

2025 Leading for Children

Annual Report

*Resilience
Through
Connection*



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Our Vision

All children birth to five grow and learn in thriving and collaborative communities of empowered and nurturing adults.

Our Mission

Strengthen communities by advancing evidence-based approaches where adults collaborate equitably towards positive outcomes for children.



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Dear Friends,



What a year. As I sit and reflect on where we've been over the past twelve months—and feel the weight of where we stand today, I find myself grounded and inspired. Why? Because over-and-over again, I've witnessed powerful examples of individual and collective resilience. In you, in our communities, and in the countless acts of care and courage across the country, I see the roots of resilience and optimism growing deeper and stronger.

I'm reminded of a story shared by the beloved Fred Rogers. Whenever something frightening happened, his mother would tell him, "Look for the helpers." I've returned to this wisdom often. What is it about the helpers that restores hope, that steadies fear, that calls something forward in each of us? I've come to believe it is connection.

In moments when chaos threatens to overwhelm us, when tragedy brings us to our knees, or when challenges feel bigger than we are, the helpers remind us that we are not alone. They hold up a mirror to our shared humanity when circumstances try to distort it. They bring us back to one another. And in doing so, they awaken our collective strength.

This year, with your partnership, Leading for Children has continued its mission to ensure every child thrives, by strengthening the connections among the critical adults in children's lives. In these shared spaces of learning and belonging, adults come together to listen, to learn, to lean on one another, and to co-create solutions. It is here, in connection, that resilience is not only sustained, but multiplied.

Even as the world around us shifts and, at times, feels uncertain, some truths remain constant. The adults in children's lives matter deeply. Every child deserves to grow, learn, and flourish in a community that sees and supports them. And our shared humanity is the thread that binds us together and carries us forward.

Together, we can continue to be resilient for children, families, and one another.

Before I close, I want to offer my deepest, most heartfelt gratitude. To our donors, whose generosity fuels this work. To our partners, who work alongside us in purpose and action, even on the weariest of days. To our members, who use their resilience to show up with and for children every day with commitment and care. To our dedicated team, whose dedication and perseverance make this mission real. And to our board, whose guidance and stewardship keep us moving forward with clarity and integrity. Thank you. This work is only possible because of you.

In a year that has tested so much, you have been the helpers. You have been the connection. And together, we are building something stronger, more hopeful, and more enduring than any challenge we face. As we look ahead, we invite you to continue being part of this circle of helpers, whether through partnership or support. Together, we can keep nurturing the relationships and resilience that make this impact possible.

With warmth and deep appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nichole Parks".

Nichole Parks
Executive Director

Year in Review



LFC's approach centers humanity in every interaction by cultivating adult agency, equity, and connection. Through facilitation and shared learning, adults lead together with dignity and purpose—so adults and children alike can thrive.

Program Impact

Introductory Workshops

LFC's interactive workshops introduce the Humanity-Centered Approach and spark reflection on relationships, equity, and shared leadership.

At the **McCormick Leadership Connections Conference**, Nichole led a session inviting participants to reimagine leadership as a shared responsibility rooted in humanity and action. Through reflection, dialogue, and hands-on collaboration, early childhood leaders explored how everyday interactions model empathy, courage, and respect - the very values children need to see in the adults around them. Participants left with practical tools for building equitable, trust-based partnerships and a renewed sense of agency to lead with intention. This session reflected LFC's commitment to advancing equity, belonging, and shared leadership across the early learning ecosystem, empowering adults to shape a more compassionate and just future for all children.

In **Las Cruces, New Mexico**, Judy, Jonathan, and Julia guided a humanity-centered workshop in partnership with **HELP New Mexico**, encouraging educators and leaders to ignite a culture of self-empowerment and connection. The group explored how individual agency fuels belonging and supports the adults who care for children, engaging with the Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership and the 11 Simple Rules to build trust, respect, and equitable relationships across teams, families, and communities. The workshop prompted reflection on personal impact, intentionality, and purpose - echoing Jane Goodall's reminder that each day we make a difference and must choose what kind. Attendees left energized, equipped, and inspired to bring humanity-centered practices into daily work and nurture flourishing, equitable communities for both children and adults.

