



AFROFUTURISM & SYSTEMS CHANGE

Reclaiming Mental Models for Child Well-Being



NBCDI
National Black Child
Development Institute



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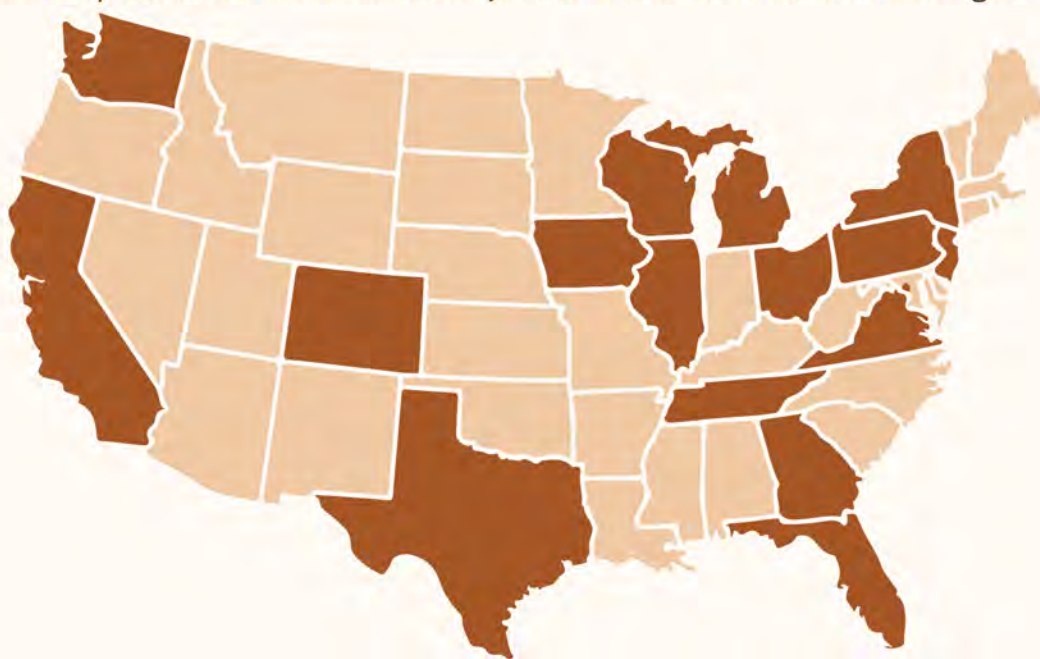
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WHO WE ARE

The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) is a civil rights organization and a preeminent voice for Black children and families. We operate as a **think-and-do** tank both nationally and locally. We **think** imaginatively and collaboratively to actively work to convene critical perspectives that amplify the brilliant strength and wisdom that comes from the knowledge, experiences, and expertise of Black communities. We **do** this work, in service of our mission to improve the quality of life of Black children, from birth to age 8, and of their families by mobilizing movements to drive true systems change. True systems change transforms mindsets, reallocates power, and redesigns underlying structures and processes; it addresses the root causes of what is experienced day-to-day and longstanding patterns of inequity that have been cemented over time.

Our National Village Network is key to who we are as an organization, and to how we do our work. It plays a vital role in informing our strategies and ensuring that our efforts are grounded in the diverse yet unified needs of the Black community. The power **of our network of 23 Villages across 17 states and the District of Columbia** exists within the dynamic leaders who forge powerful and authentic relationships with families, children, and community members. Our Village Leaders develop partnerships at the state and local levels through their deep community work. They address immediate needs via direct services and programs and they drive long-term shifts in policy, advocacy, research, and power building to ignite community-centered movements for justice and Black children's civil rights.





OUR COMMITMENT TO BLACK CHILDREN

Black children are born full of wonder, joy, beauty, and genius and deserve a world that honors this truth. Instead, they are born into a world where anti-Black racism permeates every system and falsely presents Black children as inherently broken and intractably inferior. In many ways they experience this from the day they are born, both directly and indirectly, through the experiences of their families and communities. In fact, research, data, and policies frequently and falsely assert that these experiences are a direct result of Black families lacking the desire or knowledge to be holistically well. NBCDI wholeheartedly rejects this falsification. Instead, for more than 50 years, we have advocated for the civil rights of and justice for Black children and their families, to champion the quality-of-life they deserve but are so often denied. We are mission driven to collectively engineer systems that empower Black children and their families and uproot the systems that have historically, and presently, relied on the oppression of Black people.

Aligned with our core principle of acting together, NBCDI convened our Village Network throughout 2022 and 2023 to identify essential outcomes for the first eight years of every Black child's life. From these convenings, the Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development were imagined and created (Figure 2). Through these Eight Essential Outcomes, we envision an achievable future where every Black child thrives from birth. A near future where every Black child grows up in a world that innately protects and fortifies their access to safe environments to learn and play; their ability to breathe clean air, drink safe water, and enjoy fresh vegetables; and their right to be seen and treated as children in expanding and affirming learning and care settings. We are insistent on these outcomes because they lay the foundation for the future that Black children and families deserve.

THE EIGHT ESSENTIAL OUTCOMES FOR BLACK CHILD DEVELOPMENT®



Our Black Child Development Framework recognizes that the first eight years of a child's life are the foundational period of brain, self-identity, social, emotional, behavioral, and health development.¹ This period of growth and development marks the beginning of a child's ability to understand how the world is structured and their position within it.² Yet, during this critical period, Black children are often subjected to anti-Black racism that seeks to diminish their humanity in relation to other groups by creating qualifiers for what they deserve based on false assumptions about Black families and communities. Our Eight Essential Outcomes are a reclamation of their wellness and well-being. These outcomes are a necessary step toward a future where every Black child is healthy, has a whole childhood, and subsequently a high-quality of life. The Eight Essential Outcomes are the foundation of the reality we envision and intend to build for all Black children in the U.S. and globally. And through these interconnected and holistic outcomes, we are committed to creating new systems that empower Black children and families.



