unicef USA

for every child

CHILD-CENTERED GOVERNANCE

Centering the Best Interests and Voices of Children in Government Decision-Making

Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief Series



For inquiries: Anne Day Leong (research partnerships, aleong@unicefusa.org) • Danielle Goldberg (municipal partnerships, dgoldberg@unicefusa.org)

Last updated: March 2026

Introducing UNICEF USA's Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Series, which highlights five strategies to help governments center children's best interests and perspectives in decision-making. The series translates research and promising practices into actionable approaches for communities to implement.

CHILD-CENTERED GOVERNANCE BRIEF SERIES AT A GLANCE

Child-centered governance is a transformative, evidence-informed approach to public decision-making on policies, priorities and resource allocations that places the well-being and voices of children at its center. It emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and accountable governance, in which children and young people can meaningfully participate in decisions that affect them, public budgets reflect their needs and priorities, and independent advocates elevate their perspectives.

This brief series draws on extensive review of existing research, international guidance, government reports and promising practices in the U.S. and globally, as well as key informant interviews with practitioners working at the national, state and local levels. Together, these insights point to common strategies for embedding children's voices and well-being into government systems that shape their day-to-day experiences.

This effort to bridge research, policy and practice on child-centered governance was born from UNICEF USA's Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), which unites local stakeholders to create safer, equitable, inclusive and child-centered communities. Launched in the U.S. in 2020, CFCI partners with communities like Minneapolis, MN; Decatur, GA; and Boulder, CO, to demonstrate the potential of child-centered approaches while revealing the need for a broader set of tools that other governments can adopt. Their experiences — together with evidence from global partners — highlight that there is no one-size-fits-all model. However, there are commonalities in what makes child-centered governance strategies effective and efficient to guide decision-making.

Drawing from this evidence and experience, the series highlights five interconnected strategies UNICEF USA promotes to put children at the center of local governance:

- **Youth Councils:** Cities create structured opportunities for young people to engage with local government. These groups connect youth to civic life and provide input on policies, programs, or community issues.
- **Child Impact Statements**: Cities use a process to consider how policies or budget decisions affect children and youth as routine practice used by decision-makers.
- **Children's Cabinets:** Cities bring together leaders from different departments to coordinate services and improve outcomes for children and families. This group is city-led and focused on collaboration across agencies.
- **Children's Budgets:** Cities track and report how much public funding is spent on children and youth across agencies and departments to clearly identify child-related spending within the overall budget.
- **Youth Ombuds Offices:** Cities designate and resource an independent office to advocate for children's well-being and address concerns. This office may investigate issues and recommend actions to improve services and outcomes for youth.

Establishing these structures is an important step, but their impact depends on how they function in practice—including how consistently they influence decisions, how children's and young people's perspectives are considered and, where

appropriate, meaningfully integrated, and how equitably they include diverse communities so that support for children in consistent and not left to chance

Many governments lack a clear roadmap and practical guidance for prioritizing the voices and needs of children in policymaking. Child-centered governance fills this gap by helping governments and partners across the community take more intentional and coordinated action for and with children.

CHILD-CENTERED GOVERNANCE IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Emerging evidence and experience suggest that these strategies, when effectively implemented, help governments design more equitable, effective and responsive systems. While causal links to improved child well-being are still being established, the strategies show clear promise.

Equitable and Responsive Policies: Including children's perspectives and using tools like Child Impact Statements leads to policies that better meet the needs of all children and reduces unintended harms.[1,2,3,4,5]

Effective and Targeted Resource Allocation: Children's budgets and coordinated governance ensure resources are strategically directed, services are tailored to community needs and new funding opportunities are mobilized.[6,7,8,9,10]

Transparency and Accountability: Participatory mechanisms, oversight bodies and public reporting improve governance, track progress toward shared goals and strengthen trust in decision-making.[3,11,12,13,14]

Youth Engagement and Leadership: Participation in governance fosters civic identity, empowerment, leadership skills and social-emotional development, creating pathways for lifelong civic involvement.[15,16,17,18,19]

