

Place Matters

Four Strategies to Connect Place, Racism,
and Early Childhood Development

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Center on the Developing Child
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

This toolkit was created to help advocates, practitioners, researchers, and other communicators apply the framing recommendations laid out in the Place Matters Strategic Brief. While the brief lays out a set of evidence-based communications strategies for deepening public understanding of how structural racism shapes the environments that affect young children, this toolkit brings those strategies to life. It is designed to support communicators who are talking about the relationship between place, racism, and early childhood development—whether they are writing op-eds, developing policy briefs, speaking with media, or creating community engagement materials.

The toolkit provides concrete examples, message templates, and a story bank for communicators to incorporate into their own work. By equipping communicators to effectively implement these framing recommendations around place, racism, and early childhood development, the toolkit can support broad efforts to shift dominant narratives and mobilize support for systems-level solutions.

Building upon the full Place Matters brief, this resource complements the core story of early childhood development that has successfully advanced public understanding of early brain development and caregiver-child relationships, and offers new ways to connect those concepts to broader environmental and systemic influences, particularly the impacts of systemic racism. Whether you are new to framing or already working to change the conversation around early childhood, this toolkit offers practical guidance to help you contribute to a more complete narrative that centers fairness of place—one that supports every child's opportunity to thrive, no matter where they live.

Place, Racism, and Early Childhood Development: Quick-Start Guide to the Four Strategies

The four strategies outlined below can help advocates communicate effectively about the relationship between place, racism, and early childhood development.

1. Use the value of *Fairness across Places*.

Highlight how the current distribution of risks and opportunities across the places where children grow up is unfair—and that we can and must make changes to create fairness across places.

Advance	Avoid
Explicit references to racism, highlighting how the places where Black, Latine, and other families of color live often have fewer opportunities and more risks due to decades of policy decisions shaped by systemic racism. Use concrete examples and specific zip codes or communities to help people understand these inequities in concrete terms.	Talking about fairness between <i>groups</i> , which can activate zero-sum thinking about public policy and depress support for solutions designed to advance equity.

What it looks like:

02115 or 02126?

One neighborhood benefits from well-funded schools, safe streets, and abundant green spaces, while another struggles with underfunded schools and food deserts. These stark disparities are not random but are the result of structural racism embedded in housing policies, resource allocation, and systemic inequities. A child's zip code—too often determined by historically discriminatory practices—should not dictate their access to opportunity or level of exposure to risk. It's time to dismantle these barriers and ensure that all kids in our city, regardless of where they live, have the resources they need to thrive.

2. Choose narrative stories to build understanding of the relationship between place, racism, and early childhood development.

Advance	Avoid
Narratives that help situate the impact of racism on particular people, in particular places, at particular times. Use the <i>Redressing History</i> and <i>Accountable Policymakers</i> narratives to tell stories about real events from history, particularly stories where the government has already taken action to redress harm. Learn more about the research behind these narratives here (link to brief) .	Assuming that people are familiar with or understand the historical references you include in your communications. For example, if you name redlining as an example of racist policy, it's critical to briefly explain it.

What it looks like:

This Is More Than a Grocery Store.

It is proof of what happens when communities come together and demand that governments do better.

For too long, our city adopted policies that prioritized development in higher income—mostly white—neighborhoods, while failing to invest in neighborhoods Black and Latine residents call home. The city's failure to fund new development left these neighborhoods without access to healthy food, which can lead to a whole host of related health issues, especially for young children.

But community leaders and residents pushed for the establishment of a fresh food financing initiative, and revitalization plans are underway to repair the harms of decades of discriminatory policies. These efforts are already creating healthier environments that give children greater access to nutritious food and opportunities to thrive.

3. Use explanatory examples of how particular communities have taken effective action on particular issues to create a sense of shared agency.

Advance	Avoid
A variety of real-life examples covering different issues, which touch on both built and natural environments and demonstrate how communities and government have taken action together to advance systems-level change.	Oversimplifying the collective action needed, either by sharing the improved outcomes without explanation of how they were reached, or by overemphasizing the role of the individual versus the collective.

What it looks like:

The Difference a Tree Makes

When it comes to healthy early childhood development, going green makes all the difference. Access to safe green space has been shown to benefit childhood outcomes—yet certain parts of our city, such as those home to lower income and Black and Latine residents, have been left behind by city planning.

Residents and city officials partnered to create the *Green Space Report*, a blueprint for creating more green space in neighborhoods that need it. They assembled a team to design and build green space and increased green space in those neighborhoods by 25 percent. By increasing access to safe green space, we can support healthy development for children citywide.

4. Apply “Part-to-Whole Framing” to zoom in and explain how a particular *feature* of a place is intentionally designed; then zoom out to explain how that feature influences *aspects* of that place.