OUR VALUES AND VISION

Our values—equity, justice, and Afrofuturism—firmly anchor our work and vision to advance systems change. They are key to building a world that not only values, but centers Black children, families, and communities. They encompass Pan-Africanism, the concept that people of African descent have common experiences, shared culture, and connected histories.³ Pan-Africanism recognizes that these commonalities draw us together and calls for the global diaspora to combat systems of oppression and colonialism.⁴ NBCDI’s values also draw on the South African philosophy of Ubuntu, which means “I am because we are.” Ubuntu emphasizes that our connected well-being and communal existence rely on interdependence as a community and a society.⁵ Pan-Africanism and Ubuntu are also core to NBCDI’s vision of how we achieve the Eight Essential Outcomes. Our vision rejects white Western cultural norms of rugged individualism that turns systemic issues into oversimplified themes of personal responsibility and individual decision-making.⁶ Embracing Ubuntu, NBCDI does not strive to act as an ivory tower that holds all the answers, but instead as a collective working to imagine, build, and realize a world where every Black child and their family has everything they need to thrive.



EQUITY AS PROCESS

Equity is often described as a goal. However, goals have finite endings, and we see **equity as a continuous process**. It must be monitored, adjusted, and refined in response to the ever-changing socio-political landscape of the United States and the world. A continuous process is necessary to meet the evolving, diverse, and communal needs of Black children and families. And equity is the process through which Black children and families have what they need, as described by their words, with the autonomy and resources necessary to directly meet immediate needs and improve long-standing disparities.



JUSTICE AS THE GOAL

Justice is the goal. Justice centers repair and restoration; in other words, it is the incremental fix of what was damaged, and the rebuilding to a state of completeness. Justice requires an end to ongoing harms and an acknowledgment and accountability to fully heal.^{7,8} We vehemently believe every Black child is born whole, joyful, and worthy of wellness. Yet, the values, assumptions, and mindsets inherent in unjust systems work to diminish those attributes. Justice repairs individually, restores communally, and advances us toward collective liberation. Collective liberation demands freedom from oppression, white supremacy, and colonialism and requires centering those most marginalized and harmed. NBCDI actively envisions and works toward a future of repair and restoration which affirms Black agency, tells the truth about the enduring harms of systemic anti-Black racism, and returns what has been stolen from the Black community. True justice will require both eliminating disparities that drive inequity and uplifting the inherent strengths, assets, and protective factors already within our communities.⁹



AFROFUTURISM AS OUR GUIDE

Afrofuturism guides our work to advance systems change. Every Black child and their family deserves a world where they are healthy, well, and thriving. Afrofuturism is the lens through which we envision a future which affirms Black identity and agency as necessary, not detrimental, to the liberated futures of Black communities.¹⁰ From a systems change perspective, Afrofuturism is the recognition and belief that the systemic changes needed to realize the liberated futures Black people deserve must come from the collective imaginations and vision of Black people. Afrofuturism guides our vision as we mobilize our Village Network and the communities they serve to boldly imagine, demand and build an equitable, just world for all. It informs our strategic efforts to achieve tangible improvements in present U.S. policy while working towards a global society of systems that bolster the full genius, wonder, and beauty of Black children from birth.



COLLECTIVE WORLDBUILDING THROUGH AFROFUTURIST SYSTEM DESIGNS

SYSTEMS THEORY, SYSTEMS THINKING, AND MENTAL MODELS

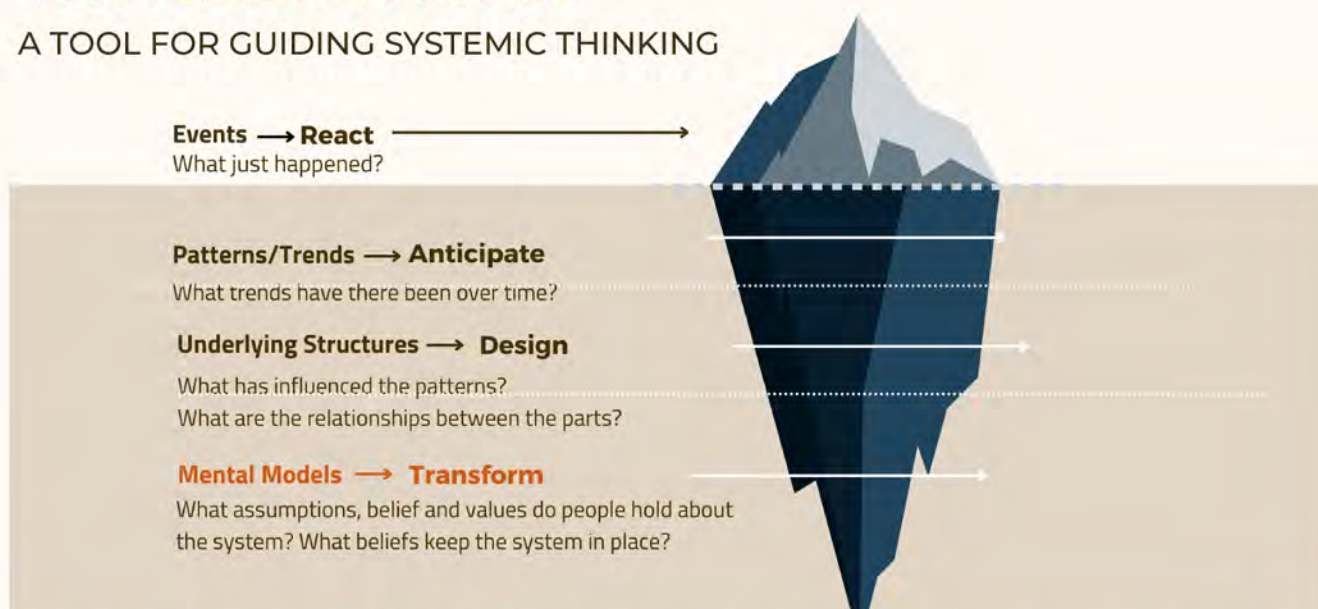
We are anchored in our collective imagining to build a world that has the necessary systems to foster the liberation, health, and thriving of Black people. Worldbuilding is systems change on a broad scale with far reaching transformations of mindsets and structures. While change towards worldbuilding can be incremental, it is also intersectional and recognizes the individual variables and components of a system, how they interact, and how the impacts of those interactions can be compounded on individuals and groups. We work to redesign systems through the lens of Afrofuturism to arrive at a just future for every Black child and family.

