

2013

COMMUNITY CAFÉS: Building Parent Leadership and Strengthening New York State Families and Communities



Written for the NYS Parenting Education Partnership by Robin Higa and Amber Huffstickler of the National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds
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Overview

The New York State Parenting Education Partnership (NYSPEP), the Children and Family Trust Fund (Trust Fund) of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and the New York State Council on Children and Families share the goal of promoting strong, stable families and thriving communities. To contribute to this goal, NYSPEP, with support from the Council, and the Trust Fund is promoting the Community Café approach as a tool for developing parent leadership, building community capacity to meet families' needs, and strengthening New York families.

NYSPEP is promoting Community Cafés as a way to increase parents' voice in family service systems and to foster communication between these systems.

Our objectives are to:

- Enhance community based organizations' capacity to support parent partners in hosting Community Cafés;
- Identify and strengthen community supports that engage and protect families;
- Build parents' capacity to help their families thrive; and
- Build community capacity to create action plans that address challenges affecting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and families.

By accepting the grant funds, organizations agreed to form community teams, attend regional café orientations, participate in peer-learning and technical assistance activities, and provide NYSPEP with summary reports of the five cafés that teams are expected to host between October 2012 and May 2013. Efforts to implement cafés and to develop a State Leadership team has been supported and monitored by ongoing communication with the community teams and through reports that capture the major themes of each café hosted by each team, known as a harvest. NYSPEP will synthesize the common themes of the café reports and distribute the summary reports to community teams as well as their state partners. Pre and post Appreciative Inquiry interviews are being conducted with all community teams and mid-term interviews have been conducted with most sites. In addition to these interviews, teams share their experiences and coach one another during regularly scheduled conference calls hosted by NYS Council on Children and Families.





This report offers a synthesis of common themes extracted from mid-term interviews with 13 of the 18 community teams. At the time of their mid-term interview, most teams had already identified their parent partners, held meetings to plan for cafés, and hosted at least one café. During their mid-term interviews, teams were asked what they were learning from the planning process and from the café conversations. They were also asked to talk about how using the

Community Café approach has affected their parent/practitioner partnerships and their personal leadership. Since most teams are just beginning to host Community Cafés, teams are in varying stages of establishing consistently effective outreach, collaboration, and organizing strategies.

Lessons Learned from the Beginning Stages of Implementation

The Community Café approach is a parent driven strategy intended to facilitate relationship building in communities and build partnerships between families and service providers. Community teams funded through this initiative typically consist of at least two parents and at least one representative from a sponsoring agency. Agencies that do not have direct relationships with parents often struggle to identify parent partners.

During their interviews agency representatives discussed a shift from their typical service provision model to taking a more supportive role. Rather than agency staff designing and implementing a

project and asking parents for input or assistance, parent members of the community teams took the lead in designing and implementing their cafés, asking staff for input or

Examples of outreach strategies shared by teams:

- Use personal invitations based on each team member's existing relationships.
- Post flyers in places where other parents frequent
- Recruit other community groups to assist with flyer distribution.
- Have a café announced on the local radio station
- Invite the local newspaper to attend and write an article about the café.
- Start a Facebook page with pictures from cafés (the planning team can have a private Facebook page to help with communication too).
- Integrate Community Cafés into a meetings for the local PTA.
- Use personal phone calls to connect with people; this also helps to build relationships.

assistance as needed. This work structure shifted their relationship from a provider/recipient dynamic to a reciprocal partnership.

Lessons learned from Planning Community Cafés:

Teams design their café purpose, invitation strategies, and café agendas. They also coordinate childcare, food and café locations, and other café-related activities. Working in teams has greatly helped community teams in their ability to implement the Community Café approach. Besides mitigating workload, teamwork allowed parents to coach each other and contribute to hosting in a way that matches their strengths. There is value in having more than one parent act as hosts on a team. One interviewee stated, “Parents have a lot on their plates... and the hosting can seem daunting, too much. Co-hosting is key, you are not going solo, the event is a group effort.”

