Focusing on
Race Equity
Throughout Change
and Implementation

Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

Addressing racial and ethnic disparities in child welfare requires agencies to intentionally focus on equity, including while planning for change and implementing new programs and practices. Achieving equitable services and outcomes demands deliberate use of race equity and inclusion principles from the earliest stages of exploring a problem to identifying its causes and solutions to ensuring sustainable implementation.

This tip sheet includes questions for teams to consider throughout change and implementation processes. Child welfare leaders, implementation team members, and technical assistance providers can use the discussion questions to raise awareness, promote reflection, and encourage actions that center equity as a goal within any implementation effort.

Use this tip sheet to:

- ◆ Reflect on race equity throughout all change and implementation processes
- ◆ Prompt team discussion and actions that promote more equitable implementation

This publication is part of the **Change and Implementation in Practice** series. For more detailed information on each topic, visit the series webpage.

Getting Started

This tip sheet is a ***starting point***. The questions presented are intended to drive conversations and prompt steps forward. As your agency moves ahead with focusing on race equity, keep the following points in mind:

- ◆ Focusing on race equity is an **ongoing and evolving process**. Ideally, it becomes embedded in all of the agency's work, including change management efforts, and improves and expands over time.
- ◆ Advancing racial equity in the context of systems with long and entrenched histories of structural racism and inequities is **complicated work** that extends well beyond asking questions. Yet, the questions can draw attention to areas for teams to collectively learn and act.
- ◆ Focusing on race equity in child welfare relies heavily on **meaningful engagement and partnership with youth and family members** who have lived expertise in child welfare and who represent the racial and ethnic populations in the communities served. It requires learning from and sharing decision-making power with those most affected by the implementation of child welfare programs and practices.
- ◆ Engaging in discussions related to race and racism can be uncomfortable. It is important to promote a **culture of psychological safety** so that all team members feel safe and respected in voicing their thoughts.
- ◆ Teaming is critical to focusing on race equity in change and implementation efforts. The questions in this tip sheet require **collaborative responses** from the many individuals involved in initiating and sustaining system and practice changes, including the child welfare agency workforce, youth and family members, contracted agencies, community service providers, and other system partners.

The sample questions can be tailored to address the diversity and progress of agency change initiatives. While many questions focus specifically on race equity to address historical patterns of inequities for children and families of color in child welfare, some questions are intentionally broad to accommodate the varying populations served and encourage equity for other underserved communities who experience disparate outcomes.

A few notes on terminology:

Developing shared language is an important part of being on the same page when discussing race equity. Yet, language about race and equity is continually evolving, and changes may be needed over time. In addition, individuals and groups may have different perspectives on terms as well as different preferences for how to refer to individuals and groups with various racial and ethnic backgrounds and identities. This publication uses the following terms and definitions:

◆ **Equity** means the "consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals" (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021, p.1). Organizations committed to advancing equity recognize that individuals and groups have different needs and circumstances and provide varying supports and opportunities as needed to achieve fair outcomes.

◆ **Racial equity** describes circumstances when race is no longer a predictor of outcomes. Race equity can be thought of as both an outcome and a process of advancing the outcome.

◆ **Focusing on race equity** refers to paying attention to race and ethnicity in a deliberate way with the goal of reducing disparities and advancing racial equity.

◆ **Structural racism** reflects "historical, social, political, institutional, and cultural factors that contribute to, legitimize, and maintain racial inequities" (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019, p.11).

◆ **Underserved communities** that have been "systematically denied equitable treatment include Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality" (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021, p.1).

Problem Exploration

While your team works to better understand a challenge your agency faces and digs into the underlying causes ...

Consider these questions:

◆ Who determines what **research questions** are asked? Are the values and ideas of youth, families, and communities served by your agency represented in the research questions asked and the data collected to answer the questions?

> "Always place the people who are most impacted at the center of conversations which seek to find solutions to problems affecting them."
>
> (Elam, 2019, p.12)

◆ Are sufficient demographic data available to examine experiences and outcomes of different racial and ethnic groups? Is your team able to **disaggregate data** (break down) to understand outcomes of people who belong to multiple intersecting groups (e.g., Black women, Latinos with disabilities)?

◆ What processes and guidelines does your agency have in place for ethical data sharing and **data integration**?

◆ How has your team analyzed who is most affected by the identified problem or need? How has your team explored the underlying reasons for **differences in experiences** and outcomes for different racial and ethnic groups? How are qualitative findings and guided discussions used to understand the stories and context behind the numbers?

◆ How are data and evidence on the contributing factors and **root causes of the problem** analyzed? What roles do systemic and historical factors play? Is there a collaborative approach to integrate input on root causes from a variety of stakeholders, including youth and family members with lived expertise?

◆ Have you considered how **implicit biases** might affect interpretation of the data and how you can lessen such biases?

