



Families Supporting Families

Movement improves child outcomes by helping families help themselves

With a generic name and a concept borrowed from 19th Century social reformers, the family support movement has established itself as an effective approach to strengthening at-risk families and, in turn, making it more likely that their children will enjoy brighter futures.

The idea is to offer families a place where they can find the support they need within their own neighborhoods, tailor what family support centers offer to what the families themselves say they need most, and give families and the communities in which they live a strong voice in shaping and implementing policies and activities.

Although a handful of studies of family support efforts nationwide report mixed findings, the network of family centers in Allegheny County – one of the oldest and largest family support movements in the nation – has earned high marks for contributing to important outcomes, such as children being better prepared to enter school, improved parenting skills among adults, and fewer repeat pregnancies among teenaged mothers.

New Twist On Old Idea

The idea of establishing neighborhood centers focused on building communities by strengthening the children and families that live in them was first practiced in England in the late 19th century and became known as the Settlement House movement. Social reformers soon after put the concept to use in major U.S. cities, opening such settlements as the Hull House in Chicago and the Irene Kaufmann Settlement in Pitts-

burgh's Hill District, which mostly served immigrant populations.

Family support, begun less than two decades ago, borrows from the basic Settlement House concept. Neighborhood centers are established in at-risk communities, participation is voluntary, and an array of services and activities are offered to encourage self-sufficiency and growth.

The movement is based on the fact that all families need support at some time or another, including emotional support and access to information in addition to such needs as adequate housing, food, and clothing. Family support also embraces the notion that the influence of the family on a child's life cannot be overestimated.

It breaks from traditional social service philosophy in several ways. Family support, for example, takes a prevention-based approach and seeks to build on the strengths of families rather

Like the Settlement House movement a century earlier, family support centers nestled in poor neighborhoods offer families places where they can build on their strengths and find a helping hand, whether its child care they need or a few tips on how to write a resume.

than focus on their shortcomings. Families themselves are urged to be active in their centers, from taking part in assessing what is most needed in the community to developing ways to address those needs. Staff are often parents from the neighborhood.

In Allegheny County, centers are governed by parent councils and family support parents routinely organize to take their insights and ideas to state and local government officials.

An important aspect of family support is the ability of centers to be flexible and adapt to specific neighborhoods. Core services typically include social support, such as peer support groups; parent-child activities; recreational programs; drop-in programs; educational opportunities in which information on child development, personal growth, and family relationships is provided in informal and structured group settings; skill-building resources,

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The Principles Behind Family Support

- Governed by, designed by and improved upon by families and other members of the community.
- Embraces a relationship-based approach that encourages partnerships among parents, peers, and professionals.
- Tries to build on the strengths, rather than the deficits, of families and their neighborhoods.
- Tailored to the specific needs and priorities of families; promotes collaboration among agencies.
- Reflects and enhances the culture of the neighborhood through the staff it hires and activities offered.
- Services are refined through ongoing evaluations designed to continuously improve programs.
- Centers and services are based in the neighborhoods of the families they serve.
- Programs are intended to serve the entire families; participation is voluntary.

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such as job and literacy training; early developmental screening; home visits; community referral; and follow-up.

Allegheny County Experience

One of the nation's largest and most established networks of family support centers is found in Allegheny County, where 31 centers serve nearly 2,400 adults and more than 5,000 children.

These centers, financed by a mix of public and private dollars, operate around a common set of principles aimed at promoting healthy child development and helping families achieve financial and psychological self-sufficiency.

Studies conducted over the past five years suggest the western Pennsylvania family support movement is making a difference in the lives of the families who participate.

One study, for example, reported improved developmental outcomes among children enrolled in 10 family

support centers in Allegheny County. The study found that not only did children who were functioning below their chronological ages at initial assessment make significant improvement in their developmental functioning, but children who were functioning on par with their chronological ages made significant gains as well.¹

An earlier evaluation of 22 Allegheny County family support sites reported outcomes such as improved school readiness among children; improved parenting skills among adults; parents setting goals and achieving them; parents pursuing education and job training; and fewer housing problems besetting families.

More recently, an evaluation by a panel of national experts in 2000 reported that among the strengths of the Allegheny County family support network is a "critical mass of engaged parents" who participate in their centers, the movement, and as advocates for issues important to children and families.

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references

This report was largely based on information from the following sources:

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