



HIGHLIGHTED RESULTS FROM FINAL ROUND OF PARENTING PARTNERSHIP INTERVIEWS

During the 2007-09 grants cycle, the Community Grants Initiative offered a “partnership” program focused on parenting support and education services. Six community agencies participated in the parenting partnership. As part of the evaluation of the partnership, three sets of interviews were conducted with grantees over the course of the grant cycle. The third, and final, set of interviews was conducted during June and July 2009. This document summarizes the results from those interviews.

The purpose of the final set of interviews was to solicit feedback from participants about the partnership program and to gather information that would supplement other data sources, on the extent to which the goals of the partnership program had been met (see attachment for the interview protocol). The main goal of the partnership was to increase the use of best or promising practices. The partnership also sought to build supportive relationships among community agencies and enhance community leadership regarding promising practices.

Each grantee agency was interviewed separately by a First 5 Alameda County (F5AC) evaluation specialist. Between 1-3 individuals from each agency participated in the interview. All of the interviews were conducted in person. The interviews were around 50-90 minutes in length.

IMPACT OF THE PARTNERSHIP ON PARENTING SUPPORT AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The grantees were asked if participating in the partnership had changed their understanding of best or promising practices. Most said that they were already familiar with best practices regarding parent education and support, but some learned more about best practices for children’s programs. For those who were already familiar with best practices, the partnership helped by providing a language to discuss promising practices with their staff. It also helped that the co-facilitators provided a promising practices “matrix” that grantees could use to assess their programs in a systematic way.

I don't know if [the partnership has]...changed our understanding [of promising practices] but it has probably... [expanded] it and it has given us...a specific...checklist to go by which is helpful. Yet, it makes it really challenging because...you look through it and you're thinking, 'Oh my goodness, we're not doing this, and we're not doing that'. But it's helpful because it makes you...think about your program. Sometimes... you think the program is running fine...[but] having something like that...is useful because...we shouldn't get too comfortable with how everything is. ...we should always...keep trying to improve things.

To...have the grid evaluation tool...was helpful... [We could] say, 'Oh yes, we're doing that.'... 'Oh, well, maybe we could improve in this way.'

All of the grantees gave examples of positive changes they had made in their programs as a consequence of participating in the partnership program. Many of the changes mentioned by the grantees concerned their children's group. Examples included:

- Change in the physical setting/environment of the children's component or a change in the schedule of activities (e.g., switch to larger room so children have more space to move about; creation of separate, well-defined play areas; moving circle time to the last activity to alert children to the fact that the program is about to end)
- Increase in training provided to staff working in the children's component
- Increased communication between children's component staff and families
- Change in program policy regarding when to terminate families from the program to allow for more time to work with challenging families
- Change in parent education/support group so that ground rules are developed at the start of each group
- More involvement of parents in selecting topics for discussion
- Modeling for, and encouraging, parents to use acknowledgement instead of praise with their children
- More use of reflective supervision
- More intentionality about program design
- Increase in opportunities for staff to plan and assess program activities
- Greater coordination of activities between the parent education and parent-child components

The grantees were asked about the sustainability of changes that had been made and several identified changes that likely will be sustained even without continued funding. These include changes made to their children's programs; aspects of their conceptual approach; and their use of reflective supervision. Other changes, such as the increase in opportunities for staff to plan and assess program activities, are dependent on continued funding. One grantee included a request for support to continue holding regular staff meetings in the budget it submitted to its umbrella funding agency.

IMPACT OF THE PARTNERSHIP ON PARTICIPANTS

Four of the six agencies felt that the partnership met or exceeded their expectations and that their investment in the partnership program was "definitely" worthwhile. The grantees described the partnership as "very positive," "very helpful and beneficial," and "very enriching."

I'm really, glad that we got to do it. It was a fun experience, and it also brought me and [other staff at the agency] together more.... And it's definitely made a huge impact.