Our approach to advancing and achieving the Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development is grounded in systems theory and systems thinking. Both approaches focus on an interconnected context for problem-solving and the belief that individuals are inextricably impacted by the broader institutions, structures, processes, and mindsets around them.^{11,12} This is in direct opposition to reductionist thinking that distills systems into isolated internal factors such as individual choices and behaviors rather than external situational factors that are outside a person's direct control.¹³

The Iceberg Model for systems thinking is a powerful tool that is a practical application of systems theory. It was created by Edward Hall in 1976 and popularized by Peter Senge's work on systems change thinking.¹⁴ The model (Figure 3) depicts four core elements within a broad system or a smaller ecosystem: events, patterns and trends, underlying structures, and mental models. Each of these interrelated pieces create a holistic view and a better understanding of how the **events** we easily see and react to are the result of powerful and deeply rooted, yet often overlooked, **mental models**—closely held assumptions, values, and beliefs. These mental models, shaped by those in positions of power and influence, determine **underlying structures** such as policies, mechanisms for budgeting and allocating resources, implementation strategies, and decision-making processes. In turn, those underlying structures lead to **patterns and trends** over time that we anticipate and react to through visible events and lived experiences we seek to improve.¹⁵

THE ICEBERG MODEL

A TOOL FOR GUIDING SYSTEMIC THINKING



At the top of the iceberg are the disparate events we see and experience that are the focal point of what we react to and seek to improve. For example, the disparate outcome of 1 in 7 Black babies being born with low birth weights of less than 5.5 lbs.—compared to 1 in 13 for all children—**is an event** that sits at the top of the iceberg.¹⁶ However, it is a surface-level event or a single symptom of deeper **patterns and trends** that over time have come to be anticipated, such as higher Black maternal health complications and deaths.¹⁷ In response to those events and patterns, **underlying structures**—such as public policies, programs, and resources—are designed to educate expectant Black mothers about what to eat, the dangers of drinking and smoking, the importance of prenatal visits, and other individual-level interventions. And this is a direct result of **existing mental models** about Black expectant mothers such as, they eat unhealthily, smoke and drink while pregnant, and generally neglect proper prenatal practices due to a lack of knowledge and/or desire to be well. This mental model frames the phenomenon of disproportionately low birth weights of Black babies as the primary result of Black mothers' individual choices, responsibility, and cultural characteristics. These mental models are foundational to underlying structures which are designed to improve individual knowledge and behaviors instead of systemic inequities.

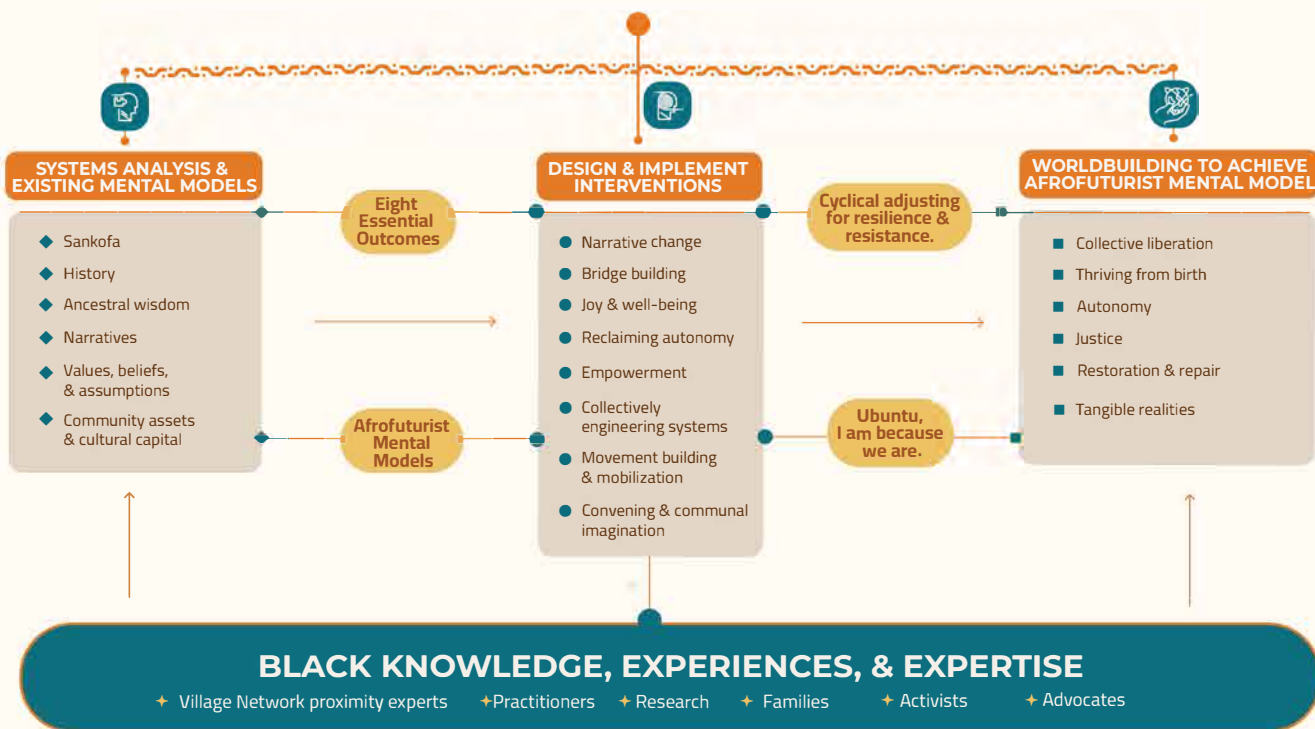
We assert that to improve the well-being of Black children and families, external systemic factors must be clearly identified and fully addressed—rather than being hyper-focused on the personal choices and behavior of individuals. And, perhaps most importantly, systems must be addressed through an Afrofuturist lens from the perspective of those most likely to be harmed but often furthest from the power to ignite change.



