



For Immediate Release

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Contact: Dan Cohen, Full Court Press Communications
(510) 282-7621; dan@fcpccommunications.com

Jason Edelstein, Full Court Press Communications
(510) 239-1102; jason@fcpccommunications.com

Co-learning: Innovative Alameda County Initiative Connects Parents and Providers to Help Vulnerable Children with Social-Emotional Challenges

Key is service providers valuing parents' expertise and working together as peers

Oakland, CA – Creating new relationships between parents and service providers for young children (birth to age 8) by partnering as peers is showing great promise in addressing early childhood mental health, a new report by Alameda County has documented.

The report by Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services' Early Connections initiative underscores the importance of parents and early childhood service providers working as peers to help children who are experiencing social, emotional and developmental challenges.

The heart of this new approach is a process called Co-learning, which bridges the longstanding power divide where often mental health professionals and other early childhood service providers do not fully recognize and engage the expertise of parents in supporting the child's wellness. The Co-learning approach cultivates parents and providers partnering as peers, which, in turn, has led to notable progress in providers' capacity to engage the lived experience and strengths parents have—and in so doing parents become more active participants and decision makers in their child's care. This model could provide a path to change the field of childhood behavioral health.

"Co-learning: Alameda County's Approach to Deepening Parent and Provider Partnership in Early Childhood Mental Health," outlines how building trusting relationships between parents and providers can achieve greater healing for all parties involved.

“Building trusting partnerships between parents and providers in public systems is much more complicated than it seems, particularly in light of how parents’ knowledge and voices have been historically marginalized,” said Beth Sauerhaft, M.Ed, CPC, pioneer of Co-learning and the Coaching and Capacity Building coordinator at Early Connections, Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services. “The cost of not engaging the expertise of parents is steep.”

The report documents how the Co-learning approach tackles a difficult area in behavioral health—how to effectively help vulnerable young children with social and emotional challenges and their families in underserved communities. When providers are not able to engage parents in trusting relationships, young children go without the supports they need. If treatment plans do not reflect parents’ strengths and expertise, satisfaction with services decreases, leading to increased costs to the system—for a variety of reasons, whether missed appointments or longer duration of treatment.

Most important is that parents are seeing real results in their lives.

“In Co-learning, I found more of my voice. That spreads to how I communicate with my son’s teacher and his doctor; this is really important, especially for an African American boy,” said Oakland parent Christina Jopes, who helped launch a Co-learning Team in Early Head Start at Through the Looking Glass agency, where she is also a Board member.

“The treatment plan that me and his therapist came up with has allowed him to soar in school and socially” said Jopes. “We work together, what she came up with and what I came up with. My say in his treatment plan was the key to help him deal with situations at school.”

The process also helped parents better understand early childhood service providers, which also contributed to better outcomes for young children.

“I also learned to understand the professionals better, that they have difficult jobs” Jopes adds. “My son sees the communications I have with his teacher and that is a model for him for problem solving, knowing that there is a direct link to people who want to support him. He is seeing a real partnership.”

The full report, executive summary and 8 minute bilingual video featuring parents and providers, can be found at <http://thecolearningproject.com/>. The study, by Bright Research Group in collaboration with Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, will be presented in California and nationally through 2015.

What Is Co-Learning?

Co-learning offers an approach that responds to the need for greater parent engagement and trusting parent-provider relationships. In Co-learning, a group of parents and providers come together (at least once a month) and practice partnering as members of a facilitated “Co-learning Team” where they jointly plan and create culturally responsive trainings, resources and



events that support the wellness of young children. The co-created products are used by early childhood agencies to strengthen workforce development and parent engagement. Through the process of co-creating these products, providers and parents examine and work across the historic and ongoing power divides and come to see each other as resources and assets—and move towards building trusting partnerships. These trusting partnerships are pivotal to supporting the young child and family.

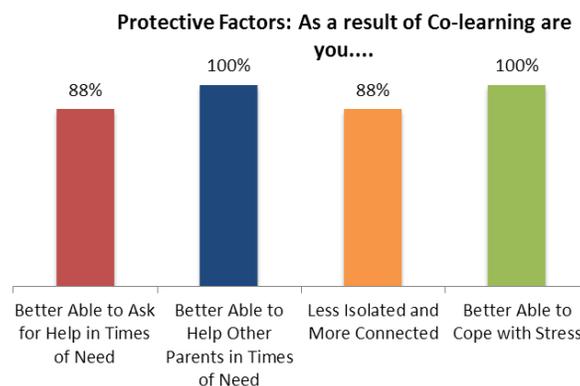
“A key concern of many early childhood programs is training clinicians to effectively engage the very families the programs are meant to impact. New staff at the beginning of their careers lose a lot of families and that is not what we want,” said Dr. Mary Claire Heffron, former Clinical Director of Early Intervention Services at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland and a founding member of the Early Connections Co-learning Collaborative. Dr. Heffron adds, “Co-learning offers an important approach that gives program staff and parents the opportunity to work side-by-side on projects about which they both care deeply. This gives early childhood staff a more nuanced understanding of parent perspectives and has demonstrated great promise for fuller parent engagement and leadership.”

