

Engaging Family, Friend, and Neighbor Informal Caregivers

Findings from Four Informal Child Care Projects



Play Café at Elmhurst (Oakland)

Introduction

Eighty percent of young children in California ages birth to two, and approximately 40 percent of children ages birth to five, are cared for by unlicensed or license-exempt family, friends, and neighbors (FFN), or informal caregivers.¹ While informal care is widely used by parents, we know little about informal care settings, as well as potential strategies to provide caregivers with the skills and support to improve adult-child interactions. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families and Communities program is investing in exploratory projects to learn more. The overall goal of this work is to test strategies to provide information to FFN informal caregivers, connect them with resources as well as each other, and support them in providing quality care for young children.

Harder+Company Community Research, in partnership with the Center for Evaluation Innovation, conducted an evaluation of four informal care grants with an emphasis on learning from and with grantees, and using evaluation tools to support and strengthen the projects. Questions addressed by the evaluation included:

- What are the **pathways** for reaching FFN informal caregivers?
- What are the most promising ways to **engage** FFN informal caregivers?
- What **messages** do FFN informal caregivers respond to?
- What are potential practices, mechanisms, tools, and resources to **improve the quality of interactions** between adult caregivers and the children they care for?

Since work in the informal care field is early and exploratory, evaluation approaches were adapted and customized accordingly. Methods for gathering data to answer the questions above included: logic modeling sessions with grantees; capitalizing on existing grantee data; and primary qualitative data collection by Harder+Company, including interviews with participants and grantees. This brief highlights key takeaways from the evaluation, and considerations for future efforts to support FFN caregivers.

¹ The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 2015. Informal Child Care in California: Current Arrangements and Future Needs. <https://www.packard.org/what-were-learning/resource/informal-child-care-in-california-current-arrangements-and-future-needs/>

Overview of Informal Care Projects

The following table provides a snapshot of the four projects including their models and approaches to engage FFN informal caregivers in their communities.

Project	Brief Description	Learning Format	Location	Outreach	Highlights
Play Café at Oakland Public Library	An expanded and repackaged story time to support and engage family, friend, and neighbor informal caregivers at two branches with historically low storytime attendance.	Storytime	Public Library	Flyers posted in libraries and passed out in the community, and extensive in-person efforts by library staff (walking neighborhoods, visiting schools). Word-of-mouth was also key once Play Café started.	Storytime attendance increased 300 percent at the two branches implementing Play Café. Many participants were first-time visitors to the library and its children’s programming.
Fresno Helm Home	Converted a historic downtown Fresno building into a “hub” for family, friend, and neighbor informal caregivers that includes playgroups, parent workshops, a toy and lending library, and developmental assessments.	Playgroup	Community Resource Hub	Extensive in-person outreach activities, including school meetings, door-to-door visits in nearby neighborhoods, and Helm Home opening-day BBQ event.	Play and Learn Groups were very well-received by caregivers. They are meeting a community need for more activities serving children who are not in preschool, and providing socialization experiences to adult caregivers.
Stanford Ready4K-Toddlers	Explore text messaging as a format for learning for family, friend, and neighbor informal caregivers. Caregivers received text messages three times a week that provided information and tips about high-quality caregiving.	Text messages	Family Resource Center	Participants were recruited with the help of Educare’s Family Resource Center staff. Efforts included information sessions, one-on-one recruitment at Educare events, and other in-person efforts.	The Stanford team found that not only did caregivers respond positively to the information and tips provided in texts, they also felt validated in their role as caregivers; they felt part of something bigger.
Lotus Bloom	Explore “natural gathering places” like barbershops and laundromats as a way of reaching family, friend, and neighbor informal caregivers not connected with community playgroups or resources.	Community Events	Community Gathering Places	Lotus Bloom leaders used existing networks tied to community gathering places to develop new community hubs for informal caregivers to access resources.	Two barbershops hosted events for informal caregivers. Children received free haircuts and caregivers received information about Lotus Bloom playgroups as well as tickets to local venues and other giveaways. There was a high turnout of caregivers and children, and business owners felt valued as community hubs.

Defining FFN Informal Caregivers is Challenging

Across projects, grantees found that it was difficult to define and identify FFN informal caregivers. According to grantees, FFN informal caregivers self-identify as parents, grandparents, aunts, babysitters or nannies, friends, and neighbors. Within any one of these categories, individuals may not see themselves as having caregiving in common with others. As one grantee explained,

"An auntie doesn't necessarily see herself having something in common with a neighbor who's an informal caregiver for a neighbor kid. Their network, I'm not sure it exists."

Defining FFN informal caregivers, and building community understanding, thus proved to be an important first step in outreach. As one grantee stated, through the work of their Packard project they were helping to define the term "informal caregiver" in their community.

In-Person Outreach is Essential

Since FFN informal caregivers may not identify as a group that can share experiences and learn from each other, outreach for new programming or activities was difficult. Grantees found that direct contact methods and working with a trusted community member to conduct outreach were effective. Oakland Public Library walked the pavements of the neighborhoods surrounding their sites to hand out flyers, give out books, and talk to community members with young children in their care or who may be connected to them. The Helm Home team took the time to hire staff that had knowledge of and reflected the community. Lotus Bloom is an established organization with a trusted reputation in the community and among FFN informal caregivers. Stanford partnered with the Family Resource Center at Educare of Silicon Valley which is located in their target neighborhood. As grantees expressed,

"It is definitely on-the-ground work with parents, the neighborhood... [We]need to find people who reflect the community...someone they can connect with immediately and trust."