Teaming

While your team brings together individuals with varied expertise and skills to guide change and implementation activities …

Consider these questions:

◆ In what ways is the existing (or proposed) team diverse? How are **team members chosen**? Are the same people always at the table?

◆ Does your team **include individuals that are most affected by the problem** or challenge your agency is working to address? Do team members reflect the complexity of the racial and ethnic identities and groups your agency serves? Does the team recognize that team members may balance multiple identities that inform their viewpoints (e.g., a team member may be Black and LGBTQ+ or Native Alaskan and a veteran)?

◆ How are youth and family members with lived expertise represented on your team? What has been done to enable participation by youth and family members (e.g., later meeting times, virtual meetings and access to meeting technology, compensation)? What steps have been taken to promote meaningful engagement and ensure **equal footing at the table**?

◆ How are **community partners** represented on the team? Are they engaged early in the process?

◆ How does your team ensure clear, **understandable communication** throughout the change and implementation process so all team members can be active participants?

◆ How does your team promote a **culture of psychological safety** for team members to feel secure in discussing race equity issues? Does your team have conversational agreements? Are all voices heard and respected?

◆ What steps are taken to **share power and decision-making** across team members?

◆ What supports are needed for team members to improve their **cultural responsiveness** and strengthen their collective ability to focus on racial equity?

Theory of Change

While your team illustrates what needs to change to get from the identified problem to a desired outcome …

Consider these questions:

◆ Have individuals from the racial and ethnic **groups most affected by the problem contributed** to the development of a theory of change? Have youth and families with lived expertise contributed to discussions of what changes are needed, how they should unfold, and what success ultimately looks like to them?

◆ **Who will benefit** the most from your team's vision for change? Who will benefit the least? What unintended consequences might result from each link in the pathway of change?

◆ How does your theory of change **reflect a race equity vision**? Does the theory of change address how to reduce disparities in outcomes for different populations served (e.g., by focusing on barriers to service access)? Does the theory of change address structural racism and its impact on outcomes?

◆ Does your theory of change "**tell a story**" in relatable language that can be understood and shared by diverse groups (including frontline staff, youth and families, and community partners)?

Intervention Selection and Design/Adaptation

While your team identifies and defines programs, practices, and other strategies to address identified problems, meet needs, and ensure fit with agency context and the populations served …

Consider these questions:

◆ How are programs, practices, or other interventions selected? How are considerations of race equity and cultural responsiveness assessed during the **research and selection process**?

◆ How are youth and families with lived expertise and others from the racial and ethnic groups most affected by implementation playing a **meaningful role in making recommendations** for intervention selection, adaptation, and design?

◆ Has your team considered **innovative or nontraditional strategies** as options? Have you explored "upstream" opportunities to strengthen families and communities and prevent problems before they occur?

◆ What evidence is there that an identified program or **intervention works for your target population**? Has your team assessed who it might not work for and why? Has the team looked beyond traditional evaluation studies?

◆ How can a program or other intervention be **adapted to be more accessible and responsive** to different racial and ethnic groups? How can the intervention or setting be enhanced to better fit with the target population's values and culture?

☑ Readiness

While your team examines factors that contribute to an agency's willingness and ability to make changes and/or put specific solutions in place …

Consider these questions:

◆ Does your team's **readiness tool** address race equity issues? Are the questions on the tool readily understandable? Do they address the local context and values of populations served?

◆ Do agency leaders, staff, and implementation team members understand race equity issues? Do they have the **willingness and capacity to apply equity concept**s to ensure access, opportunity, and organizational support during implementation?

◆ Are team members **prepared to engage** families and youth with lived expertise in meaningful ways? Are they willing and able to learn about and acknowledge the culture, values, and history of the populations served?

◆ How has your team considered the **readiness of community partners** to support implementation and deliver services?

◆ What **implementation supports** (e.g., coaching, resources, partnership) are needed to further advance equitable implementation?

⚙ Implementation Planning and Capacity Building

While your team outlines plans and action steps to get ready for implementation, build capacity, roll out a program or other intervention, and monitor implementation …

Consider these questions:

◆ Is your team **working with youth and families with lived expertise, frontline staff, and members of the target population** to prepare an implementation plan? To identify strategies to build capacity and leverage existing strengths? To strengthen outreach and communication?

◆ Has the team tailored the interventions and implementation plans to **fit the culture, history, and values of the local community** and target population? What additional supports or capacity are needed to ensure fit?

> "Equitable implementation occurs when strong equity components—including explicit attention to the culture, history, values, and needs of the community—are integrated into the principles and tools of implementation science."
>
> (Woo, Dumont, & Metz, 2019)

◆ Will the interventions and **services** be **delivered by individuals the community trusts** and who look like the populations receiving the services? What supports are needed for recruitment, training, and retention?

◆ What **factors could potentially contribute to inequities** for different racial and ethnic groups during implementation (e.g., barriers to access, differing experiences)? How can they be addressed?

