



Bay Area First 5 Policy Brief

*Families and Caregivers are Supported to
Provide Loving and Learning Environments
for Their Children*

Investing in Our Children...
Investing in Our Future...
Investments that Last a Lifetime.



POLICY
BRIEF

05



About This Brief

This brief is the fifth in a series produced periodically by the Bay Area First 5 Commissions. First 5 Bay Area is a collaborative of the First 5 Children and Family Commissions in eleven counties in the Bay Area: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Monterey, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, Solano and Sonoma. For more information contact www.first5kids.org/bay.

Raising children is one of the most fundamental and rewarding tasks of our society. Families are the social structure within which children are raised and in which most children thrive. Parents need the support of their community to raise children who are healthy, well-adjusted and ready for school. Families benefit from being connected to concrete resources and social networks that provide information and support their parenting.¹ Children have a better chance at healthy development and school success when their families have access to information and social supports to nurture their children's development and connect them to learning activities.²

Where do parents turn for childrearing information and support? A recent survey conducted by ZERO TO THREE found that parents of young children turn first to their mothers and mothers-in-law, then friends, other family members and their pediatrician or health professional. Websites and publications are used less frequently.³ There are ethnic differences -- African American parents are more likely than White or Hispanic parents to point to how their parents raised them and to their faith or religion as important influences in their parenting.⁴ Latino families report that they value strong relationships within their own families and access to guidance within their own communities.⁵ Some families need more support than others, and there are times in a parent's life when support is more needed. First-time parents, parents of infants and parents of children with special needs seek support more than "repeat" parents and parents of older, typically developing children. Single, separated, and divorced parents also express the need for support.⁶




First 5 San Francisco, San Francisco's Department of Children Youth and Their Families (DCYF) and San Francisco Human Services Agency- Family and Children Services (H.S.A.-FCS) are jointly committed to ensuring that all San Francisco children and their families have access to family support services provided at Family Resource Centers (FRCs) to enhance child development and strengthen family functioning. In order to reach this goal, the three departments allocated funding for a Family Resource Center Initiative in FY 2009-10.

This initiative intends to have a long-term and sustained impact on the enhanced capacity of parents to provide for their children's needs and of communities to serve families. With this intent in mind, the Joint FRC Funders developed the following aligned goals against which to measure the success of the initiative:

- 1) Children and youth are nurtured, safe, and supported for school success
- 2) Parents have the knowledge, skills, strategies, and support to parent effectively
- 3) Families build their own capacity to improve family functioning
- 4) Families receive adequate services to meet their needs
- 5) Communities are family-focused & responsive

Funding was allocated to 23 Neighborhood Based FRC's - targeting services to families in specific neighborhoods and Population Focused FRC's- targeting services to identifiable groups of families who reside throughout San Francisco and have a demonstrable need for family resource services that are provided with specialized knowledge, skills and/or expertise. These include teen parents, LGBTQ families, and families with children with special needs, under housed families and families exposed to violence.

First 5 San Francisco is the lead agency for purposes of managing and implementing this family support initiative. More information is available at www.first5sf.org



We can do more as a society to connect families to the resources that support their parenting efforts. There is evidence that “parent education” programs do benefit parents and children by providing information about child development and parenting strategies.⁷ Many communities provide parent information, support services and school readiness activities by establishing community-based family resource centers. Community networks of family resource centers in Santa Clara, San Francisco, Monterey and Solano Counties are examples of this trend. Neighborhood Family Resource Centers provide parenting information and parent education resources, promote children's school readiness, connect families to services, and promote community development. Family Resource Centers provide services for all families and are able to connect families to more intensive services if they need extra support.

Strengthening the informal networks that connect families can also provide resources for parenting. Neighborhoods in which families are connected to each other tend to build “social capital” – the emotional and information resources we all draw on to conduct our daily lives. Social capital takes several forms: creating trust and expectations among members; creating channels for information; and creating social norms and sanctions.⁸ Families in a community with high social capital might reciprocate in informal child care arrangements, share information on how to find a good health care provider or fun family activities, and create expectations that families will monitor the activities of their own teenagers. Social capital in turn builds economic capital as children thrive and become productive contributors to the community.

