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FAMILY MATTERS

Parents as Teachers

by Chloe Learey

Kerri Beebe talks about a home-visiting model called “Parents As Teachers” (PAT) (<http://www.parentsasteachers.org/>) on an upcoming episode of ‘Family Matters’, the talk show where we discuss topics of interest to families with young children.

Kerri is a Family Support Worker and Family Supportive Housing Coordinator who has been trained in this model and will be helping implement it in our region. We are excited about this program because it aligns well with our organizational values and how we approach our work with families. It is a parenting education and support model that acknowledges that parents are their child’s first and most influential teacher, and builds on the strengths that parents bring.

I often say that people should not get into the field of early childhood because they like children – they also need to like adults, too. One of our primary activities towards fulfilling our mission of ensuring each child’s optimal development is to help families build their knowledge and capacity as parents. This requires our professionals to bring the expertise of child development AND skills around coaching adult learning. PAT brings these elements together in one model by offering a framework that includes in-person regular visits, a network of resources and information about child development and parenting, a structure for helping parents connect with one another, and tools such as developmental screenings to inform the process. The foundation is created by joining families where they are and developing a relationship that allows for learning together about who a child is, where she or he is developmentally, what meaning parents make of their child’s behavior, and where they want to build their capacity as a parent. This is not a scripted model but a toolbox to use in supporting individuals and their unique situations, including acknowledging and working within family culture, and goals are parent-driven. Elements that are emphasized include focusing on the parent-child interaction, keeping development at the center of the work and connected to parenting, and identifying and understanding issues and developing workable solutions. Family well-being is also a central aspect of PAT. This is key to understanding that child development happens in the context of the family, so stressors on the family

directly impacts on how a child develops. It is critical to acknowledge this in any parenting and family support program even if it is not the primary goal of the program.

Another aspect of PAT that is consistent with our work with families is the focus on parent strengths, and ‘Strengthening Families’, a framework from the Center for the Study of Social Policy (<http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>); a framework which informs the PAT model. Five protective factors are described in the ‘Strengthening Families’ framework including: (1) parental resilience, (2) social connections, (3) concrete supports, (4) knowledge of parenting and child development, and (5) the social emotional competence of children. PAT highlights building knowledge and social connections specifically. We are particularly excited about creating monthly parent group connections as part of our implementation of the program. As an inclusive early childhood program we believe that it is imperative for children to learn from each other, and this applies to parents as well. Learning amongst peers is very powerful and affirming, and creating a space for this to happen for parents is an important part of what we can do. Ideally these opportunities are inclusive, representing the diversity of the community, and build on what already exists as much as possible.

Strong communities, thriving families, and children who are healthy, safe, and ready to learn are the articulated long-term outcomes of PAT, These certainly resonate with those of us who work in early childhood. We understand that there are many variables that impact a child’s development and that we need to take them all into consideration if we are to optimize that development. This is not just about making sure that young children are doing the best they can. Ultimately it is about making sure that our youngest citizens grow up to be confident, competent adults who can contribute to strong communities. Investing in families and supporting them to build their capacity as parents through programs like PAT is an investment in all of our futures.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Childhood Development in Brattleboro. You can watch episodes of Family Matters by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>.

http://www.reformer.com/columnists/ci_30159007/family-matters-parents-teachers