

Article for Getting Ahead Website

Heartland Programs-Community Family Connections

Community Family Connections started two years ago with the implementation of a parenting group for Head Start parents utilizing the *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* Curriculum. This curriculum, written by Philip DeVol, is based largely on the work of Dr. Ruby Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty*. According to Dr. Payne, Poverty is much more than a lack of finances; it's a lack of resources. The purpose of this group was for parents to learn how to move from poverty to self-sufficiency by building their personal resources and relationships with other parents.

Some of the successes we witnessed as a result of the first Getting Ahead Group were: parents obtaining full-time employment in a field they love, one parent taking college classes and one parent being elected as the PTA president of her older child's Elementary School. Parents in the group used each other as a support system through these changes. They met regularly for barbeques and had each other on speed dial. One parent bridged another parent to a full-time job at a homeless shelter coordinating services for homeless and/or substance abusing women and their children.

In addition to these successes, couples began having serious conversations about their lives and became empowered to take the steps necessary to make a plan to get out of poverty. One family realized that just because it was pay day didn't mean they had to buy their children a new toy. One parent reported, "In the past I had goals, but they were so big I would quit before achieving them. The Getting Ahead Group taught me how to break down my big goals into small steps where I could achieve success. I thought I was breaking them down into small steps, but they were still too big for me to find success. Furthermore, in the past, if 'life happened' I would quit working towards my goals. Now, I realize I can take a step or two backwards, reevaluate my plan and move forward." This kind of thinking will get her out of poverty.

As a result of implementing the first Getting Ahead Group, we realized we had the ability to help families increase their educational and relationship resources to get out of poverty. We changed the lenses we viewed our families through. Instead of seeing them as victims of stress and poverty, we saw them as resourceful and excellent problem-solvers. We saw their willingness to survive and tapped into their motivation to provide a better life for their children. We took our expert cap off and became facilitators of learning. As a result of the Community Assessment, we found gaps in services. More importantly, we found ways in which well meaning community agencies had created rules and policies that actually kept people living in poverty. If families started to get ahead, they lost services.

In the fall of 2009, we decided to start adding groups that provided parents the opportunity to increase specific resources that were identified through the Getting Ahead Curriculum. We added groups on committed relationships, Financial Peace, and peaceful parenting. All of these groups addressed the resources families needed to move out of poverty. The groups ranged from 5 to 14 weeks utilizing a semester format. The semester format introduced parents to the time commitment of a college class, a subtle detail vital to families moving out of poverty. We had 21 parents complete the groups. Child care, an evening meal and bus passes were provided to parents to eliminate any obstacles to attending each week.

Family Connections groups taught and supported parents to develop “Protective Factors,” such as social-emotional and life skills. As parents learned these skills, goal setting, effective communication and controlling their own behavior, they were able to teach them to their children. Parents participating in these groups learned how to take responsibility for their actions while improving their communication, mediation, problem-solving and planning skills. They learned that change starts with them.

The group setting allowed parents to build relationships with other parents in similar situations and practice their newly learned skills in the social context. Group facilitators and parents served as mentor/coaches for parents in learning and practicing these new skills. Parents learned that they matter and have a direct impact on their child’s educational success. These skills will help prepare parents to continue to support their child’s education when they reach the public school system which hopefully will increase their involvement in school functions such as parent/teacher conferences and parent committees.

This past spring semester, we wanted to expand these group opportunities to the greater Salina community and asked the Salina Housing Authority, Ashby House (homeless shelter and women’s inpatient treatment center) and CAPS (Child Advocacy and Parenting Services) to collaborate with us. 31 parents representing the 4 partnering agencies completed one of the Community Family Connections Groups. We added two new groups; a committed relationship group for Spanish speaking couples and how to choose a healthy relationship for single parents.

Today, Community Family Connections is sponsored by the Ashby House, Salina Housing Authority, Child Advocacy and Parenting Services, Heartland Programs, Kansas Association of Infant Mental Health, and the YW Legacy Fund at the Greater Salina Community Foundation. These agencies are co-sponsoring more groups this fall. In addition to these groups, we are sponsoring a Bridges out of Poverty and Getting Ahead Training for the Salina Community. We hope to have representatives from the business, faith, social service, education, and city planning sectors complete this training to learn how to better serve families and teach them to become more self-sufficient.

I’ve worked for Head Start for over 14 years and having facilitated the Getting Ahead Group, I will never be the same. I know this is also true of the staff and families who have participated in Community Family Connections Groups.

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