

Tips for Meaningfully Engaging Families and Communities in a Post-COVID Landscape

Adapted from Engaging Youth through Arts-based Methods:
A Toolkit for Building Meaningful Engagement in Services for
Children and Youth Impacted by Family Violence¹

Systems were faced to pause during COVID-19. It forced a reckoning in child and youth-serving systems. It revealed flaws in the design and limitations of mandated reporter-driven interventions. It also exposed what is possible when systems provide a space for communities to lead. The pandemic taught us to rebuild and not look back to what was, but to look forward to something better, rooted in community care and co-creation.

This guide is not a checklist or a one-size-fits-all formula. Instead, it's a blue-print or starting guide for reimagining how systems can engage with families and communities in the wake of a public health crisis. These tips are rooted in the lived experiences of families and communities most impacted by the pandemic and are informed by what the pandemic exposed, exacerbated, and transformed. They can be adapted to any current state of events and are as relevant today as they were on the onset of the pandemic.

¹ Johnson, M. H. & Castaneda Acrey, N. (2025). Engaging Youth through Arts-based Methods: A Toolkit for Building Meaningful Engagement in Services for Children and Youth Impacted by Family Violence. Doraville, GA: Caminar Latino..



NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

The National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families (NCAP) is a coalition led by Caminar Latino and includes Ujima: National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, and Futures Without Violence.





Objectives

01

Strengthen authentic partnerships with families/ communities by shifting from compliance-driven engagement to relationship building with *mutual trust*.

02

Center the importance of community-based support roles that are essential partners such as *mutual aid*, *culturally-specific organizations*, and *community leaders*.

03

Foster safe, supportive, and community grounded engagement practices to meet the complex needs that were intensified during the pandemic.