Advance	Avoid
The idea that many aspects of place are influenced by the intentional design of features within them. Explain how these design choices affect child development and can lead to racial inequities, while stressing the opportunities that exist to redesign with fairness in mind.	Generalities that fail to tie the quality of a certain place with the individual design choices that create that quality.

What it looks like:

Making Water Work for Our Kids

Water is a natural resource, and it’s everywhere. But how it gets from nature to our faucets—that’s the product of human choices that must be made when communities and cities are designed.

If policymakers make choices that put fewer resources to ensure safe water where Black and Latine people live, children bear the impact of those choices for life.

But we can make different choices; we can bring in drinking water from healthier sources *and* we can choose to redesign all aspects of our neighborhoods that add up to better outcomes for childhood development.

You Say, They Hear

At times, we take for granted that the audiences we want to reach understand the words and phrases we use in the ways we intend them. But that is not always the case.

Here are some examples of the ways in which messages about place, racism, and early childhood development may be misunderstood—and how you can align with the goals of communicators in this space.

You say...	They hear...	Why...	Try this...
"There are highly sensitive periods of development."	Yes, kids are way too sensitive and emotional these days.	People narrowly interpret sensitivity as "emotional sensitivity," which is often seen as a negative trait.	Make the environment a part of your definition. "At every age children are shaped by their surroundings, but development unfolds in ways that make certain periods—and certain biological systems—particularly sensitive to environmental influences."
"We need to pay attention to built and natural environments to better support children's development."	It is so important that kids come from good, tightly knit homes, play outside, and stay away from social media.	People interpret "built" to mean social or familial environments, rather than physical infrastructure. They associate "natural" environments with outdoor activity, healthy eating, and the opposite of virtual or online spaces.	Offer examples. "Even small decisions like the size of sidewalks in our neighborhoods impact children's development. If sidewalks are wider and well-maintained, families can take walks together without fear of traffic."
"We should design places to reduce exposure to risk and increase access to opportunity."	The world is so risky these days.	When people hear risk, opportunity tends to drop out of the conversation. Even switching the order of the discussion can keep opportunity top of mind.	Start with opportunity and then talk about risk. "Intentionally designing our neighborhoods with children's wellbeing in mind is one way we can enhance opportunity for healthy development while also minimizing risks, such as environmental toxins."
"Places are designed."	Things never change.	People understand that places are designed, but once the design process is complete, they believe it is permanent.	Make sure your language expresses the ongoing, ever-changing nature of the design process, and the opportunity this offers to support healthy development. Use the active and present voice: "Planning for a vibrant future means looking at our neighborhoods with a new lens. One step at a time, we can redesign our spaces to support healthy child development."

Applying the Strategies: A Checklist

The strategic brief offers several strategies to connect the dots between place, racism, and early childhood development. All strategies aim to enhance understanding about structural racism, its impact on place, and how that affects children's developmental outcomes.

Here is some guidance on how and when each strategy can be used for maximum impact. Included is a checklist of questions to ask yourself about your communications goals to help guide you forward.

Fairness across Places

Use this strategy to:

Help people understand that unfair distribution of risks and opportunities associated with place impacts developmental outcomes.

Questions to Ask

1. Does your communication reference fairness that speaks explicitly to place?

Yes No

If not, address fairness across places with a high degree of specificity, pointing to concrete examples or specific zip codes or communities to help audiences understand the idea in the context of a real-world setting.

2. Does your communication concretely explain *how* structural racism impacts place?

Yes No

If not, identify and describe an actual racist policy or practice that has negatively impacted place. The key to this strategy is specificity. Pinpoint and illustrate exactly how racist policies and practices shape places where we live, creating more risks and less opportunities for Black and Latine families.

3. Does your communication convey an “all of us” message that avoids suggesting “winners” and “losers”?

Yes No

If not, pivot toward language that conveys a sense of collective responsibility and benefit to avoid zero-sum thinking about policy and activate a sense of collective progress.

4. Does your communication present solutions through the way that places are designed?

Yes No

If not, be sure your communication offers a clear solution that readers can clearly connect to design choices.

Narratives and Examples

Use this strategy to:

Shift unproductive mindsets, reduce misperceptions of racism as “isolated incidents,” and build understanding around the relationships between racism, place, and child development.

Use a variety of real-life examples covering different issues to show how particular communities have taken effective action to create a sense of shared agency and create places where all children can thrive.

Questions to Ask

1. Does your story center community members and decision-makers as key actors?

Yes No

If not, revise your story to highlight the dynamic between these groups. Show how decisions made by leaders directly affect real lives, and how community members are actively shaping those decisions—not just responding to them.