Jonathan guided a dynamic two-day experience in mutual learning and humanity-centered leadership at the **California Early Childhood Mentor Program Statewide Institute**. Through reflective discussions, collaborative exercises, and small-group dialogue, educators explored what children truly deserve along with the meaning of optimistic leadership. The sessions cultivated curiosity, connection, and clarity of purpose, strengthening relationships, deepening collective learning and equipping educators with practical tools to build equitable partnerships, create meaningful impact, and model leadership that helps every child thrive. Attendees left inspired, empowered, and ready to carry their learning experience into classrooms, mentoring, and community work.

Leading for Children's virtual gathering with **Tūtū and Me Traveling Preschool from Hawaii** was a meaningful and uplifting experience that celebrated optimism, reflection, and connection. The session brought educators together to explore what it truly means to lead with intention, humanity, and hope. Through shared storytelling and reflection, members deepened their understanding of optimistic leadership. Together, they paused to set intention, honored the power of their shared experiences, and discovered how optimism can sustain them through uncertainty while strengthening community and purpose. The conversation illuminated the difference between positivity and optimism - seeing optimism as the steady belief in a brighter path ahead, rooted in collective strength and resilience. As one participant reflected, "Optimism is knowing there's a light at the end of the tunnel and looking forward to the light." United by shared culture and values and guided by the Five Commitments, Tūtū and Me educators left grounded in purpose, sustained by community, and ready to continue building a future with humanity at the center.

At the **Mississippi Department of Education Family and Engagement Transition Conference**, Judy inspired participants to see themselves as the models of humanity our youngest children need. With a thought-provoking keynote, the session explored how children learn empathy, kindness, and respect, not from what adults say, but from what they do. Educators and family leaders reflected on how their everyday actions shape children's understanding of trust, exploration, and belonging. The experience reminded the group that each moment of connection is an opportunity to nurture curiosity, confidence, and compassion. Participants left with renewed purpose and practical inspiration to model the values that help every child see hopeful possibilities ahead.

At the **Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA) Conference**, Judy led an energizing and impactful learning experience inviting early childhood educators to reimagine what it means to lead with optimism and humanity. In her keynote, "Humanity Starts With Each of Us: Being the Optimistic Leaders Children Deserve," Judy empowered participants to reflect on how children learn empathy, kindness, and respect by observing the adults around them, and how every interaction is a chance to shape the world we want to create. In the breakout session, "The What, Why, and How of Optimistic Leadership," educators dug deeper into the core commitments of optimistic leadership, discovering how self-awareness, relationship-building, and curiosity can strengthen their daily practice. Interactive discussions and hands-on activities gave participants the space to reflect, practice, and plan for meaningful change within their own communities. The experience left educators motivated and equipped with concrete strategies to lead with purpose and optimism.

Book Study Groups

Rooted in the Mutual Learning Method, Leading for Children's book study groups invited participants into deep exploration of the Five Commitments and 11 Simple Rules through reflection, dialogue, and shared discovery.

Members described fundamental shifts in how they saw themselves and related to others - changes sparked by the intentional co-design of these learning spaces, where safety, curiosity, and shared ownership were central. As participants practiced pausing, listening, co-creating, and capturing insights together, they began to reimagine how they lead, teach, coach, and collaborate. Over time, these ways of being extended beyond the study groups, shaping classrooms, teams, and communities with stronger relationships, deeper empathy, and renewed purpose.

Leading for Children's remote book study groups sparked meaningful learning communities across nine states, equipping 387 early childhood professionals to lead with greater reflection, collaboration, and purpose. Through guided facilitation, participants explored real-world challenges, strengthened their shared commitment to equitable, relationship-centered practices, and built networks of mutual support that continue beyond the final session. The impact reaches far beyond the groups themselves—these educators now shape more responsive and nurturing environments for approximately 5,805 children across Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Hawaii, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, and Pennsylvania. LFC's book study model transforms professional development into sustained, collective growth that endures long after the last discussion ends.