[My expectations have] definitely...been met, more than my expectations.... It was very well thought out.... I think they know how to support us in the work that we do.... It's not a top-down kind of model.... It's almost like they believe in us.... And then it was...from the ground up, they want us to create together with them. And they're going to support us in the best way they know...with the best resources.

I was just really glad we had this opportunity.... I think there was a really nice sharing.... It was a two-way street and...if you didn't learn anything from this, it really was your fault.

Two of the agencies had initial doubts about the value of participating in the partnership. Both agencies felt that the cohort meetings during the first year were not relevant enough to their work to justify the time commitment (twice monthly meetings). However, during the second year, the time commitment was reduced to monthly meetings and the format and topics of the meetings changed in a way that felt more relevant to the two grantees. By the end of the second year, the interviewees from both agencies felt their participation had been worthwhile, although one person was not certain if other staff at the agency would agree.

All 6 grantees identified important benefits they received from participating in the partnership program.

1. They learned ~~a lot~~ about incorporating child development concepts

Several grantees noted that they had learned a lot from participating in the partnership program. For example, they learned about sensory processing disorders; temperament; second language learning; how to help parents observe their children more closely; how to deal with challenging families and children; and setting up a children's program. One grantee learned that they did not need to rigidly follow their parenting education curriculum--they could be more flexible in how they used it. Grantees also enhanced their supervision skills. One participant said they learned how to set goals for their staff and hold them accountable. Another said the co-facilitators "role model[ed]...a parallel process of how I can work with my team. They show[ed] me as a supervisor...how to build this team together."

2. They received a lot of guidance and support

Several grantees were appreciative of the guidance and support they received. One noted: "I don't think I've gotten that kind of support...in the 10 years that I've been in this job." Three grantees discussed how they had received support when they were struggling with how to respond to families that presented various challenges (e.g., aggressive parents or children, families that were not fully participating in the program). Some of the participants function relatively independently within their organizations and feel somewhat isolated in their

positions. One person said, “just getting more support [was helpful] because sometimes when you’re in a coordinator position you don’t get a lot of supervision.” Another said: “It often felt like a support group for professional growth...like you...come where you know...it’s safe, and all of these people know you and you can talk about whatever’s going on. ...that was really helpful for me.”

3. For some agencies, there was an increase in the professional development and leadership skills of their staff [Building mechanisms for reflective practice with staff that led to program improvements?](#)

Participants from at least 2 agencies described how they, themselves, or their staff had gained confidence in their professional skills as a consequence of participating in the partnership. One said that the program’s home visitors “have felt more respected as professionals” and that the ECE teachers had increased their involvement in, and level of responsibility for, the planning of parent-child activities. Another said: “I see myself more as an expert than I did before.” Two agencies also said that their staff had requested that the agency purchase books for them to read in support of their professional development.

CONNECTIONS AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS

Several grantees noted that they had established stronger connections with the other agencies in the partnership, which helped to support their own work.

It’s nice to...get to know other agencies’ programs. And I think knowing how people run...their...programs...gives you ideas on things that you could do... And..we were able to...make referrals to each other or provide resources to other agencies...so that was really nice.

We definitely feel like we can call each other and...ask each other questions, see what’s going on.

Although most of the grantees spoke positively about the relationships that had developed with the other partnership agencies, one grantee said their expectations had not been met in this regard.

We would have liked to have seen it evolve into more of like...a reference and referral between the agencies. It didn’t really happen very much. We had a couple of calls...but then nothing ever really followed through.

One grantee was pleased to have established a stronger connection to F5AC as a consequence of participating in the partnership.

[One of the things I liked best about the partnership] was having a closer connection to First 5.... [I felt] I was more plugged in. ...like when I was writing the grant reports, it...had a lot more meaning to me.... I knew who was reading them and I just felt more connected to the agency. And...[I] felt like I could use

you guys more as a resource as opposed to just people that we report our findings to.