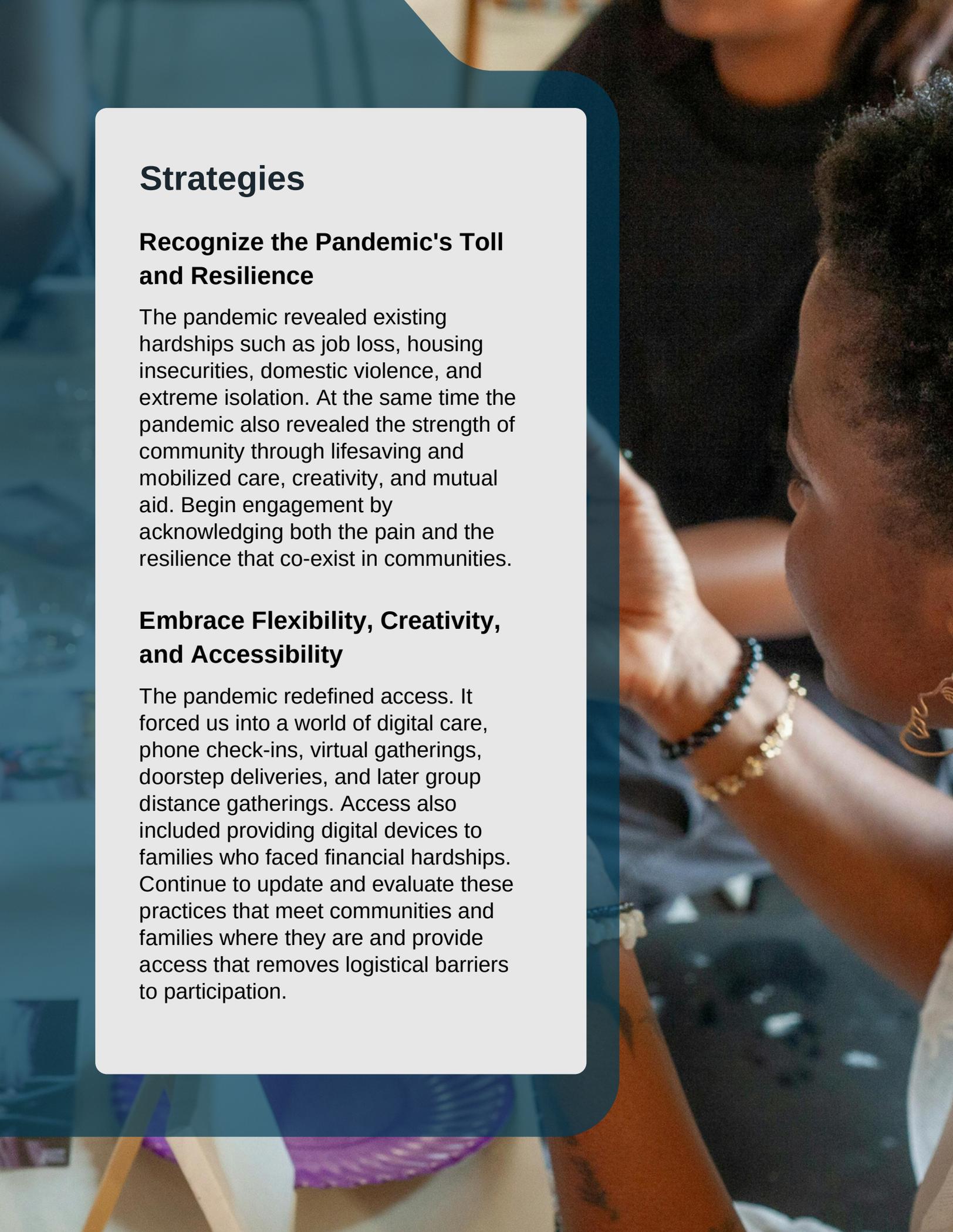
Strategies

Recognize the Pandemic's Toll and Resilience

The pandemic revealed existing hardships such as job loss, housing insecurities, domestic violence, and extreme isolation. At the same time the pandemic also revealed the strength of community through lifesaving and mobilized care, creativity, and mutual aid. Begin engagement by acknowledging both the pain and the resilience that co-exist in communities.

Embrace Flexibility, Creativity, and Accessibility

The pandemic redefined access. It forced us into a world of digital care, phone check-ins, virtual gatherings, doorstep deliveries, and later group distance gatherings. Access also included providing digital devices to families who faced financial hardships. Continue to update and evaluate these practices that meet communities and families where they are and provide access that removes logistical barriers to participation.



Approach Communities with Empathy, Not Evaluation

It's important for systems to offer support and ask what's needed, not offer diagnosis or solutions. Remember, communities always have the answers that best fit their needs.

Center Healing Spaces

Many families and communities continue to navigate the insurmountable grief, loss, trauma, violence, and isolation and are still experiencing the residual trauma of the pandemic. Healing comes in many forms. It goes beyond asking survivors to fill out forms and systems to provide resources. Design your programs that foster healing, joy and resilience. Include storytelling, art, music, movement, play, and space for community and emotional connection.

Go Beyond System-Centered Roles

During the pandemic, grassroots organizations, spiritual leaders, and community health workers filled critical gaps that systems could not fill. These partnerships are not temporary and should be fostered and nurtured beyond the pandemic. They must be resourced, respected and recognized as co-leaders and co-creators of your programming. Compensate them fairly for their expertise, time and trust.

Center Humanity

While there were heightened reports of domestic violence and child welfare involvement during the pandemic, there was an increased over-reliance on mandated reporting and surveillance that exposed harm on families and communities experiencing financial barriers. Shift toward care-based responses that distinguish between poverty and neglect. Approach families as experts, not as cases.

Offer Optional and Meaningful Participation

Families impacted by COVID often face logistical barriers. Ensure that family and community participation and engagement is optional. Make participation meaningful, not mandated. Support participation with resources such as offering child-care, transportation, stipends, or translation/interpretation to support engagement opportunities.

Co-Create and Co-Design with Families

Approach families and community as partners not just as participants. Build your programming with them. Involve parents, caregivers, and community leaders and elders in creating and designing your goals, content, strategy, and evaluation tools. Always respect their time, wisdom and knowledge and engage them in every stage of your programming planning and implementation. For more information, see **Go Beyond System-Centered Roles** tips above.

Start and End Projects with Care

COVID reminded us that abrupt transitions in systems that serve individuals impacted by domestic violence can be harmful. Begin projects with intention and end them with transparency and continued communication. Always share next steps and ways to maintain long-term connections.

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