Learning Networks

LFC's Learning Networks are longer-term communities of practice where adults learn with and from one another over time, building coherence and trust across roles.

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In 2025, LFC's program leaders facilitated three state-based learning networks with partners in Arkansas, California, and Pennsylvania, and two national networks that connected participants across multiple states:

- **Optimistic Leaders in Thriving Communities Learning Networks** supported adults in cultivating self-awareness, intentionality, and communication practices that strengthen communities. Through thoughtful conversation, collaborative exercises, and shared learning, members built trust, honored diverse perspectives, and took collective action to support one another and the children they serve. These place-based networks created a ripple effect, where strengthened relationships and shared leadership radiated outward, fostering vibrant, connected communities for both adults and children.
- **Coaching as an Optimistic Leader Learning Networks** supported coaches and other adults impacting children's lives in adopting growth-oriented, collaborative approaches that strengthen relationships and inclusive partnerships. Centering curiosity, collaboration, and Mutual Learning, participants engaged in thoughtful discussion, shared insights, and applied strategies to strengthen how adults lead together for children. These networks sparked continuing change, deepening connections, spreading best practices, and shaping entire communities with intentionality.
- Through the **National Learning Network of Facilitator Fellows**, Leading for Children united educators from across the country to strengthen their coaching practice and explore Optimistic Leadership in action. Monthly sessions integrated the Humanity-Centered Approach and facilitation methods, emphasizing insight, skill-building, and collaboration. As Fellows honed their skills, the momentum of their learning extended beyond the network—coaching peers, embedding Mutual Learning practices, and inspiring systemic change that strengthens communities and supports children's well-being.

Extending the Conversation

An essential part of LFC's commitment to shaping a humanity-centered world is ensuring conversations and resources are accessible beyond program partnerships. Through these resources, all who are curious are invited to reflect, connect, and learn together, strengthening the connections that support resilience.

National Conversations

Nine National Conversations brought together around

150 community members from across the country. Participants gathered with curiosity and a desire for connection—ready to listen, share, and support one another. These spaces nurtured understanding and strengthened the relationships that help individuals and communities grow more resilient.

The Leading for Children Podcast

Across 8 episodes, the Leading for Children Podcast reached 834 monthly listeners and 1,225 total downloads, extending connection beyond program spaces into everyday life. Featuring voices from across the community—parents, educators, administrators, military families, and caregivers—the podcast brought our humanity-centered approach to life through honest stories and practical reflection, highlighting the resilience that grows through shared experience.

The Blog

Across 8 posts, our blog received 2,485 views, offering a space to explore key themes with greater depth and nuance. By weaving together insights from newsletters, National Conversations, podcast episodes, and social media, it deepened reflection and helped connect community members to a shared, evolving conversation.

Impact Insights



This year, Leading for Children partnered with Colmena Consulting to better understand how change happens through the Humanity First Model and Mutual Learning Method by conducting evaluations across multiple projects. A clear pattern emerged: when adults are invited into spaces grounded in trust, reflection, and shared learning, they begin to show up differently — with more confidence, more intention, and more care. Over time, those shifts extend beyond the group itself, shaping how people lead, relate, and build community.



What We Learned Across Projects

Connection Created the Safety People Needed to Find Their Voice

When people felt invited, affirmed, and safe, they became more willing to speak, share, and advocate for themselves. The evaluation found that voice grew not from pressure, but from trust and intentional design.

In one project sample, **65%** of participants identified psychological safety as a key support for growth. In another, **56%** named supportive relationships and **44%** named psychological safety as key contributors to their growth.

Mutual Learning Created Shared Ownership

Mutual learning spaces were described as “a meaningful departure from traditional top-down learning.” Instead of being passive recipients, participants experienced learning as something they shaped together through shared decision-making, peer-led synthesis, and opportunities to contribute in real time.