PROVIDING LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY

There was a range of views regarding the role of the grantee in providing leadership in the county or beyond regarding best or promising practices in parent education and support. Two grantees expressed a willingness and growing ability to do this. Surprisingly (given the stated goals of the partnership), two other agencies did not seem to view this as an important part of their role. One noted: “In the broader community, it’s not the function of our agency to provide any advocacy work or any leadership on that macro level [regarding parenting education/support].” The other said, “We don’t talk about our parenting class a lot with other agencies in the community.... So I don’t see how...[our participation in the partnership] would affect our leadership.”

EFFECTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Grantees identified some key elements of the partnership program that contributed to its effectiveness.

The co-facilitators and F5AC staff were responsive to the needs of the grantees

Several grantees noted that the co-facilitators and F5AC staff were responsive to grantee feedback.

I found the group leaders and the staff very responsive to the needs and...suggestions of the group.

They really took the feedback that we gave... [like] when we said that [meeting] twice a month is too much and we need to bring it back down to something realistic for folks... I ...appreciated them being supportive of the group decision-making and really listening to the group.

The co-facilitators had a vision of what they wanted the participants to learn, which was grounded in promising practices.

One grantee noted that the co-facilitators had a vision of what they wanted the participants to learn, which was based on promising practices.

And I think that made a big difference. And I think they left their trail of bread crumbs as we went through the two years and we were following that vision, because we kept coming back to that promising practices matrix that they made.

The co-facilitators provided agency-specific consultation and training

This aspect of the partnership was highly valued by the grantees. Two grantees felt this was the most valuable aspect of participating in the partnership.

[The individual TA from the co-facilitator] was...the best thing that could have come out of the cohort... [The co-facilitator] was really great and the providers really responded to her and all the incentive funds...that allowed her to come here and do in-service trainings were amazing... Huge impact on our programs.

I thought the site visits were...useful in helping us make a better program... [The co-facilitator would say], 'We really like what you're doing here, but let's see how you can do it better, and here's some steps you can take to do that and here's how I'm going to help you.'

[The co-facilitator] just zooms right in there to the heart of the matter in a way that I couldn't...some things are easier for an outside person to say...and the ideas were taken by my staff in such a more positive light than if I would have said the same thing.... I thought that was one of the best things [about the partnership].

The availability of expansion funds

Five of the 6 grantees applied for, and used, the expansion funds. Each grantee determined how they would use the funds. The funds were used, for example, to pay for trainers to train staff, or to cover staff time so that staff could attend staff meetings, trainings, or one-on-one supervision meetings or assist with parent-child playgroups. Several grantees felt these funds were well-spent and had a positive effect on their program.

[The expansion funds] made an enormous difference. [When we were writing the grant], it felt sort of like gravy [to include a weekly staff meeting] and we...really couldn't afford that... So the incentive grant was so great.... There's just a lot of exchanging ideas on how we could tweak [our program]...and we could not have done that without that hour meeting [each week].

There was an expectation from co-facilitators/staff that grantees would make improvements

One grantee noted that there was a clear expectation that the agencies would make programmatic improvements, which motivated them to make changes.

The other thing that helped changes to happen is...that we were pressed to make changes. First 5 was like, 'What are you doing to improve? ...okay, I need to articulate this and get on the stick here...I couldn't do the status quo.... This was really the push, like...'How are you making it better, how are you changing things and be specific when you tell us.' ...she [a co-facilitator] would come in and tell us how we needed to...have more dress-up clothes or have the signs a little lower so the kids can see it, and it wasn't one of those [things], 'Yes, we probably should do that, let's get around to it.' It's more, 'We

need to get on that because she's going to be here in a month and we haven't done anything.'

The grantees felt supported

As noted above, the grantees felt supported in their work, both personally and in their relationships with their own staff, which helped them make changes in their programs.

The grantees shared their experiences with one another and learned from each other

A number of grantees commented on the supportive relationships that eventually formed among the participants and how they benefitted from hearing about each other's work.

It was really helpful—the relationships and camaraderie that was built up within the people in the partnership. It took a little while to build but...eventually we became a really tight group.

I really enjoyed hearing other people's challenges...and how they worked with the different challenges.