Children’s Hospital of Oakland’s Early Intervention Services and Center for the Vulnerable Child has been a leading innovator and implementer of Co-learning in early childhood mental health. Early Head Start programs are recognizing Co-learning as a powerful model for engaging parents and building authentic partnership between the young child’s teacher and parents. In Alameda County, Early Head Start programs at Through the Looking Glass and Brighter Beginnings have successfully adapted Co-learning Teams.

Study Shows Co-Learning’s Wider Impact

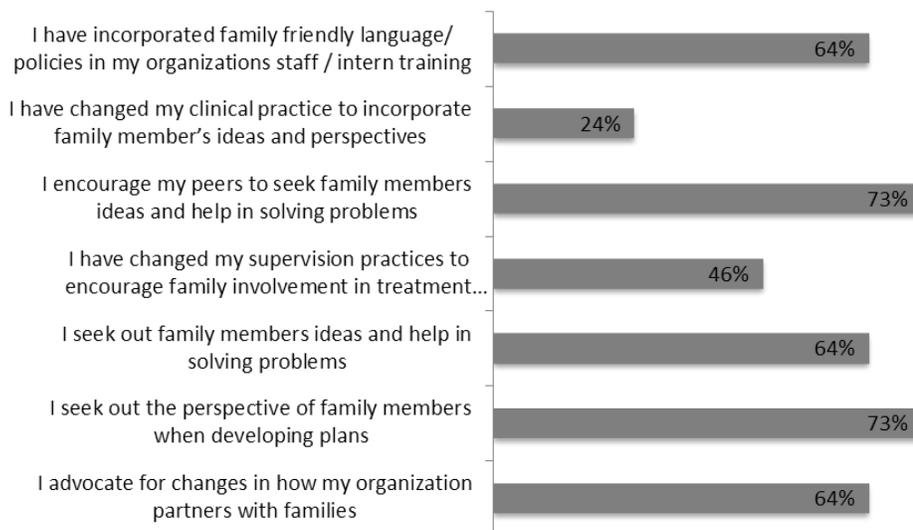
The Co-learning process works in different ways for the parents and providers. “We are talking about how to build resilient families and how to promote family strengths,” Sauerhaft said. “We’ve learned that when parents feel their voices and expertise are being truly valued, they can better advocate for their children and are better able to cope with stress and support a child’s healthy development, among other important outcomes.”

As the report documents, Co-learning increases the protective factors that build family resiliency, including:



The reach of Co-learning’s impact extends to provider practices and changes in organizational polices and practices. Through participation in Co-learning, early childhood service providers explore their unexamined biases and come to ask, *“Do we provide to families what I would want for myself and my own family?”* Providers additionally report that they bring what they learn in Co-learning Teams to how they practice and train their staff to seek out and incorporate the ideas and perspectives of parents in service delivery, agency planning and policies.

Changes in individual provider and organizational practice as a result of Co-Learning



When providers engage parents as “experts,” together they can identify the most effective culturally and linguistically responsive ways to support the young child and family. “Parents are an essential element of a team and are uniquely qualified to help identify their young child’s wellness goals, and inform treatment planning. The expertise and lived experience of parents needs to be at every decision making table that impacts the well being of children and families’ said Rosa Warder, MS, Manager of The Office of Family Empowerment of Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services and member of the Co-learning Collaborative. “Co-learning provides the foundation for parents and providers to learn with and from each other.”

Looking ahead, Alameda County is growing Co-learning Teams across the county. With greater adoption of Co-learning, providers and parents could become more active and engaged partners in shaping the services, supports, environments and policies that impact the social, emotional well-being of young children and their families.

About The Co-learning Project

Co-learning is a powerful approach for building the authentic parent and provider partnerships necessary to support the social, emotional wellness of young children and their families. <http://thecolearningproject.com/>



For inquiries about launching a Co-learning Team, please contact Beth Sauerhaft, M.Ed, CPC, Coaching and Capacity Building Coordinator, Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, at bsauerhaft@acbhcs.org

About Early Connections

Early Connections is a growing and united partnership of parents, providers and local agencies. We work together to strengthen and sustain Alameda County’s system of care for children ages 0-5 with social, emotional, behavioral and related developmental concerns. Early Connections is funded by SAMHSA, (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) and administered by Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, in partnership with First 5 Alameda County and United Advocates for Children and Families. <http://www.acearlyconnect.org/>