In one project sample, **51%** of participants identified mutual learning as a key support for growth.

Experiences of Connection Rippled into Communities

The changes participants experienced didn't stay in the room. Many described bringing new ways of listening, leading, reflecting, and relating into their teams, classrooms, families, and organizations. The evaluation found that these ripple effects were most visible in three areas: with children, within teams, and across systems.

Participants described carrying this work forward by:

- Modeling reflective, relationship-centered leadership in teams
- Introducing new language and practices into classrooms and meetings
- Shifting how power, conflict, and difference are navigated in community

“ Reflection isn't something we *do* now. It's how we move through the world. ”

“ This isn't just changing how we work—it's changing how we live. ”

Across projects, Colmena's evaluation affirmed that resilience is built relationally. When people experience trust, shared ownership, and meaningful connection, they carry those practices forward, shaping the spaces and relationships around them.

Story of Impact: *Iris Marin*



Iris Marin

Project Specialist, Marin County Office of Education, Early Childhood Department

My professional journey in early childhood education began without formal training, but with a deep commitment to learning and growth. Over time, through dedication, study, and lived experience, I grew from a classroom teacher into a program leader, supporting multiple classrooms, educators, and families. Throughout this journey, I sought out opportunities to strengthen my practice, including training in anti-bias education and developmentally appropriate practices. These experiences shaped my understanding of inclusion and equity, particularly in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

In my daily work, I applied these learnings by supporting children's social-emotional development, often guiding them to pause, breathe, and regulate in challenging moments. While these practices were meaningful, I later realized that I was often moving quickly, multitasking, and carrying stress. Even while supporting others, I was not always fully present myself.

My participation in the Leading for Children series marked a turning point. Through reflective practices and the Five Commitments, I began to slow down and examine my own impact, how I show up in relationships, communication, and decision-making. I became more intentional

“ I began to slow down and examine my own impact. ”

about pausing, being present, and approaching others with curiosity rather than assumption. This shift was not only professional, but deeply personal. I began to rest better, feel more grounded, and bring a greater sense of calm into my work, and I remain deeply grateful for the leadership, support, and opportunities provided by the Leading for Children team and my MCOE-ECE Department, which helped open doors and shape my growth.

“ I began to rest better, feel more grounded, and bring a greater sense of calm into my work. ”

From my role as a facilitator, I have come to understand that community is built through authentic conversation. Structured invitation formats, such as carousel-style engagement, support this process by creating space where every voice has a place and ideas can move, connect, and evolve collectively rather than remain isolated.

As conversations unfold, I continue to witness how trust and belonging develop over time. Participants not only share experiences but also begin to reflect more deeply on their own beliefs, instincts, and ways of responding. Supported by shared readings and reflective frameworks, this process opens space for greater self-awareness, making visible both strengths and areas of growth.

A recurring awareness emerges in this work: the impact we each have on others. I am continually reminded that our words, actions, and decisions, whether intentional or not, leave a mark. This understanding gently expands our sense of responsibility as educators and as human beings working in relational spaces.

As my internal approach has continued to evolve, so has my leadership. I have moved from focusing primarily on outcomes to intentionally creating spaces for reflection and mutual learning. I structure time for educators to pause, think, and share their experiences, and I support environments where people feel safe to be seen, heard, and respected. I remain attentive to equitable participation so that all voices are included and valued.

Over time, I have begun to notice the effects of this work in a quieter but meaningful way. What began as encouragement, modeling, and leading by example continues to ripple outward. There is a growing sense of trust, openness, and shared responsibility within groups, and I see educators engaging more deeply with their practice and with one another.

I also feel a shift in the emotional tone of the environments I am part of. There is more grounding, more presence, and a slower rhythm that allows space for reflection rather than urgency. A strengths-based approach feels more present now, one that supports educators to pause, listen more fully, and respond with greater intention. In turn, this has contributed to environments that feel more connected and responsive for children and families, where interactions are marked by care, attunement, and calm.