One agency, after listening to how two other agencies conducted their parenting groups, changed their approach to working with parents to allow more time for parents to process information and express themselves.

One of the things we did this year was we had the parents all write books... And [this]...takes an intensive amount of time...[and it means we can't bring in] other speakers [such as] the food bank and domestic violence [workers]... And it was phenomenal. The stories that came out...the healing that happened was more than I had ever expected. So...it's...a reminder to me to trust the process and understand that...the slow small shifts are really important.

The participants felt they were part of a larger endeavor

Two grantees mentioned that they felt they were part of a larger endeavor which helped to motivate and inspire them. One said: *"I think it's that sense of spirit almost, that we are part of something big... And we want to meet the challenge."*

The partnership combined a "big picture" focus with attention to the daily, practical matters of running a parenting program

I think they [the trainers and facilitators] are very interested in how are we going to apply [what we learn to] the work.... And I think...they get into both the micro and the macro aspects of this—the bigger picture as well as the nitty-gritty of running the program on a day to day basis.

CHALLENGES

Participants identified some challenges to participating in the partnership which included:

Time commitment

Several (4 of the 6 agencies) found the time commitment during the first year to be challenging. One of the agencies said: “I think it was necessary for us to meet that much for the group to gel. We would not have come together if we’d only been meeting once a month.” It was easier when went to monthly meetings but “it’s kind of ironic because now I feel like, ‘Well, I *did* like meeting that much’ it just was [hard] trying to balance my other responsibilities.”

Slow start

Several of the agencies noted that there were stumbling blocks in the first year in terms of building a sense of trust and cohesiveness in the group and deciding on the format and focus of the cohort meetings. Some agencies liked the team-building, process-oriented exercises that occurred during the first year and others did not. More than one agency recommended starting the case conferences earlier. Several agencies credited the responsiveness of the co-facilitators/staff to grantee feedback for improvements in the second year.

The first 6 months were kind of hard. It felt sort of abstract and the trainings...were not ringing too many bells for me yet.... [What] happened a lot at the beginning [was that]...we were not sure what our role was.... The meetings started off with [us] doing...a lot of...touchy-feely team building activities that didn't seem like a good use of our time at the beginning... But then...once we started getting into trainings...our...opinion about the meetings shifted because we were...starting to learn very interesting topics that we felt...would help us...possibly improve our services, and a lot them...just enriched our own personal knowledge...

Identifying common evaluation measures and using the Parental Stress Survey

Two grantees felt the effort to identify and use common measures was valuable. Others, however, felt that the process of identifying common measures was time-consuming and they noted a number of challenges they encountered in administering the Parental Stress Survey.

It was definitely challenging...in just trying to work with 20 some-odd people that are coming from a bunch of different perspectives and try to come up with one common thing... We spent a lot of time trying to come up with those measures and...work out the scales... It was...maybe not the best use of the time that we spent together. [Our agency]...had a lot of challenges because we would have some people that—in a matter of 4 weeks' time, you're trying to measure the amount of change in your parental stress. I just think that the way our program was structured, it...didn't...work. And people were resistant to even fill it out because they felt like you were going to be judging the type of parent that they were. We had some parents [referred]...from ARS or CPS and then they were really scared about filling out any sort of paperwork that said that they were stressed.

Staffing constraints

With 3 of the 6 agencies, there were some limits on the extent to which they could change their programs or extend the learning that occurred during cohort meetings to additional staff because of their particular program design and staffing pattern. Since these programs rely on part-time staff (e.g., parenting group facilitators, family advocates), some of whom have full-time positions elsewhere, the staff were not available to attend cohort meetings or even staff meetings on a regular basis.

Lack of match between training topics and grantee's particular situation

A few grantees noted that some of the cohort training topics were not especially relevant to their specific client population, e.g., children with special needs, teen parents, and families with infants. One participant, who does not supervise other staff, said that the discussion of reflective supervision was not especially relevant.