"I think one of the things that I learned is that it's really important to go through either trusted members of the community or members who are at least backed by an established organization."

"Instead of going to traditional referral agencies we went into the practical places where neighborhood residents gathered and were already accessing services. For low income [community members]... you have to go to a place where you are meeting families where they were at."

The drawback to this method of outreach is that takes a lot of time and labor. As one grantee reflected, "One thing we talked about was the sheer manpower it took to recruit 21 FFN informal caregivers into our study for this year."

"[Reaching caregivers] is about getting the resources and the information that has already been accumulated in various manners to where people are at and where they're receptive to it."

-Grantee

"This is an opportunity for [caregivers] to have adult time while fostering literacy for the little ones."

-Grantee

Opportunities for Socialization are Important

The resources provided by the four projects were very well received by FFN informal caregivers. Caregivers expressed enthusiasm at the socialization opportunities of playgroups and storytimes, noting that they were valuable for adults because they provided a chance for them to interact with other adults and build community. It appeared that providing a connection to an anchor in the community (i.e., public library, texting messages from a trusted source, a community hub, known gathering location) enabled children to socialize and reduced isolation for caregivers.

- **The Fresno Helm Home** saw strong early attendance at Play and Learn Groups, most of whom were consistently attending sessions. Caregivers were excited about the opportunity to have children socialize with other children; many caregivers noted that there is a particular need for activities in Fresno that target young children who are not enrolled in preschool.
- **Lotus Bloom’s** activities focused on finding natural community gathering spots to identify hard-to-reach caregivers in Oakland. Caregivers shared concerns about the need for more programs for children in high-need neighborhoods in Oakland, and more quality, safe public spaces for children to play.
- **Oakland Public Library’s** revamped storytime saw a 300 percent increase in attendance by caregivers at two branches where attendance had historically been very low. Interview findings show that 59 percent of respondents had never attended a children’s program before the Play Café and 71 percent of caregivers said that they now read more to the children they care for after attending Play Café.
- The **Stanford Ready4K-Toddlers** project saw strong positive responses to text messages. Caregivers found the messages helpful for supporting children’s learning, and also helpful for managing children’s behavior and emotions. Caregivers appreciated that the messages reminded them of their purpose and made them feel connected to a larger community and trusted source of information—Stanford and the Family Resource Center at Educare.



Helm Home Play and Learn Center (Fresno)

Together, the projects revealed a community of FFN informal caregivers eager for activities and resources. In particular, they show the potential of socialization opportunities like playgroups and storytimes, and community anchors like public libraries, as ways to engage FFN informal caregivers, build rapport with them, and encourage practices that improve the quality of interactions with the children for whom they provide care.

Considerations Moving Forward

This cohort of grantees engaged in exploratory projects to “experiment” with these new models and approaches to engage FFN informal caregivers in their communities. This year of innovating, testing, and learning offered an opportunity to learn more about who informal care providers are, their needs as FFN caregivers of very young children, and how communities can reach and serve them. The following are considerations for future work that emerged across projects.

- Program design, testing, and outreach should be well-planned and intentional:** When designing a program that serves FFN informal caregivers, the more intentional and well-defined the planning phase is, the more effective the program will be in engaging caregivers. Programs should consider short- and long-term goals, the program activities, the learning format, and the specific outreach plan. Organizations should be ready with the time, resources, and organizational commitment at the leadership level to be using significant capacity to get a new program off the ground.
- Successful projects appeared to connect or anchor FFN informal caregivers to a community and a trusted source:** Caregiving in the informal setting can feel isolating. Therefore, whether it is through technology, a place in the community, or a regular playgroup, it is important to find ways to connect FFN informal caregivers to a larger community for support, a trusted source of information, networking, and socialization.
- Further explore effective and efficient outreach methods:** It was challenging for grantees to identify, locate, and reach FFN informal caregivers. Additionally, the most effective outreach methods used were very resource intensive. It would be worth exploring and testing a variety of outreach methods, including reaching FFN informal caregivers through parents.
- Webinar-style learning communities offer opportunities for service providers to connect and learn:** Since best practices with FFN informal caregivers are not widely known, webinar learning communities provided grantees/service providers an open and positive opportunity to share, learn, and network about their work in informal care.
- Explore how to define quality for informal care:** Quality care in informal settings has not yet been defined, and standards for informal care have not been established. Even with the successes and lessons from the grantees, “quality” was not clearly articulated. Grantees used a combination of standards and messaging from parenting and formal early education, and saw themselves as helping to support literacy and other school-ready skills, but more work remains to be done in this area.
- Explore how to measure the quality of adult-child interactions in the informal setting:** Related to the first consideration above, it may be challenging to evaluate quality in informal care settings without a measure of some type. Assessments used in the formal care setting (i.e., child care centers, preschools, family child care) may not be appropriate, but other options such as a simple checklist or observation tool, or a tool that can be used by parents may be considered.

“Helping to connect with children on an emotional level so that they feel safe and secure – just to know that there is an adult in their life that they can depend on will go a long way with Kindergarten entrance.”

-Grantee



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