Now, as a facilitator and fellow, I continue to center reflection, presence, and connection in my work. I believe that reflection is the first step in building wisdom, and that meaningful change begins with how we show up, with ourselves and with others. This continues to guide my commitment to supporting equitable, inclusive, and responsive systems for children, families, and educators.

Project Spotlight: *UNM & LFC*

Leading for Children partnered with the University of New Mexico Early Childhood Services Center (UNM ECSC) to support early childhood professionals in building more reflective, connected, and collaborative ways of working together.

Shared Practice Became Shared Culture

Participants described the work as more than professional learning — it became a new way of showing up with one another. Through reflection, shared language, and mutual learning, they built confidence, trust, and alignment that extended into their own teams and communities.

Many shared that slowing down, listening more intentionally, and practicing reflection together helped them lead with more clarity and care — especially during moments of stress or complexity. Over time, those practices became something they could carry into meetings, relationships, and systems serving children and families.



Project Spotlight: *Leading from Strength*

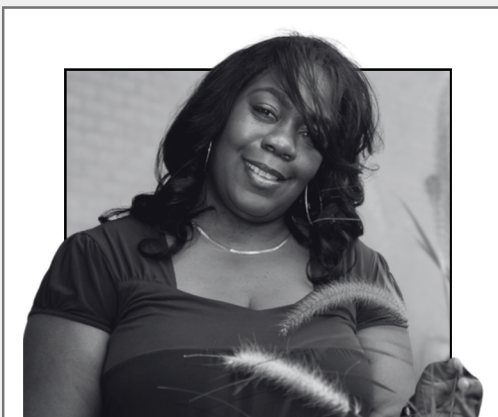
This year, Leading For Children partnered with iSlay Movement to explore how the Humanity First Model and Mutual Learning Method support leadership, self-efficacy, and collective growth among Women of Color. Through the National Leading from Strength Learning Network, a clear pattern emerged: when Women of Color are invited into spaces that honor their lived experiences, affirm their identities, and foster trust through reflection and shared learning, they begin to show up more fully – with greater confidence, agency, and connection. Across monthly conversations and an in-person convening, participants engaged in a consistent arc of intention setting, connection, exploration, and action, allowing the work to remain grounded while also responsive to personal and societal realities. Over time, these experiences not only strengthened individual leadership and resilience, but also expanded how participants advocate, build community, and model possibility for the children, families, and communities they impact.

“ The opportunity to be in a professional space with women of color is not an opportunity I’ve ever had, so I knew that I wanted that to happen. ”

“ Feels like our ancestors had these spaces and that’s how they made it. ”

“ When we don’t have these spaces, the invisible stress of being a black woman and all the expectations on us, all the taking it on the chin that we have to do, all of the internalizing that we have to do, especially if you’re a mother of a black boy. There’s never a day that I don’t worry about him. To have that sense of fear every time they walk out the door. Now you feel it for your daughters. Spaces like the one created help us to acknowledge it and not have to prove it, helps us to cultivate by building resiliency so that we can thrive within the system we live in. We can unclinch. ”

A Story of Impact from Leading from Strength



LaTunja Sockwell
CEO & Founder, iSlay Movement

Before partnering with LFC, I often experienced my work from a place of quiet distance. By nature, I’m shy and tend to feel uncomfortable in professional spaces where I don’t know many people, especially when relationships are already established. Entering those environments could feel intimidating, and I would question how I would be received and whether I truly belonged.

That uncertainty shifted almost immediately through my engagement with LFC. Walking into my first convening, I was acutely aware that I was the “newcomer”—surrounded by

women who already had relationships with one another. I remember wondering how it would go. What happened next was not what I expected at all. I was warmly and genuinely welcomed into the fold from the very beginning. Although I was participating in the role of evaluator, I was treated not as an outsider, but as someone who belonged. That intentional inclusion changed everything.