NBCDI AFROFUTURIST SYSTEMS DESIGN PROCESS

Our approach to achieving the Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development is through the NBCDI Afrofuturist Systems Design Process (Figure 4) that we are actively implementing across projects and initiatives. This process is tangentially connected to the Iceberg Model for systems thinking but applies an Afrofuturist lens and moves beyond thinking about the interconnected elements within a system to building completely new systems. It is a process created out of necessity to reclaim Black autonomy. Autonomy is required to identify and uproot existing mental models, seed new Afrofuturist mental models into society's consciousness, and collectively develop and implement policy and programmatic interventions through strategic agendas to achieve a blindingly radiant tomorrow.

NBCDI AFROFUTURIST SYSTEMS DESIGN PROCESS®



The Afrofuturist Systems Design Process provides practical applications of systems thinking. It fortifies immediate policy improvements in service of new Afrofuturist mental models that will be required to realize the world Black children and families deserve. There are three core stages of the process, and each stage has guiding principles that act as feedback loops to continuously strengthen the process and ensure alignment. Each stage of the process is rooted in the knowledge, experience, and expertise of Black people. These roots keep us tethered to the diverse yet unified lived realities of Black communities and accountable to advancing a collective vision. In addition to our National Village Network, dismantling anti-Black racism that permeates all systems are invaluable drivers of our Afrofuturist Systems Design Process.

SYSTEMS ANALYSIS & EXISTING MENTAL MODELS

The Afrofuturist Systems Design Process begins with **analyzing the existing system and mining out the mental models** that uphold it. Mental models are the most critical component of any system, they act as the anchor that keeps all parts of the system firmly in place. Mental models are subconscious **narratives** deeply ingrained and subtly formed over time.¹⁸ The **values, assumptions, and beliefs** that form shared mental models are how people with common racial, cultural, and social backgrounds similarly perceive, navigate, and understand the world.¹⁹ Identifying and uprooting mental models of the existing system is crucial because systems change is not possible when mental models remain the same. Mental models are so powerful that when they stay in place structural reforms will eventually revert to the original mental model and will perpetuate the same patterns, trends, and events. Therefore, it is paramount to identify and uncover the shared mental models that serve as the foundation for existing structures such as programs, policies, and institutions that repeatedly fail Black children and families.

Existing systems and the shared mental models that undergird them are not created in a vacuum, they are shaped by **history**, perceptions of events, and the impacts and remnants of that history over time. For Black people, part of that history is rooted in anti-Blackness and the oppression, enslavement, and dehumanization of people of African descent in the Americas. Analyzing the existing system and its mental models is a required stage that uncovers how history has shaped lived realities. It is important to do this to identify the lived realities and false perceptions of those in positions of power and how Black communities have been subjected to and oppressed by that power.

Another part of that history is Black **ancestral wisdom** that presently adds to the depth of **community assets** and **cultural capital**; the inherent knowledge, skills, and abilities rooted in Black culture.²⁰ We must look back at that history to propel ourselves forward through the principle of **Sankofa** to develop new Afrofuturist mental models. Sankofa is a term



originating in Ghana that translates from the Twi language into “go back to gather.”²¹ Sankofa is a reclamation of our true narratives and history while Afrofuturism and the new mental models we are creating are counternarratives. And these narratives must reject deficit framing in favor of centering community assets and various forms of community and cultural capital including navigational (how to maneuver structures and institutions), familial (a sense of kin and community) and resistance (a legacy of opposing systems of oppression through strategic individual and collective behaviors) that will drive us towards new **Afrofuturist mental models** aligned with the Eight Essential Outcomes.²²

SEEDING NEW AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODELS:

Each of the Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development are impeded from becoming a reality due to existing mental models that prevent the creation of necessary systems that can achieve them. Mental models dictate underlying structures based on perceptions about people, what they need and deserve, and whether and how public resources should be used to meet those needs. When those underlying structures are based on false mental models, the resulting resources, policies, and programs will continuously fail Black communities because they perpetuate, instead of fix, root causes. Those failing structures lead to patterns and trends and events that repeatedly harm Black children and families.

Using the Afrofuturist Systems Design Process to identify these mental models and create new Afrofuturist mental models to counter them is essential to building the world that Black children need and deserve. Creating new mental models uncovers and elevates narratives that center the lived realities of Black communities instead of the harmful assumptions, values, and beliefs that are rooted in anti-Black racism, oppression, and white supremacy. Uncovering these mental models has required deep, transparent conversations with Village leaders and other experts to interrogate existing systems that conflict with achieving the Eight Essential Outcomes. The following are the mental models that we believe inhibit the Eight Essential Outcomes from becoming a reality, and the necessary Afrofuturist mental models and systemic interventions that will create the world we are actively imagining and building.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 1



EVERY BLACK
CHILD
IS BORN AT A
HEALTHY
WEIGHT



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

Black babies are born underweight as a direct result of Black mothers eating poorly, smoking while pregnant, and generally neglecting proper prenatal health practices.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

Medical research confirms that the morbidities known to influence low birth weight (prenatal care, nutrition, and maternal lifestyle) fail to fully account for the disproportionality in low birth weights among Black babies and without a designated inquiry into the true reasons for the disproportionality we can not effectively address the issue.



According to the March of Dimes, between 2020 and 2022 an average of 14% of Black babies were born at a low birth weight (LBW) of under 5.5 lbs., compared to 8% of all children.²³ This means they had higher risks of developmental and cognitive delays, infection, and death.²⁴ The existing mental model frames this issue as a direct result of Black mothers eating poorly, smoking while pregnant, and neglecting proper prenatal practices.^{25,26} This mental model is routinely elevated in medical studies, including those that inform policy interventions. This is despite known empirical evidence that individual choices and characteristics elevated as key influences of LBW fail to fully account for Black babies' disproportionate LBWs.^{27,28}

The existing mental model blames Black mothers behaviors instead of fully investigating the problem. As the policies and programs aligned with the incomplete mental model fail to adequately address the higher incidence of LBW among Black babies, it reinforces the false narrative that Black mothers are unwilling to make healthy decisions. To dismantle the existing system, there must be a comprehensive study developed, run by, and centering Black birthing people to uncover the factors contributing to LBW such as stress-induced trauma from systemic racism, interactions with medical professionals, and other detrimental ecological factors. That research must then be used to develop actionable policy solutions that can shift practice, change systems, and improve outcomes.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 2



EVERY BLACK CHILD IS SEEN AS A CHILD



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

Black children are often viewed by the general public as miniature adults who do not need the innocence afforded in childhood nor the access to the necessary protections, allowances, care, and provisions that other children are warmly offered.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

Black children must be afforded the innocence and protection that is inherent to childhood, including protection from racialized trauma, adultification bias, dehumanization, and anti-Blackness.