Uncertainty regarding how and when to use agency-specific consultation and training

At least one agency initially was uncertain about how to use the one-on-one support from the co-facilitators and how much consultant time was available to them:

In the beginning...we couldn't figure out exactly how much we could use [the co-facilitator]...it wasn't delineated how many hours of her work we could use...

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Suggestions for improvement included the following.

- Meet less frequently (5 agencies). Although one agency would have liked to have met bimonthly for the entire duration of the partnership, others suggested meeting less frequently (e.g., meeting bimonthly for the first 6 months instead of the first year)
- Focus cohort meetings more on the parent-child play component and the children's component (vs. parent education and support) (2 agencies)
- Spend less time meeting as a cohort and more time receiving one-on-one training and technical assistance (1 agency)
- Spend more time talking about evaluation data and results from the partnership (1 agency)
- At least one agency felt uncertainty or discomfort when asked to role play being a participant in a circle time. Other grantees mentioned "silly" or "goofy" activities that were conducted during cohort meetings. Some grantees clearly articulated the value of such activities, but for others, it was less clear. It might be helpful for facilitators to provide more context for participants about why they are being asked to participate in such activities.



PARENTING PARTNERSHIP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #3

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the interview today. This is the third and last round of interviews that we'll be doing with the parenting partnership participants. The purpose of this set of interviews is to help us identify what we, as an agency, have accomplished with the parenting partnership as a whole, and whether we've met the goals that we set for ourselves. The interviews are not intended for evaluating the work of individual grantees.

I would like to ask your permission to tape record the interview. Your responses will be kept anonymous and no identifying information related to your responses will be shared with the Parenting Partnership Co-facilitators, Janis and Nancy. Also, your responses will in no way affect any current and future funding you receive from First 5 Alameda County.

1. Please describe your experiences over the past 2 years as a Parenting Partnership grantee.
 - a. What did you like best about being a partnership grantee?
 - b. What did you like least or find most challenging?
2. Feedback on program components:
 - a. How helpful were the monthly cohort meetings?
 - b. How helpful was the individual (site based) TA from the co-facilitators?
 - c. Did you receive additional funds (up to \$5,000) to expand the reach of the partnership? If yes, was it helpful to have the extra funds? How so, or why not?
3. What have you learned from participating in the partnership, if anything?
4. Has participating in the partnership changed your understanding of promising practices? If yes, how so?
5. What changes, if any, have you made in your program or agency as a consequence of participating in the Parenting Partnership? Please be as specific as possible. Possible probes:
 - a. Are you doing anything differently in the parenting education/support component of your program?
 - b. In the parent-child component of your program?
 - c. In the children's component?

6. What has enabled you to make these changes? (For example, has your approach to supervision changed, have you changed your staffing pattern, your intake forms, etc.?)
7. If not mentioned, probe whether there have been changes in:
 - a. Use of promising practices in program planning and service delivery
 - b. Levels and capacity for teamwork and shared problem solving
 - c. Use of supervision, team/staff meetings and other opportunities for discussing practice
 - d. Integration of program components
8. Is there anything you are doing differently that you plan to continue to do, even if funding from F5AC were no longer available? [sustainability]
9. Were you able to extend or transfer the learning that occurred during cohort meetings to staff members who did not attend the monthly cohort meetings? If yes, please elaborate.
10. One of ECC's goals for the partnership was to have grantees collectively identify one or more common measures that all of the grantees would track and report on. Please describe what this process was like (selecting and then reporting on common measures, i.e., 2 Client Survey questions and the PSS) from your perspective.
11. Another goal that ECC had for the partnership was to support participants' leadership in the community regarding promising practices in parenting education and support. Do you feel that participating in the partnership has affected your leadership (either in your agency, or in the broader community) regarding promising practices in delivering parenting education and support services? Please elaborate.
12. Have your expectations for participating in the partnership been met? Was the investment worthwhile?
13. Is there anything that ECC could have done differently that would have made the parenting partnership a more useful or better experience for you?
14. Do you have any other comments you'd like to share?