Throughout the convening, I felt comfortable sharing, engaging, and being fully present. For the first time in my professional life, I experienced what it felt like to be truly “held” in a work setting—to be valued not just for what I contributed, but for who I was. That sense of sisterhood and trust created an environment where meaningful dialogue and authentic connection could thrive.

“ For the first time in my professional life, I experienced what it felt like to be truly “held” in a work setting—to be valued not just for what I contributed, but for who I was. ”

This experience fundamentally reshaped how I approach my work and how I understand leadership. I’ve come to see that strong outcomes are deeply connected to how people feel within a space. Leadership doesn’t have to be loud or performative; it can be rooted in care, intention, and the ability to create environments where others feel safe, seen, and supported.

It’s important to understand that the impact of LFC extends far beyond programs or measurable outputs. This work transforms professional spaces into places of belonging and growth. It empowers women to show up fully, strengthens leadership from the inside out, and creates ripple effects that influence organizations, communities, and systems. Supporting this work is an investment in people—whole people—and that impact is both profound and lasting.

Financials

Statement of Financial Position

As of June 30, 2025

Assets

Current Assets

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Cash | \$430,579 |
| Accounts receivable | \$80,013 |
| Prepaid expenses | \$9,463 |
| Total Current Assets | \$520,055 |

Liabilities & Net Assets

Current Liabilities

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Accounts payable & accrued expenses | \$5,011 |
| Deferred revenue | - |
| Total Current Liabilities | \$5,011 |

Net Assets

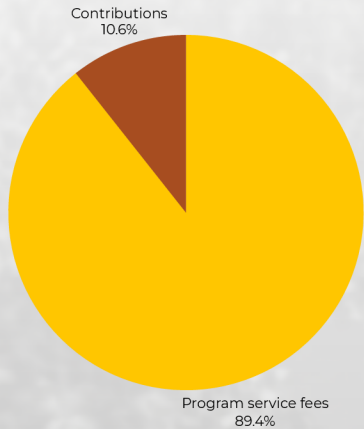
| | |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| Without donor restrictions | \$506,044 |
| With donor restrictions | \$9,000 |
| Total Net Assets | \$515,044 |

Total Liabilities & Net Assets **\$520,055**

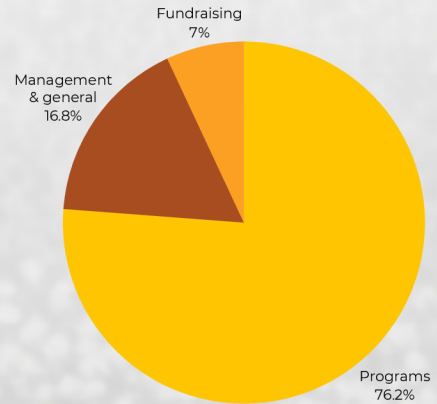


LFC is highly rated as a Four-Star charitable organization by Charity Navigator, meeting and exceeding best practices and industry standards across "Accountability & Finance."

Where Our Money Comes From



Where Our Money is Spent



Support & Revenue

(for the year ended June 30, 2025)

| | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Program service fees | \$950,322 |
| Contributions | \$112,566 |
| In-kind contributions | - |
| Total Support & Revenue | \$1,062,888 |

Operating Expenses

(for the year ended June 30, 2025)

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Program & supporting services | \$801,975 |
| Management & general | \$177,247 |
| Fundraising | \$73,243 |
| Total Expenses | \$1,063,465 |

Source: Leading for Children Financial Statements June 2025 and 2024 audited by CliftonLarsonAllen LLP.

Thank You to Our Donors

We are deeply grateful to our generous supporters who made significant gifts to Leading for Children in 2025. Your partnership made it possible to continue expanding this work—strengthening relationships, supporting adults who care for children, and helping communities grow stronger together.

Alison Masutani
Andrew & Mariama Davis
Ann Hinckley
Barbara Bilello & Vivian Matalon
Carrie Nedrow
Cecilia Baker
Chelsi Jones
Clara Basile
Dana Mason
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Humanity Starts With You