◆ How can the agency **partner with community organizations**, faith-based groups, or other local service providers (particularly those that serve underserved communities) to support implementation? Promote access to services and encourage participation? Build capacity?

Intervention Testing, Piloting, and Staging

While your team conducts a trial run on a small scale, makes changes, and strategically rolls out programs and practices …

Consider these questions:

◆ How have you **engaged** front line staff, youth and family with lived expertise, and members of the target population in usability testing, pilot testing, and planning for staging and scaling up?

◆ Has the team taken proactive and creative steps to **learn from the local communities** about what works, what needs to be improved, and what approaches can help overcome challenges?

◆ Has the team fully considered how different groups will access and benefit from the selected intervention? Are different outreach strategies needed to **address barriers to access** for different populations and improve equity? How can the strategies be tested?

◆ What are the **social, cultural, or historical factors** that may affect the success of a pilot test? Or the plans for staging (sequencing) an intervention?

◆ How can the team best address **varying capacity strengths and needs** while the intervention is being rolled out and scaled up at different sites?

Monitoring, Evaluating, and Applying Findings

While your team collects and analyzes data and evidence to answer questions about what's working and what's not and to guide improvements …

Consider these questions:

◆ Are youth and family with lived expertise and members of the target population **meaningfully involved** in designing plans for monitoring and evaluation? Offering input during data collection? Analyzing data and evidence and interpreting findings? Identifying recommendations? Informing how findings are shared and helping to make reports relevant?

◆ How have agency leaders, evaluators, and researchers cultivated **trusting relationships** with program participants? Have they acknowledged historic mistrust that stems from decades of misuse of research and evaluation findings related to families and children of color?

◆ How has the team collected and analyzed data to **assess what's working well, what's not working, and for whom**? How do findings guide ongoing adjustments and improvements?

◆ How has the team collected **feedback on services** from the target population? Has the team asked service recipients what they can do better? How does that feedback inform service delivery?

◆ How has the team **assessed effectiveness** of the intervention? Are there differences in outcomes for different racial and ethnic groups? What factors contribute to those differences? How have findings guided decisions to adjust, sustain, spread, or discontinue the intervention?

◆ How has the team **defined success**? How does the child welfare system's definition of success align with how racial and ethnic groups in the communities served define success?

◆ How has the change and implementation process contributed to **equitable results**?

A letter from the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau identified several activities that may help increase understanding of equity issues (Schomburg, 2021):

◆ Analyzing and using program and administrative data to identify equity issues

◆ Examining how equity considerations inform planned use of available resources

◆ Identifying outreach strategies and efforts to reach underserved populations

◆ Developing ways to measure the degree to which improvements at the state level translate into improvements for all populations

Moving Forward

This tip sheet offers questions designed to drive conversations. Teams planning for change and implementing new programs and practices will be at different places in their abilities to answer the questions and act on responses. Next steps will differ from team to team and will be informed by how their conversations unfold and their agencies' particular circumstances and needs.

Three essential steps can help agencies build momentum moving forward:

◆ **Make a commitment** to focus on and advance equity.
◆ **Listen and learn**, particularly from individuals with lived child welfare expertise and who represent underserved communities.
◆ **Discuss and examine** the effects of child welfare work on equity.

> "Being committed to equity means that we must be willing to have difficult conversations. We must also be willing to examine whether and how existing policies and practices have had disparate, and sometimes harmful, impacts on historically underserved and marginalized people. The work requires honesty, openness, and willingness to make changes."
>
> (Schomburg, 2021, p.1)

Whether just beginning to focus on equity or continuing prior efforts, agencies may need to build their capacity for this challenging work. The Capacity Building Center for States (Center for States) can support public child welfare agencies with their next steps to focus on equity by referring them to available resources, hosting events, connecting staff with peers doing similar work, and offering technical assistance through tailored services.

Support for Advancing Race Equity in Child Welfare

The Center for States provides free services and supports to state public child welfare agencies. To ask questions or request services tailored to your child welfare agency's needs:

◆ Email capacityinfo@icfi.com
◆ Contact your Center for States' Tailored Services Liaison

For More Information

Building knowledge and skills to advance race equity calls for continuous learning and growth. The following are some resources to help teams learn more:

◆ Becoming a Family-Focused System (Center for States)
◆ Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare (Center for States)
◆ Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
◆ Bringing Equity to Implementation: Incorporating Community Experience to Improve Outcomes (Stanford Social Innovation Review)
◆ Equity at the Center of Implementation (Center for the Study of Social Policy)
◆ Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide. Embracing Racial Equity: 7 Steps to Advance and Embed Race Equity and Inclusion Within Your Organization (Annie E. Casey Foundation)
◆ A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration (Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy, University of Pennsylvania)
◆ Racial Equity Resources (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute)

To stay current on new resources, services, and events from the Center for States, including those related to race equity and child welfare:

◆ Join the Center for States' email community
◆ Check the Center for States' website

References

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