Community Resilience and Long-Term Child Well-Being: Cross-sector coordination and child-centered governance enhance crisis responsiveness, strengthen communities and contribute to lasting improvements in children's health, education and safety by ensuring support is more connected and consistent over time.[4,5,6,20,21,22,23,24]

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND GETTING STARTED

Child-centered governance is most effective when approached as a coordinated, system-wide effort. While each strategy can be pursued individually, they are mutually reinforcing:

- **Youth Councils** surface priorities that inform **Children's Budgets** or guide **Children's Cabinets**.
- **Child Impact Statements** provide evidence to strengthen decisions made by **Children's Cabinets** or **Youth Ombuds Offices**.
- **Youth Ombuds Offices** monitor whether commitments made through **Children's Budgets** or **Children's Cabinet**s are implemented, reinforcing accountability.
- **Children's Cabinets** coordinate across agencies and strategies, ensuring that youth priorities identified by **Youth Councils** and evidence from **Child Impact Statements** shape policies and budgets.

Communities can start small — engaging youth in policy discussions, creating public-facing budgets to show where funding for children is being spent, or forming cross-agency working groups — and gradually build toward more formal or sustained structures.

The accompanying briefs in this series offer further guidance for local leaders and practitioners, with evidence, case studies, and practical steps to support implementation. Together, they can help governments deepen understanding of how these strategies contribute to more coordinated, child-centered governance; learn from real-world examples; and identify actionable entry points to strengthen local systems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Child and Youth Friendly Governance Project for conducting the literature review and the many experts who generously shared their time and insights through key informant interviews for this research-to-policy series.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM UNICEF USA

UNICEF USA partners with government leaders, youth and key stakeholders to advance child-centered governance—supporting communities to strengthen how decisions affecting children are made so that policies and systems consistently uphold children's rights and improve their well-being.

What's next: UNICEF USA will continue to roll out additional tools, guidance, research, and peer learning opportunities to support municipalities at different stages of their journey.

Sign up for our Communities for Every Child newsletter to stay informed about research, advocacy and child-friendly governance initiatives.

Learn more in our full Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief series: *Children's Budgets • Youth Councils • Child Impact Statements • Youth Ombuds Offices • Children's Cabinets*

For inquiries: Anne Day Leong (research partnerships, aleong@unicefusa.org) • Danielle Goldberg (municipal partnerships, dgoldberg@unicefusa.org)

CITATIONS

1. Kids Impact Initiative. Using Child Impact Assessments in Your Community or State: A Starter Guide. Los Angeles, CA: Kids Impact Initiative; 2021. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://kidsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/cia-dtarter-guide-final.pdf
2. Payne, L. *Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA): A Review of Comparative Practice Across the UK.* London, UK: UNICEF UK; 2017. Accessed September 17, 2025. https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Unicef-UK-CRIA-comparative-review_FOR-PUBLICATION.pdf
3. Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 19 (2016) on Public Budgeting for the Realization of Children's Rights (Art. 4), U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/19. 2016. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/838730/files/CRC_C_GC_19-EN.pdf
4. European Network of Ombudspersons for Children. *ENOC Synthesis Report on Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)*. Strasbourg, France: ENOC; 2020. Accessed September 17, 2025. https://enoc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ENOC-Synthesis-Report-on-CRIA-FV.pd
5. McCall-Smith, K., 2022: Good better best? Human rights impact assessment in crisis lawmaking. The International Journal of Human Rights, 27(9–10), 1326–1344. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2057955
6. Reville, P. The Urgent Need for Children's Cabinets. Harvard Graduate School of Education Usable Knowledge. March 27, 2020. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/20/03/urgent-need-childrens-cabinet
7. Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth & Family Services. Innovating Children's Services: Establishing a Children's Cabinet in Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth & Family Services; 2022. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://pccyfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Childrens-Cabinet-Report-FINAL.pdf
8. Maryland Governor's Office for Children. *Maryland's Results for Child Well-Being 2023 Annual Report (MSAR #12652).* Annapolis, MD: Maryland Governor's Office for Children; 2023. Accessed September 17, 2025. https://gocpp.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/EX-ORD-01.01.2020.01-VI-E-GOCPYVS-Marylands-Results-for-Child-Well-Being-2023-Annual-Report-MSAR-12652-1.pdf
9. Ganguly Thukral, E., Shastri, P. Budget for children analysis: a beginner's guide. Save the Children; 2010. Accessed September 19, 2025. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/budget-children-analysis-beginners-guide
10. OECD. Child poverty in the OECD: Trends, determinants and policies to tackle it. OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 218. OECD Publishing; 2018. Accessed September 19, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1787/c69de229-en
11. Haus, M., Wehner, J., de Renzio, P. (When) Do Open Budgets Transform Lives? Progress and Next Steps in Fiscal Openness Research. International Budget Partnership; May 18, 2022. Accessed September 19, 2025. https://internationalbudget.org/publications/when-do-open-budgets-transform-lives-progress-and-next-steps-in-fiscal-openness-research/
12. UNICEF. Making Government Budgets Deliver Better for Children: A Compendium of UNICEF's Impact on Public Financial Management in Eastern and Southern Africa. UNICEF; 2024. Accessed September 17, 2025. https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/13901/file/Making%20Government%20Budgets%20Deliver%20Better%20for%20Children.pdf
13. de Renzio, P., Wehner, J. The impacts of fiscal openness. *World Bank Res Obs*. 2017;32(2):135–162. doi:10.1093/wbro/lkx004.
14. Gaines, E., Allen, O., Patel, N., Logan, N. State Policy Survey: Child and Youth Policy Coordinating Bodies in the U.S. Summary of Findings. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment; 2017
15. Laurence, J. The Impact of Youth Engagement on Life Satisfaction: A Quasi-Experimental Field Study of a UK National Youth Engagement Scheme. *Eur Sociol Rev*. 2021;37(2):305-329. doi:10.1093/esr/jcaa059