There were several factors related to the level of attendance teams achieved with their cafés. The degree to which sponsoring agency staff personally interacted with parents had a large impact on teams’ ability to have parents and community members participate in cafés. Sponsoring agencies that manage multiple sites or coordinate a network of organizations are somewhat removed from the group of parents they want to engage. On the other hand, these same agencies are able to capitalize on existing relationships with partner organizations to reach out to community partners to help accommodate café attendees with resources like specialized child care, transportation, translation

assistance etc. Teams learned an effective outreach strategy when inviting parents to cafés was to start with their existing relationships and then asking parents in their direct networks to help outreach to additional networks.

Planning lessons learned from the Community Café in Auburn, NY:

- Using the same flyer and agenda format every month helps cut down work load and creates consistency.
- Asking volunteers to help hang posters and flyers helps get “more feet on the street”.
- The harvest portion of their café conversation is important.
- Inviting an artist to create a mural each month adds to a comfortable and inviting environment.
- Social media is an effective communication tool, both externally to the community and internally to the team.
- Using email and conference calls to plan together helps to accommodate parent schedules.
- Providing kids with a gift and providing a meal for all helps with attendance.
- A lawn sign that say Café Here Today in front of Church and out in the community helps with outreach.
- Planning in one large group works best, someone is always there to pick up the slack; helps to have more than two people in the planning.
- Having more than two parents prepared to host provides more flexibility.
- Group learning emerged in the harvest part of the conversation.

Other significant team factors that teams said affected their outreach efforts include:

- The size of the social circle of parents on the team.
- Parent affiliation with existing community groups such as a church.
- Willingness of parents and staff to make phone calls or invite people personally.
- Relationships sponsoring agencies had with other service providers or agencies.
- The sponsoring agency's reputation in the community.
- The sponsoring agency's existing direct relationship with parents.

There were other factors that affected café attendance. Although teams can anticipate potential weather conditions, they could not account for Hurricane Sandy, and the unusually snowy and cold weather conditions that hit the Northeast this season. A team in Long Island described budget reallocations in the wake of Hurricane Sandy that diverted funds toward relief efforts; their schools, in particular, are facing many pressures that have made it difficult to devote time and resources to additional activities. Similarly, winter precipitation and frigid temperatures created conditions in New York City and Western New York that reduced the likelihood that cafés would attract the expected number of participants. Subsequently, several cafés were postponed or rescheduled. A couple of teams learned to schedule an alternate “due to bad weather” date during their café planning meetings.

Community teams reported success in partnering with local organizations to provide accessible locations. In addition to the programs or organizations that partnered with host



parents, most teams engaged other community organizations to assist with hosting cafes such as provide resources (i.e. childcare, space, food, etc), assisting with outreach, and participating in the cafés. One community team even invited someone from the animal shelter to bring a service dog to attend. (See the appendix for the full list of organizational partnerships.)

Typical partnering organizations included:

- Libraries
- Schools
- Social service programs
- Community coalitions
- Child care and other early childhood agencies
- Faith-based organizations
- Local governance
- Law enforcement



Several sites hosted their cafés in a space provided by the agency affiliated with their team to leverage resources and to take advantage of families’ familiarity with the location. Additionally, this strategy eliminated costs for facility rental. Ideal site amenities provided

“There were a few parents that came and really had a say-so in the café; they really got involved in the conversation, bringing flyers for different activities. As café hosts, we show leadership by us hosting the event and interacting with parents and staff. Parents bring things [passion for community] to the table. I’m involved in Abyssinian and the [pre]school, so when it comes to the community and doing stuff for the children and with the parents I wanted to interact with parents as well so we all could help each other out when it comes to the kids.”

- Parent Host, Harlem

by sponsoring organizations included a separate room for childcare, (even multiple rooms so children can be split into age groups,) kitchen and food serving areas, and was easily accessible by car or public transit.

Teams have met with mixed success in identifying the most convenient time to hold cafés. Some teams plan their events to overlap easily with children’s programming to make the time more convenient for parents; others have struggled to find common times, especially when many families and communities were in “survival mode” due to weather. In Long Island, in an effort to accommodate parents’ schedules, one parent host adapted the Community Café approach to begin having one-on-one conversations on the weekends with the parents of children who attended her in-home child care.