Black children are often viewed and treated as miniature adults who do not need the innocence afforded nor the access to the necessary protections, allowances, care, and provisions that other children are warmly offered. In fact, Black children are expected to maintain a certain level of resilience in the face of repeated racialized trauma that happens knowingly and unknowingly. The trauma and the expectation of perseverance detracts from the time, space, safety, and security needed to thrive.²⁹ This mental model exists as a remnant of the enslavement of African people who were dehumanized, and Black children were not spared from this fate.³⁰ Today, this takes the form of disproportionate and harsh punishment disguised as discipline including suspension, expulsion, pushout, or isolation, all deep and unsettling forms of education injustice.³¹

Our Afrofuturist mental model holds that Black children must be afforded the innocence and protection that is inherent to childhood, including protection from systems of racialized trauma, adultification, dehumanization, and anti-Blackness. To support our commitment to disentangle and dismantle the many sordid ways Black childhood is erased, NBCDI developed two child-centered narrative frames for shifting the discourse on Black childhood: childhood should be easier and childhood is for being, not becoming. These frames when combined with our Afrofuturist mental model serve as the foundation for building a new conceptual framework for Black childhood so we can collectively work toward a liberated vision where every Black child is seen and treated as a child.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 3



EVERY BLACK
CHILD HAS
BOOKS AND TOYS
THAT REFLECT
WHO THEY ARE
AND CAN BE



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

It is nice for children to see themselves reflected in their books and toys, but not necessary if they have access to books and toys generally.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

In the first eight years of life, where learning resources are primarily books and toys, it is critical for Black children to have access to culturally affirming, responsive, reflective, and phenotypically accurate learning materials.



Children's access to phenotypically accurate and positive reflections of who they are in their learning materials—primarily books and toys in the first eight years—is key to understanding their significance in the world, promoting engaged learning, and forming a positive self-identity.^{32,33} However, the existing mental model is that Black children having such reflections is nice but not necessary. And instead, learning materials should remain objective and who's centered or represented should not matter. In turn, the scarcity of positive, phenotypically accurate, diverse experiences of Black children in books and toys keeps the existing system in place because it inaccurately affirms that these materials are not widely available because of perceived controversy and a preference for objectivity.³⁴

Ignoring the need for Black children to see themselves represented as equitably as their non-Black peers perpetuates the developmental harms done to their self-identity, self-perception, and academic capabilities. Our Afrofuturist mental model asserts that Black children need culturally affirming, responsive, reflective, and phenotypically accurate learning materials that promote positive self-perception and foster a true sense of belonging and engagement in their learning and care environments. Dismantling the existing system that undermines this importance for Black children must be met with abundant access and amplification of such materials.



ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 4



EVERY BLACK CHILD ENJOYS MEALS WITH VEGETABLES



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

Black families do not eat healthily simply because they have not learned the importance of doing so.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

Black families must have the autonomy, power, and resources necessary to make decisions about what foods are available, where they can be accessed, and what is affordable.



Access to affordable vegetables, rich in vitamins and nutrients, is critical for a child to develop essential neural pathways, build strong immune systems, grow healthy teeth and bones, and have the energy needed to focus and retain knowledge.^{35,36,37} Conventional thinking holds that Black families do not eat healthily simply because they have not learned the importance of doing so.^{38,39} As a result, public intervention to improve the Black health index typically relies heavily on education and awareness campaigns about what to eat, portion size, and how to cook.⁴⁰

The existing mental model that Black families don't eat healthily because they simply don't know how or prefer unhealthy foods holds the current system in place by diverting advocacy efforts from where they should be—a focus on making vegetables affordable and easily accessible—to an overabundance of education programs about the importance of healthy eating. In reality, what sits on the plate in Black homes is a direct result of the lack of access to affordable healthy foods for Black families. Therefore, Black families must have food sovereignty—the autonomy, power, and resources necessary to make decisions about what foods are available, where they can be accessed, and what is affordable.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 5



EVERY BLACK CHILD HANGS OUT ON A SAFE AND APPROPRIATE INTERNET



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

Parental control and supervision are the primary factors in maintaining children's safety and digital literacy within the existing landscape.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

Black children's safety in the existing digital landscape requires a framework grounded in digital inclusion that includes algorithmic ethics, integrity, and the banning of harmful technology as additional considerations to fully mitigate the systemic disadvantages Black children already face.



The existing mental model around digital safety for Black children is primarily dependent on appropriate parental controls and supervision. Yet there is an increasing use of technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) in child care settings and schools, places outside of the purview of parents. AI is powered by algorithms which require data banks with unimaginable sums of personal information, student records, GPS locations, and other external historical data to operate effectively.⁴¹ Due to algorithmic biases, the uninhibited use of AI can and will cause more harm to Black children. For example, biased data used to power AI could disproportionately recommend Black children for suspensions and expulsions, overlook them for talented and gifted programs, or incorrectly identify them as having learning or developmental delays.

If Black children are unable to safely use technology in ways that appropriately include their lived experiences, respects their privacy, and mitigates biases, it follows then that AI-powered digital environments—from which learning and development tools emerge—have the potential to exacerbate systemic oppression and discrimination at scale. Our Afrofuturist mental model contends that Black children's safety in the existing digital landscape requires a framework grounded in digital equity and literacy. It must include pathways and processes to fully mitigate the systemic disadvantages Black children face through specific considerations for the holistic development of each tool—from design to delivery.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 6



EVERY BLACK CHILD LIVES AND PLAYS IN A SAFE COMMUNITY



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

The harm and lack of safety Black children and families experience is a result of what they do to themselves and each other.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

There are four interconnected categories of safety that are particularly salient to Black children: discipline, learning, existential, and interpersonal safety. Black children must be safe from the systems, narratives, and people that threaten the security they need and deserve so they can be free to learn, grow, explore, thrive, and be.