2. Does your narrative portray environments as flexible and changeable, shaped by human decisions over time?

Yes No

If not, incorporate examples—across both built and natural environments—that illustrate how these settings can be redesigned or reimagined to advance fairness across places.

3. Does your story clearly explain how a racist policy, practice, or event has harmed children’s development?

Yes No

If not, connect the dots for your audience. Spell out how racism operates and why it leads to specific developmental consequences. Don’t rely on the audience to infer—take them there step-by-step.

4. Does your story go beyond simply naming racist policies (like redlining) to explaining how they worked and what their impact was?

Yes No

If not, choose concrete, localized examples that may be unfamiliar to your audience. Flesh out how the policy functioned and whom it affected. You can also pivot to a more compelling or surprising example using the story bank below.

5. Does your story show how policy change can redress past harms and injustices?

Yes No

If not, include examples of enacted policies that emerged from community advocacy and government action. Show how change is possible—and how it’s been achieved—when systems are responsive to collective demands.

Part-to-Whole Framing

Use this strategy to:

Zoom in to the intentionality of design in how features of places are created; then zoom out to demonstrate how those designed features impact equity.

Emphasize how the design of places has been influenced by racist policies and practices—and that those elements of a place's design can be redesigned.

Questions to Ask

1. Does your communication highlight how specific features of a place are shaped by intentional policy decisions?

Yes No

If not, bring in clear examples—such as zoning laws, transportation access, or water infrastructure—that show how places are actively designed, not naturally occurring.

2. Does your story illustrate how these design choices impact child development and contribute to racial inequities?

Yes No

If not, explicitly connect the aspects of a place to developmental outcomes, and show how inequities arise when certain communities are systematically excluded from beneficial design decisions.

3. Does your communication reinforce the idea that environments can be changed through deliberate decisions over time?

Yes No

If not, emphasize the possibility of redesign and reform. Use examples of past or current policy changes that demonstrate how environments have been or can be improved through collective action.

4. Do you provide specific, tangible examples instead of general descriptions of place?

Yes No

If not, replace vague references with vivid, concrete examples that clarify how the quality of a place results from specific design or policy choices.

5. Does your story zoom out to show how a feature of place connects to broader systems or structural inequities?

Yes No

If not, link localized examples to bigger patterns—such as housing segregation, transportation inequity, or environmental racism—to underscore that the issue is systemic, not isolated.

Framing Structural Racism

Use this strategy to:

Ensure that all of your communications are centered in a shared understanding of racism as the result of intentional design throughout places. Untangle the perceived connections between racism and poverty and ignite a sense of collective agency.

Questions to Ask

1. Does your communication clearly show that race and class are related but not interchangeable?

Yes No

If not, refine your language to reflect this nuance. Instead of saying “lower-income, Black neighborhoods,” use phrasing like “neighborhoods that are home to mostly lower-income and Black residents” to avoid reinforcing the false equivalence of Blackness with poverty.

2. Does your communication illustrate that collective action is necessary to change racist policies and structures?

Yes No

If not, incorporate examples that show how community organizing, advocacy, and policy leadership have successfully driven change. Emphasize that systems are made—and can be remade—through coordinated effort.

3. Does your communication highlight how systems, not people, are the source of vulnerability?

Yes No

If not, shift the focus from individual or group-level vulnerability to the failures of structures and institutions to serve all people. Instead of framing people as inherently vulnerable, show how poorly designed systems create unequal outcomes.

WHY IS VULNERABILITY SO HARMFUL?

Vulnerability framing can be harmful when discussing racism and early childhood development because it risks reinforcing stereotypes and passive narratives that portray marginalized communities as inherently weak or deficient rather than as groups facing systemic barriers. This framing can obscure the role of structural racism in shaping inequities, shifting focus away from the policies and systems that create inequitable conditions. It can also undermine collective action by fostering pity rather than urgency for systemic change. As an alternative, advocates can highlight resilience, agency, and the structural solutions needed to create fair and supportive environments for all children.

[Watch this video](#) for more discussion about vulnerability framing.

Story Bank of Historical Examples

This story bank offers a collection of ready-to-use examples that bring key ideas to life. You're welcome to use them as written or adapt them to fit your audience, goals, and communications context.

EXAMPLE #1

Community Members Organized to Reduce Asthma Rates Caused by Highway I-94 in the Rondo Neighborhood of St. Paul, MN

Policy: Interstate Highway Act of 1956

The Rondo neighborhood was once a thriving Black community in St. Paul, Minnesota, but the construction of Highway I-94 from 1956 to 1968 had devastating impacts on the area, displacing hundreds of families and businesses. The highway's construction also introduced long-term environmental harm, with a rise in traffic-related air pollution.