Fostering Leadership:

Every member of a community team, both parents and staff, reported new leadership skills and practices emerging as a result of hosting Community Cafés. In addition to the personal growth that staff experienced in shifting their role from visible leader to background support, many parent hosts mentioned an emerging sense of self-efficacy and development of technical and transferable skills. One parent from Western New York went to tears explaining how the opportunity to participate in this project presented itself at a moment of particular vulnerability,

and how since then she has found purpose in helping the community strengthen families.

Other indicators of leadership development that people cited included:

- Increased confidence in hosting a community gathering.
- Increased knowledge about community mobilization.
- Excitement over discovering that they could be successful in providing a meaningful experience for others.
- Feeling more connected to the community and to agency partners.
- Building confidence talking to others about their goals.
- Being more aware of creating a welcoming space, especially for diverse groups.
- Feeling more comfortable associating with diverse community members, such as law enforcement.

“When we broke up into groups, we could overhear others and I overheard my daughter say things that I wondered why hasn’t she said that to my face, so it sparks opportunities for us to have conversations about raising the kids and what’s going on in the community.”

- Grandparent Host, North Country

Because parents shared concerns about their children’s well-being and could empathize with other parents, they quickly established connections with other participants. Several parents said they were motivated to lead planning teams because they know what a difference it would make to have a stronger community; after attending a café, they now feel compelled to help by extending a compassionate hand and appreciate the importance of parents sharing their knowledge and use of community resources. Four parent hosts have already agreed to share their Community Café experience at a statewide conference.



Staff also had much to share about their own leadership development. They talked about experiencing parent/staff role reversals that provide opportunities for parents to lead while a new way of leading for staff has been to “sit on their hands,” and assume a learning role. Staff typically provided logistical support and appreciation for parent hosts as they took on the responsibilities of planning, community outreach, and café design and hosting.

Developing Parent/Practitioner Partnerships:

The cohesion of planning teams were aided by the frequent interaction between staff and parents and debriefing sessions after each café that allowed everyone to get on the same page as they moved forward in planning the next café. Several staff noted feeling grateful for being able to connect with parents as peers, and many parents communicated that their relationships with staff have deepened as a result of the café planning process.

Working in partnership has helped them see bumps in the road as areas for improvement or accept that “expecting the unexpected is part of the learning process.” As teams invested their resources in building relationships within the community, they made two observations: increased bonding among parents; and strengthened relationships between parents and partnering agencies.

Teams with strong parent partnerships had parents leading the design and planning of the cafés with agency staff there to provide specific support as needed such as providing a meeting space. Many teams highlighted how rewarding it has been for staff to step back as parents stepped up to design and host cafés. They believe their success is due to the organically derived conversation topics and natural leadership that parents cultivate among their peers. Although a number of organizations are well received within the community, staff recognized the difference between a service provider implementing a program for the community and a parent inviting fellow parents to join in conversation about issues that matter to them.

I have learned that there are many other people out there that are feeling similar emotions about the community and within their families. I’ve learned strategies and activities that we can do as a family. The support has been a big plus for me in coming to the cafés. At the last café, we discussed the school shooting in Connecticut and it was nice to have a forum to talk about how it’s affected me, how we talk to our families about it or why some of us didn’t talk to our kids about it. We talked a lot about family traditions – where we get our support from and it was nice to hear different things.

- Parent Host, Capital Region



One staff person shared, “We believe we are learning the importance of communication and building trust. We have and are continuing to share vision with families and leaders in our communities the importance of working together to achieve and change things in a positive model/system.”

Almost all of the teams reported forming stronger relationships with each other.

Several teams talked about how they were becoming friends as a result of hosting cafés together. Partnerships can happen when people are allowed to contribute what they can to support community

conversations. One participant was a community college professor who taught a community engagement class and was inspired by the café he attended. He shared that he will look into providing class credit for his students for attending cafés.