The existing mental model around safety for Black children and families is that their lack of safety is primarily because of what they do to themselves and each other. This underlying belief is the chief design principle for decades of strategies that center on teaching Black people the behaviors and attitudes that might avail emotional identification, regulation, and emancipation. Though useful, these efforts on their own regularly fall short of their intended objective because of a defective mental model that relies on anti-violence campaigns, increased police presence, and other measures that exacerbate violence and criminalize Black communities, keeping the existing system firmly in place.^{42,43,44}

Within Black children's care and learning environments, which are extensions of their community, safety is narrowly defined from the perspective of those disconnected from Black communities. And this disconnect means the salient safety needs of Black children are confined and shaped by the current mental model. As such, child care and school safety standards do not encompass the specific safety needs of Black children and that impacts their collective consciousness and perceptions about safety. This lack of perceived safety and impending harm inhibits all other forms of safety in those settings. Ultimately, this disrupts Black children's sense of belonging in their learning and care environments. Black children must be "safe" from the systems, narratives, and people that threaten the security they need and deserve so they are free to learn, grow, explore, thrive, and be. NBCDI has identified four interconnected categories of safety that are particularly salient to Black children: discipline, learning, existential, and interpersonal safety. Within each of these categories we are working to name the specific accommodations necessary to meet the distinct needs, attributes, and historical context of what safety means for Black children.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 7



EVERY BLACK CHILD HAS THE RIGHT TO BREATHE CLEAN AIR AND DRINK CLEAN WATER



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

Barring an unexpected and unavoidable public health crisis at scale, every U.S. citizen has access to clean air and water.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

Black children and families will only be afforded reliable access to clean and safe air and water when both are considered as a civil right and infrastructure is redesigned to meet this expectation.



Lead exposure during the prenatal period and in the first six years of a child's life has crucial health consequences including brain and nervous system damage, underdeveloped growth, and difficulty regulating emotions.⁴⁵ And children who are chronically exposed to air pollution have an increased likelihood of asthma, respiratory infections, and allergies. For Black children, this exposure has meant they are more likely than any other group of children to have asthma and are disproportionately exposed to lead and other water pollutants.^{46,47} The existing mental model is that access to clean air and water is a right, and that if there are crises, communities would be made aware—like in Flint, Michigan, and Jackson, Mississippi. This mental model exists because of the lack of knowledge of how historically, anti-Black systemic racism has created deep inequities in the water systems and air quality of Black neighborhoods.⁴⁸ The remnants of that history—decisions of where to put highways, industrial plants, and community zoning laws—are present today and have created a false sense of security that the water crises in Flint and Jackson or that the polluted air of “cancer Alley” in Louisiana are unfortunate isolated events.^{49,50}

Historic and present-day systemic environmental injustice has led to disinvestment and reactionary policies instead of proactive repair and maintenance of water systems and air quality. This reactionary governance is compounded by inequitable dispersal of federal funds within states at the local level, which worsens these issues in Black neighborhoods.⁵¹ The lack of clean air and water experienced by Black communities can only be fixed by redesigning and regulating these industries and to prioritize air and water as a civil right that offers equal protection under the law.⁵² This will create a codified system of accountability to proactively provide federal funding to implement policies to address the discrimination causing environmental injustice in Black communities.

ESSENTIAL OUTCOME 8



EVERY BLACK CHILD ATTENDS A SCHOOL THAT AFFIRMS AND EXPANDS THEM



EXISTING MENTAL MODEL

School curriculums should never be political, controversial, or divisive, and that if they were to fulsomely address Black history, culture, experience, and identity, they would be.



AFROFUTURIST MENTAL MODEL

No school or care setting can hope to affirm or expand a Black child without centering the true story of their people in their learning and care and this must be done in a way that intentionally acknowledges and repairs the historical and present-day harm Black children experience.

The existing mental model contends that school curriculums and pedagogy should not be political, controversial, or divisive; and if they were to fulsomely address Black history, culture, experiences, and identity, they would be. This mental model is reductive, it harms Black children; deters policies, practices, and training from being culturally responsive; and is a direct form of education injustice.⁵³ The mindset that curriculum, standards, pedagogy, quality, safety, and all aspects of care and learning must be race-neutral keeps the existing system in place by stigmatizing Black identity as inherently political.

Our Afrofuturist mental model asserts that school and care settings cannot affirm or expand a Black child without centering the true story of our people and acknowledging and seeking to repair the historical and present harms they experience. Black children need to learn in environments that are designed to celebrate who they are individually, and as a people. In fact, all children will be affirmed and expanded when their experience and learning is substantiated by the beauty of Blackness, and the astounding feat that is the history of Black people, globally and domestically. NBCDI's Afrofuturist mental model provides the necessary foundation to build a new system because it vehemently rejects the belief that Black identity is controversial.

DESIGN & IMPLEMENT INTERVENTIONS

Next, the Process focuses on **designing and implementing interventions**. Interventions **build the bridge** between the existing system and its mental models and the world that realizes and centers the Afrofuturist mental models that support the Eight Essential Outcomes. Afrofuturist mental models will require new values, perceptions, and beliefs about Black children and families. At their core, mental models are narratives. However, people of African descent have historically been stripped of the power and autonomy to shape the narrative of who they are, who they have been, and who they can be. Systemic interventions that move us toward worldbuilding require deep narrative change to shift the negative dominant narratives rooted in existing mental models. Therefore, interventions must focus on reclaiming autonomy to assert narratives that focus on **Black joy, well-being, and empowerment**—narratives not entangled with capitalist values tied to the labor status or productivity potential of Black children and families. This distinction is important because NBCDI is committed to the health and wellness of Black communities without any additional qualifiers.