Community events that focus on family activities enhance social connections and strengthen parents' engagement with their children. A service club pancake breakfast, a family games day in the local park, or a "Read Across America" family literacy event can bring neighborhood members together in a festive environment. These events can also emphasize a message to families that simply engaging with their children in fun activities helps the children learn important skills.

Some neighborhoods and communities may need extra support to develop social capital. Communities with high residential turnover lack opportunities to build enduring connections among families. Neighborhoods that include many single parents, parents who work long hours or non-traditional work schedules, can benefit by creating opportunities for families to come together. Communities with high proportions of immigrant families and non-English speaking families share special challenges in providing parenting resources. Language barriers, lack of financial resources and lack of knowledge of the local service system keep families from finding the services they need. These barriers tend to cluster in low-income communities, where there is also a shortage of formal child care and a scarcity of agencies devoted to family support services. Increasingly California's low-income communities are also non-English-speaking communities. Recent immigrants may live in highly connected ethnic or cultural communities, but these communities may be isolated from social services and other formal supports. With encouragement and trust building, families in low-income communities may be able to come together to support each other. For instance, families may share child care and educational materials, reducing family expenses and supporting families in becoming engaged in school activities.⁹

Parents should be engaged as partners in planning, implementing and evaluating family support services, giving them an active voice in decisions that affect their community and their children. When parents have input in designing local services there is a better chance that services will be matched to family needs. Developing and supporting parent leadership in schools and other community groups has positive outcomes for children. In Head Start, the multiple strategies used to engage parents results in increased involvement with their children that is sustained through the preschool years and into the first years of grade school.¹⁰ The Texas program AVANCE (see description below) found that parents became engaged in community advocacy when they were given training in leadership skills.¹¹ Building parents' confidence and sense of efficacy by providing child development and parenting information and by building connections to their child's preschool program increases the likelihood that families will remain involved later.¹² Reaching out to families at key transition points, such as at kindergarten entry, supports family engagement and is associated with positive school outcomes.¹³

Supporting families in their parenting roles is a combination of understanding where and why parents seek information and assistance, and what communities have to offer as "social capital." Supportive communities can build parenting confidence, decrease isolation and parental depression, and increase family access to basic needs. Families supported by thriving neighborhoods and communities have better opportunities to thrive themselves and be successful in childrearing. While many children and families are successful without formal supports, we can increase the odds for all children by strengthening families and the communities that support them.

The United Health Foundation defines a healthy community as one in which there is on-going dialogue, leadership located throughout the community, in which diversity is embraced and people are connected to resources. Family oriented activities – recreation, education, cultural, neighborliness – increase the sense of community connectedness and build community capacity to address complex problems. This connectedness also attracts and supports business, which helps a community prosper and provide economic opportunities for its members. Connectedness creates "social capital" – benefits coming from social relationships – and social capital is associated with children's well-being.¹⁵

Recommendations

First 5 Bay Area recommends the following actions to strengthen the capacity of families to provide loving and learning environments for their young children.

1. *Create a family-friendly community in which families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs and to communities.*

- a.** Encourage and facilitate informal opportunities for family-to-family networking and support, particularly for families with similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds and families whose children have similar medical or developmental concerns.
- b.** Promote public awareness about early childhood development and community resources to support families.
- c.** Identify, build and develop parent leadership in the community by providing leadership training and engaging parents in community decisions about children.
- d.** Convene community forums on child health and development with parent leadership that bring together families, concerned community members and service providers to discuss and problem-solve common concerns.
- e.** Promote a family-friendly community. (See box)
- f.** Provide information to help parents make good choices, for example, offer information to help parents recognize characteristics of high quality child care.

2. *Ensure that family support programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to a community-building process.*

- a.** Insure that family resource centers and other family-serving agencies providing for basic needs, school readiness and parenting supports are located and have high visibility in neighborhoods where families have multiple socio-economic challenges.
- b.** Orient “community helpers” to information and resources on child development, developmental screening and family support services. Public health clinic staff, librarians, clergy members and staff of religious organizations are trusted resources who can direct parents to community resources.
- c.** Encourage community agencies that have contact with families to develop a plan to address children’s healthy development or to partner with agencies that have this capacity – increase the number of community groups that “keep young children on the radar.”
- d.** Make it easy for parents to seek out and find the information and resources they need by co-locating services so that families can easily identify where in the community to go for assistance, creating combined program applications, establishing central referral and information websites, etc.
- e.** Strengthen coordination among community agencies to link agencies providing universal services to those agencies having a more specialized charge to recognize and respond to early child development concerns. For example, every child care center should know how to access developmental services for a child with a delay or disability.
- f.** Ensure that community agencies have access to interpretation and translation services to ensure that all community members are served and engaged.
- g.** Encourage parent participation in community advisory boards and the governing boards of local community agencies.



3. Mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.

- a.** Locate kinship supports (e.g., help for grandparents raising grandchildren) and community-based resource and referral agencies in neighborhoods where families experience high levels of stress or face multiple socio-economic challenges.
- b.** Increase family access to supports for basic needs. (See Bay Area First 5 Policy Brief, Issue 2: Family Economic Stability – A Foundation for Healthy Children)
- c.** Identify family- friend- and neighbor - child care providers and ensure they are connected to community resources.
- d.** Increase the availability of high quality child care.

4. Encourage employers to support parents.

- a.** Provide information in the workplace on community services, child development and child care supports. Allow parents to use workplace internet connections to access parenting information and community resources.
- b.** Support flextime work schedules and flexible time off so that parents can attend to children’s medical needs, school events, and other parenting responsibilities.
- c.** Provide paid parental leave and paid sick time including time to care for a sick child.

Family-friendly communities respect and actively fulfill all the rights of the families and children who live there, including the right to a healthy environment, the right to learning opportunities, and access to public supports and services.¹⁶ Family-friendly communities...

- Offer family oriented activities – recreation, education, cultural, neighborliness
- Make family-to-family and peer-to-peer support opportunities readily available in community clinics, WIC, parks, markets, etc.
- Families know about community resources and activities through community bulletin boards
- Public transportation is available
- There are natural gathering places for people of all ages
- Safe playgrounds within walking distance offer places for parents and caregivers to gather and talk while children play
- A community resource guide and/or information “warm lines” are available

Programs that Connect and Support Families to Empower Themselves

AVANCE has been in existence for over 35 years serving low-income Hispanic families in Texas, with expansion sites under development in New Mexico and California. AVANCE’s population tends to be extremely low-income parents of children birth to three, with little knowledge of child development, lacking social support systems, and frequently coming from a history of being abused as children themselves. AVANCE provides parent education, health education, parent leadership development, job training, and literacy and language skills, and connects families to housing and other basic needs. AVANCE has been successful in increasing parents’ ability to provide appropriate learning environments for their children. AVANCE parents became advocates for their community and successfully obtained grants to fund a playground and crime prevention activities. Parents continue to be involved in school and residence associations.¹⁷



Family-Place Libraries provide child development information, parent education and parenting support in the context of the local public library. Children’s librarians are specially trained to understand child development and community resources for family support. Family-Place Libraries are equipped with a wide selection of parenting materials and children’s books. Families become engaged in the library through programs especially designed for children birth to 5 and their families. Family-Place librarians reach out to non-traditional library patrons to improve family literacy and social connections. Evaluations of Family-Place Libraries have found that parents felt more connected to their community and better informed about early childhood development, family literacy, and community resources. Parents gained confidence as their child’s first teacher. Children with developmental concerns were identified through screening programs associated with the Family-Place Library and referred to community services.¹⁸

First 5 California School Readiness Initiative provided family supports and school readiness activities for children birth to three in high-priority school districts in 45 counties in California. Examples of family support included connecting families with health insurance, community health programs and social services, providing child development information, parent leadership training, family literacy programs, and providing transportation. Children in participating families were more likely to receive necessary health check-ups, receive developmental screening, and attend an early childhood education program prior to school entry. These characteristics are associated with school readiness.¹⁹ The project evaluation found that when parents were concerned about their child’s development the child’s transition to kindergarten was more difficult and children were less prepared for school.²⁰ Program participants overcame these concerns.

Family Support America is an organization that promotes parenting education and family resources to prevent child abuse. Family Support America has put forward nine principles¹⁴ to guide family support organizations in working with families:

1. Staff enhance families’ capacity to support the growth and development of all family members – adults, youths and children.
2. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs and to communities.
4. Programs affirm and strengthen families’ cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to a community-building process.
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.



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