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FAMILY MATTERS: The Importance of Connection

By Chloe Learey

A challenge of modern parenting is that many families end up isolated due to a variety of factors ranging from being stuck at home during long winter months to not having friends with children the same age to having moved away from grandparents and other social supports. According to the Centers for Disease Control, a family risk factor for child abuse and neglect is social isolation. Supporting family connections is one antidote to this potentially extreme outcome. The “Strengthening Families” framework outlines protective factors which help support optimal child development within the family (<http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>), and one of the protective factors is “social connection.” However, helping people connect requires a unique skill set, one that is not always part of the education of those who work in the field of early childhood.

While some of the protective factors such as “knowledge of parenting and child development” might be tied to implementing a program such as a parenting class, or a home visiting model such as “Parents As Teachers”, it is not as easy to tie social connections to such “evidence-based practices.” How people make friends and interact with family and the community is a deeply individual practice impacted by things like personality, class, religion or spirituality, ethnicity, etc. There is not an “off-the-shelf” package for how to support families to connect, and it would be a mistake to try to put something like that in a box. This does not mean we cannot embed the principle of connection in our work and look for opportunities to support social connections. Rather, we need to be responsive, considerate and creative when it comes to practice.

This is an area that could be rife with judgement about what are appropriate social connections, and what is the best way to make connections. For instance, churches and other religious groups are often mentioned as a way to connect, and this might be the type of suggestion that alienates a family. Another common idea is to create a parent group, making sure to offer food and childcare, and then being surprised when families do not take advantage of the opportunity. The key is to recognize and understand a need and to utilize a program that already what exists and create one to meet the need.

For example, a coalition of providers from several organizations representing multiple disciplines identified that the post-partum period can be especially difficult for mothers, which in turn can negatively impact child development. This group created Mother’s Circle which meets every week at Winston Prouty (<http://www.postpartum.net/locations/vermont/>). Over time the group has developed and grown, clearly meeting a need, bringing mothers together with each other and with facilitators who can support the connection with other parents as well as appropriate services.

However, new initiatives are not always necessary to create opportunities for connection. Hosting family gatherings such as a coffee hour or potluck dinner at early care and education programs have been a wonderful way for families to come together, with some families staying connected long after their children have gone to elementary school. Finding opportunities that can easily be built into a family’s busy schedule, such as hosting a dinner at pick-up time, can be key to helping families successfully access each other. Or, offering a workshop on what to do when your child is biting (if that seems to be a topic of interest at the time) can broaden the impact of the event beyond the social connection protective factor. There are many possibilities for creatively supporting people to connect with one another. The positive impact this can have for the development of children and their families is inspiring.

After all, it is all about relationships.

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http://www.reformer.com/columnists/ci_29797575/family-matters-importance-connection