



Healthy Relationships within the Whole Family Approach



RUTGERS

UNIVERSITY | CAMDEN

Senator Walter Rand Institute
for Public Affairs



PASCALE SYKES
FOUNDATION

The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2012 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 18 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability,
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review, and
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

One of the pillars of the Whole Family Approach focuses on the strengthening of healthy relationships among family members. In the context of this evaluation, relationships between caregivers and with the children in a family were the main focus in the beginning years. As the collaboratives became more established in their communities, however, the relationships between families and the collaboratives, and the community by extension, surfaced as a valuable aspect of families' expanding social network. This report summarizes the most critical findings around healthy relationships between caregivers, caregivers and children, and families and their collaboratives and communities.

EVALUATION METHODS AND DATA ON HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Healthy relationships were studied in the evaluation through the longitudinal survey conducted every six months over the first two years of a family's involvement with the collaboratives. Participants were asked to share their perceptions of help received with chores and responsibilities, relationship with their children, overall social support, resilience, and neighborhood belonging. Additionally, qualitative data from focus groups, interviews, and observations with collaborative staff and families throughout the evaluation added context to the development of their rapport and families' growing social networks.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CAREGIVERS

Findings consistently indicated there was a strong connection between family members, with nearly all relationships being described as supportive and encouraging. In 2015, 98% of primary caregivers reported that they always or usually got the social and emotional support they needed. All caregivers expressed supportive and positive emotional and physical relationships with their caregiving partner, even among non-traditional caregiver figures. Some collaboratives reported working with caregivers to develop a deeper understanding of the feelings and experiences of other family members to increase family bonding and identify shared goals and activities.

Families involved in the Whole Family Approach reported increased support received by the primary caregiver from the secondary caregiver over time. Specifically, caregivers reported receiving more help from their caregiving partner with household chores, childcare responsibilities, and running errands over time. This dynamic was evident across diverse populations and counties included in the evaluation. Although Hispanic, female caregivers traditionally did not express high expectations for men to engage in home and childcare duties, there were reports of men assisting or taking over household chores and childcare when the female caregiver was either sick, studying, or working, indicating that families were willing to reassess caregiving roles and responsibilities depending on the situation.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic tested family relationships as many experienced an increase in fear, stress, and mental health concerns while confined to limited spaces during quarantine. Caregivers indicated a decrease in help from the other caregiver in running errands, helping with chores, fixing things around the house, and caring for the children during the first year of the pandemic (March 2020 to March 2021). However, caregivers were more likely to agree that their family was trying to help them during the first year of the pandemic (67%) than before the pandemic (55%), and this trend continued increasing into the second year of the pandemic (77%) (April 2021 to May 2022). Caregivers also reported similar levels of resilience and social support during the first year of the pandemic compared to prior, whereas families not involved in the Whole Family Approach reported a decrease. The importance of family togetherness and support was emphasized by a collaborative member during the first summer of the pandemic in 2020:

“The concept of teamwork has been reinforced, and in a time when isolation might mean that all you have to depend on is your family, having a better relation with your family hopefully has allowed people to weather [the pandemic].”



RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CAREGIVERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

A majority of caregivers (80%) reported having an “excellent” relationship with their children prior to the pandemic. Positive relationships between children and caregivers were largely dependent on open communication and trust, so collaboratives and families often made improving communication within the family unit and creating sustainable parenting habits some of their primary goals. In early interviews, teenagers shared that they engaged in open discussion with their caregivers surrounding risky behaviors, and this was then mirrored by caregivers who reported having open communication with their adolescents and feeling comfortable speaking with their children about various topics. Teen participants widely identified their caregiver as someone who cared about them. Mothers were seen as the more communicative caregiver throughout the evaluation and were noted to have an “excellent” relationship with the teenager. Furthermore, a positive relationship between a child and the adults in the family was indicative of a positive relationship between the adults in the household as well.

Focused studies revealed nuances in caregiver-child relationships across populations. For instance, Hispanic caregivers saw their children as a source of motivation and pride. Many families sought collaborative support to find tutoring and school advocacy services for their children, and even goals around employment and housing had the children’s security and futures as motivation. Some families shared that they struggled with work-life balance, expressing a clear desire to spend more time with their children but not having enough time or resources for bonding activities. In response, collaboratives often offered various family-oriented activities around holidays and celebrations for achieving goals. Families recognized these activities as being enjoyable and providing them with opportunities that they might not be able to afford otherwise.

There was also evidence of positive outcomes pertaining to children’s healthy relationships. The Child Connection Center’s school-based

socioemotional programming was evaluated on its impact on children’s emotional well-being, self-regulation, and prosocial behaviors. Teachers noted a decrease in hyperactivity and a positive trend in prosocial behaviors, while caregivers reported fewer emotional and behavioral concerns among their children. The intensity and negative impact of disruptive behaviors was perceived to have decreased across settings.

As with other relationships, the pandemic impacted the relationships between children and caregivers. Although most families were still rating their relationship with their children as “good” or “very good,” only half of participants rated it as “excellent” in the second year of the pandemic. The causes for this tempering in relationship quality likely stem from COVID-19 repercussions such as isolation at home for long periods of time, lack of adequate technology, and/or anxiety of contracting the virus.



