shared support. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory deepens this understanding by showing how children develop within interconnected environments, from their immediate relationships with families, educators, and peers to the broader communities and systems surrounding them.

These environments do not operate independently. Connections between families and educators, the support educators receive from leaders, and the values reflected in a program's culture all help shape children's experiences.

If we want children to experience belonging, we must also consider whether the adults who surround them experience it themselves.

> **“Belonging is a human need. Community is how we meet it.”**

The Six Pathways to Belonging: A Relationship-Centered Framework for Building a Culture of Belonging



How Do We Put That Belief into Practice?

I developed the Six Pathways to Belonging to help educators and leaders move beyond welcoming gestures and intentionally cultivate relationships where everyone feels valued. These interconnected pathways encourage us to examine how belonging is experienced through everyday interactions, opportunities, and decisions.

1. Honor & Respect: Recognizing Every Individual

Belonging begins with honoring the identities, strengths, experiences, and perspectives each person brings. To truly honor someone, we must take time to know them as an individual—what matters to them, and what their interests, strengths, and needs are. Whether we are connecting with children, families, educators, or leaders, respect begins with genuine curiosity rather than assumptions.

Reflection prompt

How are we intentionally getting to know each person for who they are?

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2. Authentic Communication: Making Every Voice Matter

Authentic communication goes beyond sharing information. It requires listening, curiosity, trust, and meaningful two-way conversations. Children need opportunities to express their ideas, families need to share their perspectives, and educators and leaders need spaces for open dialogue. Communication is not simply about inviting people to speak; it is about demonstrating that their contributions matter.

Reflection prompt

Are we listening to understand, and how are we showing others that their voices have value?

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3. Community & Connection: Nurturing Relationships

Sharing a space does not automatically create community. Meaningful connections grow when we intentionally create opportunities for relationships to develop. Children build friendships through shared experiences, families connect with one another, and educators and leaders strengthen relationships through collaboration and mutual support. Often, the smallest gestures create the strongest connections.

Reflection prompt

Are we creating opportunities for everyone to find their place within our community?

4. Meaningful Partnership: Sharing Ownership

Inviting participation is not the same as creating meaningful partnerships. True partnership recognizes people as valued contributors who can help shape their experiences. Children can influence classroom decisions, families can contribute to program practices, and educators and leaders can collaborate in decision-making. Partnership requires trust, shared responsibility, and a willingness to consider different perspectives.

Reflection prompt

Are we simply inviting people to participate in what we have planned, or are we inviting them to help shape it?

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5. Shared Learning & Growth: Learning Together

Learning happens through the relationships, conversations, and experiences we share. Children teach us through their curiosity and discoveries. Families offer insights into their children's lives and experiences. Educators grow through reflection and collaboration, while leaders strengthen their communities by learning alongside their teams. Shared learning requires humility and recognizing that we do not always have all the answers.

Reflection prompt

Are we creating environments where everyone feels comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, and learning from one another?

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6. Joy & Celebration: Finding Joy in Everyday Moments

Joy is not reserved for holidays or special events. It lives in a child's laughter, a shared discovery, a meaningful conversation, or a simple gesture of appreciation. Celebrating individual strengths, cultures, accomplishments, and contributions strengthens relationships. A joyful community does not mean every moment is happy or without challenges. It means making space for gratitude, connection, and celebration even during difficult times.

Reflection prompt

How are we recognizing the everyday moments that bring our community together?

From Intention to Everyday Practice

Building a culture of belonging does not require another program or initiative. It begins with examining the experiences we create every day.

Look for belonging in everyday decisions:

- **Staff meetings:** Are educators simply receiving information, or helping shape decisions?
- **Family engagement:** When families enter our classrooms, are they welcomed, or are they also invited to contribute?
- **Children's ideas:** When children share ideas, do we acknowledge them, or allow their thinking to influence what happens next?

These moments remind us that belonging is not measured by attendance or participation alone, but by whether people experience their presence, voices, and contributions as meaningful.

A Culture We Create Together

Belonging is not something we achieve once and check off a list. It requires ongoing attention, reflection, and care.

I invite you to consider your own learning community.

> **Closing reflection**
>
> Who feels seen and valued? Whose voices are heard? Who may be present but not yet feel connected?

Because ultimately, belonging isn't simply about being invited into a community. It's about knowing you matter within it.

Reference

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Harvard University Press.