Fostering narrative change and designing and implementing interventions takes place through **convening**. NBCDI convenes experts—those with practical and/or technical knowledge—at the local, state, and national levels. These experts work to advance policy, research, and advocacy across the Eight Essential Outcomes. Through these convenings, the voices that are chiefly important are those of our National Village Network. Our Village Network is comprised of Village Leaders and community members with deep experiential and technical knowledge. The knowledge of our Village Network is rooted in their individual and collective experiences. These roots have created the critical perspectives necessary to engage in **communal imagination** to conceive of, demand, and build the world Black children and families deserve. We name and honor the proximity expertise of our Village Network in echoing the sentiment that those closest to the problem have the vision necessary to identify the right solutions.

Through this stage of the Afrofuturist Systems Design process, NBCDI will rely on **movement building** and **mobilization** of our National Village Network and our partners as the strategy to **collectively engineer systems change**. Movement building is an amalgamation of strategies that center collective community power and knowledge building, organizing, advocating, and



mobilizing to affect long-term transformative change.⁵⁴ NBCDI views movement building as something that happens from the bottom up. It must be from the bottom up so those closest to the problems can identify the necessary solutions and reclaim power to address those problems through adequate resources to support community-based solutions. Movement building is also horizontal, as it requires strategic partnerships and coalition building that recognizes the interconnectedness of ecosystems that create broader systems. It harnesses the power of mobilizing—gathering around a common issue to affect change— across issues by connecting broader common goals for a common good and centering those who have the greatest potential to be harmed but are furthest from power. While NBCDI believes movement building and mobilizing must begin on a local scale we always do it with an eye towards affecting global change.

Moving from designing and implementing interventions to worldbuilding will require cyclical periods to **adjust for resistance and resilience** that aligns with the **Ubuntu** philosophy—our connected well-being and communal existence. These cyclical periods of adjustment are necessary to ensure the overarching process is flexible and responsive to needs within the current socio-political landscape without being constrained by the limitations of the existing system. Resilience is the ability to navigate everyday systemic and interpersonal adversity and conflict through coping strategies, such as filling the gap of systems failures through community assets, to persevere.⁵⁵ However, to avoid the harms associated with long-term resilience within oppressive structures and institutes, resilience must be balanced with resistance.⁵⁶ Resistance is the direct and indirect opposition to oppressive systems of injustice. Resistance is inextricably linked to the Black identity. Black people have exercised resistance in a number of ways, from centering joy and protesting to creating community systems to circumvent the harms of public policies. Worldbuilding requires these periods of adjustment to allow space to rest, reimagine, and build collective power to achieve our Afrofuturist mental models.

COLLECTIVE WORLDBUILDING THROUGH AFROFUTURISM SYSTEMS DESIGN

The final stage of the Afrofuturist Systems Design Process is the work of worldbuilding to achieve new Afrofuturist mental models. This stage of worldbuilding is done incrementally because of the changes from the interventions in the previous stage. The individual interventions and the collective work of convening, imagining, narrative change, and engineering systems is how we will build the world where every Black child thrives from birth. Each intervention and the resulting outcome it is meant to advance will act as a building block we will use to engage in worldbuilding.



WORLDBUILDING

Worldbuilding is a term that is closely associated with writing literature and storytelling. It is a practice that goes beyond simply describing places and people, to creating intricate details that allow readers to immerse themselves in a new fictional reality. NBCDI, our Village Network, members, and partners will engage in worldbuilding of new realities that can support the Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development. These outcomes are the baseline of what every Black child needs to thrive over the first eight years of life. We set these as the baseline of what we demand for Black children because they encompass key ecosystems of a child's life during the most critical period of development and anything less is unacceptable.

The work to seed new Afrofuturist mental models that align with the Eight Essential Outcomes will allow us to cultivate **tangible realities** through structural changes. These changes will center **restoration and repair** as a pathway to **justice** and **collective liberation**. The structural changes that the new Afrofuturist mental models support will redistribute power and resources and will ensure that Black communities have the **autonomy** to decide what those resources are, how they are used, and how they can be accessed. Such structural changes will lead to new patterns and trends that foster joy, well-being, empowerment, and centering community assets.



CLOSING ASSERTIONS

NBCDI is driven by its mission to improve the quality of life for Black children birth through age eight and their families. Every Black child and their family deserve to be healthy, well, and thrive but the world we live in does not have the necessary systems in place for this to be a reality. To move closer to that reality, NBCDI and our Villages created the Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development to provide the baseline of what Black children need in the first eight years of life. Our values—equity, Afrofuturism, and justice—anchor us to what we want to see reflected in that reality. And the Afrofuturist Systems Design Process is how we will move towards that reality; collectively, boldly, and unapologetically.

Through our Afrofuturist Systems Design Process, each outcome will be connected to systems interventions to create pathways to advance policies and practices that identify and dismantle existing mental models. By highlighting the necessary Afrofuturist mental models and identifying aligned interventions, Black children will have the support, protection, policies, and resources they need to thrive. The collective Afrofuturist vision we are bringing to fruition will mean that Black children will be afforded the future they have always been worthy of but have been so severely cut off from experiencing. NBCDI ignites and leads justice-focused movements to create systems change by advancing policy and other structural changes that improve and uphold the civil rights and well-being of Black children and families. The Afrofuturist Systems Design Process creates a distinct and clear framework around which to mobilize our Village Network and the communities they serve, in order to imagine and create the equitable and just world we foresee.

This work must be collective, however, and will require broad and deep partnerships, collaborations, and monetary support. There are several ways to join NBCDI as we advance these outcomes through interventions that begin the work of shifting from the existing mental models to Afrofuturist mental models. In the spirit of our principles of collective thinking, communal imagination, and collaborative worldbuilding we will not do this work in isolation. We are instead creating and convening groups to work together in service of building the world we are demanding for Black families and children. In 2025, grounded in our Afrofuturist Systems Design Process, NBCDI will launch the Commission on Black Child Safety; a Task Force on Black Infant & Maternal Health; a Roundtable on Clean Air & Water; and the inaugural Book, Toy common & Media Awards. We are also using the Afrofuturist Systems Design Process to update our signature programs like the Family Empowerment Program, Good For Me, and Read to Succeed. We call upon those committed to the well-being and thriving of Black children to join us in this work to advance systems change through worldbuilding to achieve new Afrofuturist mental models that can support the Eight Essential Outcomes.