FAMILY, COLLABORATIVES, AND COMMUNITY

Individuals and families reported having generally good relationships with collaborative members and positive feelings about the services offered. Collaboratives maintained relationships with families that served as a social support system through building trust and rapport with those involved. These relationships allowed for open communication around variety of topics such as emotional and financial support, as well as suggesting or providing resources for families' needs. Collaborative engagement also resulted in participants reporting more community engagement, such as reaching out to other social or community services or participating in volunteering activities. These community engagements are crucial as social support and engagement from within the community was highlighted as an important aspect of families' relationships. Collaboratives reported helping strengthen community bonds by facilitating interactions between community members for social

aspects as well as encouraging the build of informal networks of support outside of collaboratives.

Collaboratives working with non-English speaking, immigrant families also prioritized rapport-building when working with families¹. Collaborative staff highlighted the importance of developing connections with culturally diverse families in specific ways, such as hiring staff who are culturally competent, can navigate language barriers, and draw on relatable experiences to connect with families. It was important to maintain a balance between building rapport and trust with families and respecting their boundaries around the information they were willing to share. Many staff members shared stories of providing transportation, serving as translators, explaining regulations and laws, and working flexible schedules to tend to families' needs. Their multifaceted support was recognized by families as well, many of whom framed their goals around attaining autonomy and setting a foundation for a



¹ For more information, please see the Decembre 2021 report "The Whole Family Culturally Responsive Approach Evaluation."

brighter future for their children. Collaborative staff focused on consistency of outreach, promptness in communications, creative problem-solving, and family-oriented community celebrations to embed themselves in the fabric of the community and become familiar and trustworthy entities.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the rapport between families and collaboratives through new challenges in communication and access to resources². Families and collaborative staff found virtual interactions helpful to communicate concerns, needs, and resources as they emerged, although there was a general agreement that in-person check-ins made it easier to connect and provide more in-depth support. Working from the existing rapport between collaboratives and families aided in making virtual meetings more comfortable. This rapport also helped with the staff's ability in anticipating the needs of families and communicating or creating resources ranging from academic support to financial assistance to food provision. Through all the uncertainty, there was an emphasis on teamwork among collaborative staff and some families as well. Collaboratives partnered with local organizations and businesses to bring resources to families, and the staff was in constant communication with each other to exchange informal supports as they appeared. Families reported finding comfort in their interactions with staff and relying on nearby family, when available. Survey data revealed that measures of resilience among target families remained through the first year of the pandemic compared to those pre-pandemic. Some families also shared directing services to isolated members in their community, such as the elderly, and sharing resources with others when they knew items such as diapers and food were hard to get.

Collaboratives took on these new challenges from the pandemic by adapting to the rapidly changing environment by re-shaping their engagement with families, and utilizing previously established relationships to continue providing a level of support to households. Families working with collaboratives reported being more satisfied with received services during COVID-19 compared to after COVID-19, and were similarly satisfied compared to pre-pandemic times. The success that continued throughout COVID-19 indicates the relationships the collaboratives built with families were maintained even in the midst of a global pandemic.

The holistic nature of the Whole Family Approach allowed collaboratives to inquire into the entire family's needs and aspirations in order to establish goals that would be valuable for every family member; in turn, this approach encouraged family members to be attuned to the needs and concerns of the other adults and the children in the family. Nonetheless, the establishment of rapport and development of trust between families and collaboratives as well as the engagement in community building also became positive outcomes of this approach.

For more information visit the [Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs](#), the [Pascale Sykes Foundation](#), and the [Whole Family Approach](#) websites.

²For more information, please see the July 2020 report "COVID Impacts, Supporting Collaboratives."



HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS IN PRACTICE

In the **Family Strengthening Network Evaluation**, a majority of families indicated having high-quality relationships with their family advocates, and had high levels of relationship satisfaction with their family advocate (90%); relationships with their family advocate also met or exceeded families' original expectations (83.05%). A majority of the respondents also indicated feeling that their relationship with the advocates was closer than both their relationship with others in general and when comparing to other people's family advocate relationships. Findings further revealed that there was a direct positive association between the family advocate relationship satisfaction and perceived social support reported by the participants over time. Individuals who reported having better relationships and higher relationship satisfaction with their advocates also indicated that they could count on friends when things go wrong. Likewise, respondents specified having friends with whom they can share joys and sorrows and also indicated the ability to identify a special person in their life who cares about their feelings as well as the ability to talk about their problems with friends. From this evaluation, it is clear that families working with family advocates report higher levels of relationship quality and social support with the advocate. These findings suggest that in the context of comprehensive family advocacy and individualized support provision, relationship quality between the service provider and the recipient is an important factor of productive collaboration.



RUTGERS

UNIVERSITY | CAMDEN

Senator Walter Rand Institute
for Public Affairs

411 Cooper Street | Camden, NJ 08102
(856) 225- | wrand@camden.rutgers.edu

rand.camden.rutgers.edu

 Officialwri

 @walterrandinstitute