What Teams are learning from Hosting Community Cafés:

After each café conversation community teams are encouraged to document what they learned and/or the common themes that emerged from their conversations. A sample template was provided to record each café report or “harvest.” Teams talked about designing questions for their cafés based on what they thought people wanted to talk about. Two of the teams mentioned community and school safety as a topic that emerged after the Newtown tragedy. People appreciated a safe space to talk about their feelings and concerns.

Staff asked parents what kind of support they needed and consequently took on specific tasks that parents did not have the time or the community connections to accomplish on their own. “I did the registration for the second [café] and am registering others for the third café. Every time I talk to someone on the phone about registration, I get a chance to talk to them and get to hear how much they appreciate having an adult conversation and not feeling like they’re alone with everything and that the cafés have been effective.” Other examples of help parents hosts asked for were:

- Finding experienced child care providers.
- Finding a free and accessible location.
- Printing flyers.
- Inviting organizational partners.
- Budget management.
- Typing up the café harvest notes or sign in sheets.

Some examples of themes that emerged from café conversations were:

- Community cleanliness, (having a safe space for children to play)
- Technology
- School and community safety, especially in the wake of current events.
- Job opportunities
- Graduation rates
- Isolation
- Needing a place to connect with others
- The importance of sharing knowledge of community resources

“The adult café has been interesting for me; we have such a diverse age group and everyone is in unique situations but they all have similar answers or feelings about café questions. We had what we thought was an innocent question – an activity you remember doing in your childhood – and it was emotional for several people. Our intent was geared toward winter activities, and instead it brought back different responses. It really bonded the group.”

- Staff, North Country

The commonality amongst community teams in regards to hosting was their intentionality about providing a safe space for rich dialogue and a place where all perspectives were welcome and included. Cafés differed from a typical community meeting in that almost all conversations were hosted using the World Café technology (www.theworldcafe.org) and other forms of conversation which allowed every participant to contribute to the conversation. Although hosts had a purpose or an intended conversation topic, many hosts expressed keeping themselves open to learning from the conversation rather than coming with a predetermined outcome.

For example, one team shared that since it was their first café they thought they would pose a “light” conversation question about a cheerful childhood memory, hoping to share ideas for fun winter activities. Participants unexpectedly turned this into an opportunity to



have a much deeper and more moving conversation about their childhood experiences. Several hosts said they appreciated how this group driven and emergent approach added to more successful community and family engagement.

Every site that hosted more than one café conversation used what they learned from that café to design the questions for their next café. One team already acted on what they learned from their café harvest and put on a technology fair for families since learning from their café that it was a significant concern for parents.

Café conversations surfaced the common concerns of families according to most community teams. Hosts were also pleased and surprised at the immediate positive feedback from participants. “As long as the conversations are something they are into and is relevant to them it works and it’s easy.” Another community team learned that it took a couple of times for people to build trust with one another and know what to expect in order to feel comfortable sharing what they are really thinking and feeling.

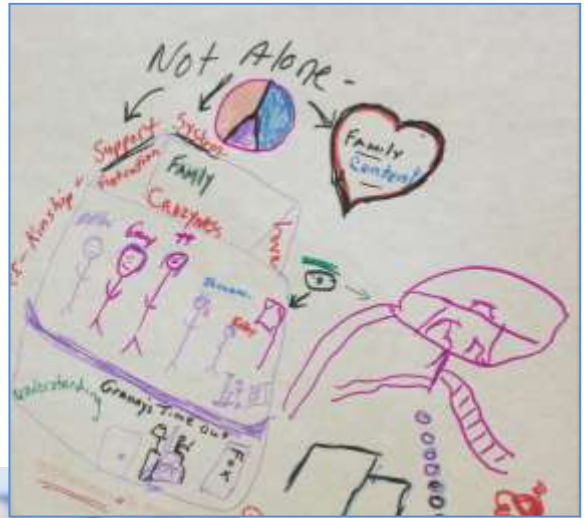
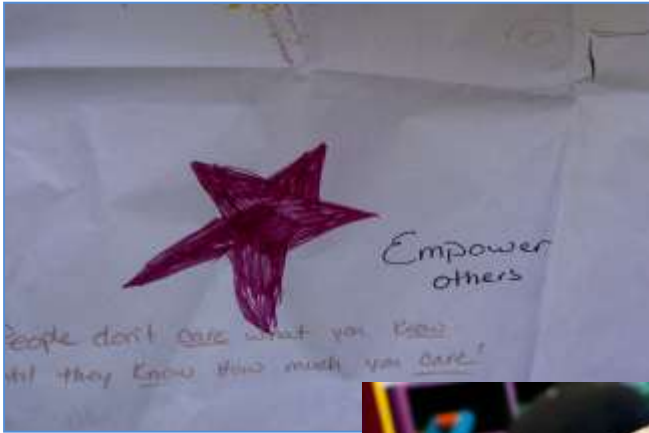
More of what interviewees said they learned from hosting their cafés:

- Once you get people there, they enjoy the process and understand it for what it is, a fun, bonding event.
- People want to be a part of the community they live in; they need to have an emotionally safe place in order to share from their hearts.
- A simple question can be powerful and emotional.
- Most parents have similar concerns; attending a café is a way for people to see that they are not alone.
- Regardless of background parents love and want the best for their children; all families have challenging situations.
- Parents need a forum to talk about tough, emergent issues and what is happening in their community, (such as in the wake of Newtown tragedy).
- It is important to have something for families to connect with that affirms their culture or family situation.
- Community Cafés can be applied to a wide variety of settings, for instance a play group becomes a place for parents to talk.

Next Steps

Everyone who participated in the interviews will receive a copy of their interview notes and all sites will receive a copy of this report. To ensure that community teams are able to support parent leaders in hosting cafés in their communities, NYSPEP will be working with sites to review the helpfulness of previous group conference calls as well as assessing the need for additional peer support or other technical assistance strategies. Most sites will be hosting three or four more cafés before the end of this project term. Final Appreciative Inquiry interviews will be conducted after all of the sites have hosted at least five Community Cafés. A summary document will be written to compile the results of those interviews.





List of Participating Community Teams and their Partners

COMMUNITY CAFÉ SITE	ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS/CONTRIBUTORS
Abyssinian Head Start, Plainview	Harlem Children’s Zone Mission Society
Autism Society of the Greater Capital Region	Schenectady ARC
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County	Community centers Head Start programs & elementary schools 4-H Youth Development Rural libraries College interns/volunteers & retirees Food banks, community gardens Churches ECD Collaborators Child Development Council’s Director’s group Franzeska Racker Centers’ Early Recognition Specialist Head Start/Early Head Start Park Foundation
Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Community Human Services	YMCA Head Start Infant Toddler Task Force
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Livingston County	Livingston County Youth Bureau Workforce Development Livingston County C.A.S.A Dansville Public Library Goodwill Community Center of Geneseo, Genesee Community College (Dansville Campus) Dansville Public Schools Mount Morris Public Schools
Coordinated Child Development Program Phelps Clifton Springs Head Start	Area businesses Humane Society of Ontario County Parents bringing cookies
Elmhurst Community Partnership Project, Jackson Heights Queens	Library School

COMMUNITY CAFÉ SITE	ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS/CONTRIBUTORS
E. John Gavras Center	Restaurants giving good rates for food Red Cross, Child Advocacy Center, local fire and police stations- Resource bags for parents with materials from many agencies YMCA Child Care Day Rehabilitation Program-volunteers to post flyers Auburn United Methodist Church
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Livingston County	Lovely Warren (Rochester City Council Member) Jackie Ortiz (NY State Representative in Rochester) David Gantt (NY State Assemblyman) Rochester Season For Nonviolence SW Neighborhood Association Mothers in Need of Others Peter Castle Family Resource Center Churches Tim Weider-Monroe Community College Neighborhood Settlement Houses Healthy Neighbors Safety Net
Child Care Coordinating Council of North County	Behavioral Health Services North Family Connections
Wayne County Action Council Head Start	Public Library

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5712 30th Avenue NE ~ Seattle WA 98105

Phone (206) 526-1221 ~ Fax (206) 526-0220 ~ trafael@juno.com ~ www.ctfalliance.org

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