For inquiries: Anne Day Leong (research partnerships, aleong@unicefusa.org) • Danielle Goldberg (municipal partnerships, dgoldberg@unicefusa.org)

16. Ginsberg Center. Well-Being and Civic Engagement. University of Michigan. Published on site. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://ginsberg.umich.edu/article/well-being-and-civic-engagement
17. Matthews, H. Citizenship, Youth Councils and Young People's Participation. *J Youth Stud*. 2001;4(3):299-318. doi:10.1080/13676260120075464
18. Pfefferbaum, B., Pfefferbaum, R., Van Horn, R. Involving children in disaster risk reduction: the importance of participation. *Eur J Psychotraumatol*. 2018;9(sup1):1425577. doi:10.1080/20008198.2018.1425577
19. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). Why Is Youth Civic Engagement Important? Tufts University. Published on site. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://circle.tufts.edu/understanding-youth-civic-engagement/why-it-important
20. Kawashima-Ginsberg, K, Lim, C, Levine, P. Civic Health and Unemployment II: The Case Builds. Washington, D.C.: National Conference on Citizenship; September 2012. https://ncoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/2012IssueBrief_CivicHealth_UnemploymentII.pdf
21. Washington State Legislative Youth Advisory Council. Our Work. Washington LYAC. Published on site. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://walyac.org/ourwork
22. Martin, S., Pittman, K., Ferber, T., McMahon, A. *Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment; 2007.
23. Growing Up Boulder. Boulder's Transportation Master Plan. Growing Up Boulder. Published on site. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://www.growingupboulder.org/boulders-transportation-master-plan.html
24. Bearup, R.S, Palusci, V.J. Improving child welfare through a children's ombudsman. Child Abuse Negl. 1999;23(5):449-457.

Over eight decades, **the United Nations Children's Fund** (UNICEF) has built an unprecedented global support system for the world's children. UNICEF relentlessly works day in and day out to deliver the essentials that give every child an equitable chance in life: health care and immunizations, safe water and sanitation, nutrition, education, emergency relief and more. UNICEF USA advances the global mission of UNICEF by rallying the American public to support the world's most vulnerable children. Together, we have helped save and meaningfully improve more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization. For more information, visit unicefusa.org.

For inquiries: Anne Day Leong (research partnerships, aleong@unicefusa.org) • Danielle Goldberg (municipal partnerships, dgoldberg@unicefusa.org)