Air pollution is known to disproportionately affect children, increasing asthma risk and harming neurodevelopment. In Rondo, the construction of Highway 1-94 led to higher asthma rates among children, and to this day, asthma-related hospitalizations remain highest along the I-94 corridor, with Black children facing additional barriers to treatment due to systemic inequities.

To address this, community members advocated for tighter pollution regulations and pushed for legislation designating Rondo as an area of concern. They also improved public transit, expanded bike lanes, and created walkable spaces. These community-led efforts have already reduced pollution, strengthened neighborhood connections, and supported children's health and wellbeing.

EXAMPLE #2

Community Organizations Are Working to Revive the Baltimore, MD, Upton/Druid Heights Community

Policy: Urban Renewal Legislation

Once a thriving center of Black culture, activism, and business, Upton/Druid Heights was a walkable neighborhood with a strong local economy. However, redlining—a discriminatory practice that denied loans and services to residents in Black and low-income neighborhoods—from the 1930s to the 1960s led to disinvestment, displacement, and deteriorating living conditions. Homes and businesses were demolished, replaced by low-income housing “superblocks,” and vacant, poorly maintained buildings now dominate the landscape.

Today and as a result of these policy decisions, the neighborhood faces significant challenges, including high rates of lead paint violations, unsafe housing, and limited green space, all of which negatively impact child health and development. Unsafe conditions also make it difficult for caregivers to provide outdoor play opportunities, which are essential for early childhood wellbeing.

Despite these obstacles, community organizations worked to restore Upton/Druid Heights. Efforts include park preservation, school improvements, expansion of recreation centers, and leveraging the neighborhood's proximity to the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and the University of Maryland BioPark for economic growth. These initiatives have supported the area's social fabric and create a healthier, more stable environment for families.

EXAMPLE #3

Outdated, Irrelevant Zoning Ordinances Reduce Access to Nutritious Food in the Englewood Neighborhood in Chicago, IL

Policy: Zoning Ordinances

Zoning ordinances shape how land can be used in cities and can reinforce systemic inequalities in food access based on race, class, and geography. In many urban areas, zoning decisions favor small parcels of land, which attract liquor stores and fast-food outlets over full-service grocery stores that require more space. Some jurisdictions allow for parcel consolidation to support larger grocery stores, while others do not, creating barriers to fresh food access.

Due to structural racism that has shaped decision-making across jurisdictions over time, only 8 percent of Black Americans live near a supermarket, compared to 31 percent of white Americans. In Chicago, where the population is nearly evenly split among white, Black, and Latine residents, access to healthy food remains racially and economically segregated. Neighborhoods like Englewood often face “spatial supermarket redlining,” where grocery chains avoid or quickly abandon stores, citing low profitability. Limited public transit and lack of private vehicles further restrict residents' ability to buy fresh food, creating additional burdens for families with young children. Research shows that for every additional supermarket in a neighborhood, produce consumption rises by 32 percent among Black residents.

Food insecurity in early childhood can harm physical growth, brain development, and emotional wellbeing. Diets high in processed foods and low in essential nutrients can cause lifelong cognitive deficits, weakened immunity, obesity, and increased risk for chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. Iron deficiencies during pregnancy can also increase risks of premature birth and postpartum depression.

To combat these challenges, communities have pursued comprehensive, equity-focused zoning and food access policies. For example, residents in some cities have pushed local governments to revise zoning codes to permit and incentivize grocery store development in Black and Latine neighborhoods. Communities have also pushed states and municipalities to create cross-sector food policy councils that include community members to guide planning, ensuring that solutions are grounded in lived experience and address the root causes of inequitable access to healthy food. Through coordinated, structural change, communities across the country are working to guarantee that each and every child has access to the healthy food necessary for lifelong wellbeing.

EXAMPLE #4

Racist Administration of Section 235 of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act Extracted Capital from Black and Latine Families and Led to Dangerous Living Conditions for Children

Policy: Section 235 of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Black and Latine families saw Section 235 of the 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act—a federal program that subsidized mortgage interest for low- and moderate-income homebuyers—as a chance to escape substandard rentals and achieve homeownership. However, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) prioritized industry profits over family wellbeing, allowing predatory practices that left families in unsafe and unlivable homes.

Annie Jeminson, seeking a better home for her family, was pressured into buying a poorly maintained house through the Section 235 program. Her family, including her young children, was living in an unsafe home and faced serious health risks, including asthma triggers like mold, pests, and poor ventilation. Her youngest daughter struggled with asthma. These conditions increase stress and harm child development by disrupting immune and neuroendocrine systems.

After homeowners like Jeminson spoke out, lawsuits and 4,000 federal investigations led to criminal convictions and program reforms. While changes were made, the damage was done—families lost savings, stability, and opportunities for generational wealth. Honoring their fight means ensuring racially just housing policies today and in the future.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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