GLOSSARY

Adultification is the flawed perception and treatment of a child as if they were older than their age. It is a practice that includes attributing adult characteristics, capabilities, and motivations to a child, resulting in negative judgment of their behaviors and holding them accountable at a maturity level that exceeds their age and developmental stage.

Adultification bias refers to the discriminatory perception of Black children being more likely to be seen as older than their age than other children of the same age, therefore requiring less nurturing and protection.

Afrofuturism is a perspective that envisions the future and alternative realities through a Black cultural lens, encompassing the experiences of people from the African continent and its diaspora. It holds that Black identity, agency, and freedom can be achieved and envisions liberated futures for Black communities.

Afrofuturist Mental Model refers to the conceptual frameworks that combine elements of African culture, history, and futurism. These models serve to reimagine the future through an African diasporic lens, challenging dominant narratives, and providing space for alternative visions of progress and development.

Algorithm is a set of instructions—designed by people—in the form of rules that computers use to complete a specific task, answer a question, or solve a problem. Algorithms are used to solve complex problems, identify patterns, and make predictions.

Anti-Black racism is a systemic and pervasive form of racism that dehumanizes and marginalizes Black people by falsely portraying them as inherently inferior and fundamentally broken. Anti-Black racism permeates societal structures, policies, and cultural norms, shaping inequitable experiences and outcomes for Black children, families, and communities from birth. This ideology distorts truth and denies Black children the dignity, wonder, and full humanity they deserve.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human intelligence and problem-solving capabilities. In computer science, artificial intelligence includes using algorithms to simulate decision-making processes of the human brain. Over time and with enough data,



AI can learn from available data to create predictions and classifications based on those predictions.

Birthing people is a gender-neutral term referring to all individuals who give birth. It is inclusive of persons who identify as women, non-binary, or other gender identities.

Child-Centered Narrative Frames refers to the prioritization of children’s well-being, rights, and perspectives in discourse and policymaking. They address racial disparities, ensuring Black children receive the same freedoms and protections they deserve. By focusing on the needs and experiences of all children, these frames challenge systemic issues and promote new ways of talking about and valuing every child.

Family Empowerment Program (FEP) is an NBCDI-led program designed to guide and coach parents and caregivers using a strengths-based approach that honors the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of families of color. NBCDI’s FEP aims to build the capacity of parents and caregivers, empowering them to become effective leaders and advocates for their families.

Food justice is the right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. The food justice movement addresses disparities in food access, particularly for communities of color and low-income communities, by examining the structural roots of our food system.

Food sovereignty is the right of people – especially farmers – to define their own agricultural and food systems. It demands that policies and mechanisms involved in production, distribution, and consumption of food focus on creating ecologically sustainable systems and healthy lives for people, rather than profits for corporations.

Food security refers to consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. It includes the availability of nutritious and safe foods that can be acquired without resorting to socially unacceptable practices, such as scavenging.

Good for Me! is an NBCDI-led, culturally relevant, health and wellness program that promotes healthy nutrition and fitness for Black families. Good for Me! engages children three to five years old in healthy eating and physical activity by introducing them to a diverse range of fruits and vegetables, hands-on activities, and active play.



Institutional is a characteristic of a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture. In the context of race, institutionalized racism refers to policies, practices, and norms that limit access to societal opportunities, goods, and services based on race (e.g., redlining).

Intervention refers to the actions taken to effect systems change related to knowledge, decision-making, and resources through the implementation of guidelines, training, and practice activities.

Maternal health is the health of women before, during, and after pregnancy, including preconception and the first year after childbirth. This includes physical, emotional, and mental health. The goal of maternal health is to ensure that women and their babies are healthy and well, and that the experience of motherhood is positive and fulfilling.

Maternal morbidities refer to any health condition attributed to or aggravated by pregnancy and childbirth that negatively impacts a woman's well-being. This encompasses a range of health problems, including both short and long-term complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth.

Mental models are an interrelated set of beliefs that shape how a person forms expectations for the future and understands the way the world works. These thought processes can also shape how an individual thinks about or understands how something or someone does, can, or should function in the world.

National Village Network is made up of local on-the-ground organizations and community leaders who are committed to advancing NBCDI's Eight Essential Outcomes for Black Child Development. In their local communities, Village leaders engage, mobilize, and advocate to improve the lives of Black children and their families.

Proximity expert refers to individuals closest to a system, issue or problem who are most knowledgeable about its workings due to their "lived experience." Parents, families, educators, and other community members are increasingly engaged by researchers and leaders of systems change to inform the development of responsive policies, programs, and services.

Pushout refers to the education system's disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, among Black children. This discriminatory practice limits Black children's engagement in learning and results in lower academic achievement and lower high school completion rates.



Afrofuturism and Systems Change

Read to Succeed (R2S) is an NBCDI-led program designed to promote early literacy and language development by supporting families with young children in establishing home libraries with culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate children's books and supplementary resources.

Sankofa is a term originating in Ghana that translates from the Twi language into "go back to gather." It speaks to the importance of the global history of Black people in how we navigate toward the future.

Systemic racism refers to the processes and outcomes of racial inequality and inequity that permeates a society's institutional structures, social structures, individual mental models, and everyday interaction patterns. Operating at multiple levels, it can emerge with or without intent to harm or awareness of its existence. Its power comes from being integrated into a unified system of racial differentiation and discrimination, influencing opportunities and outcomes across generations.

Systems Change is a fundamental shift in practices, underlying values, or norms by local actors that reshapes policies, processes, relationships, and power structures. By directly engaging with structural barriers, systems change addresses the sources of deeply entrenched racial and socioeconomic inequities, helping people with low incomes and people of color to overcome poverty.

Ubuntu is the South African philosophy meaning "I am because we are." It emphasizes interconnected well-being, communal responsibility, and collective action. It challenges individualistic approaches that blame systemic issues on personal responsibility.

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