

CO-LEARNING

ALAMEDA COUNTY'S APPROACH TO DEEPENING PARENT AND PROVIDER PARTNERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH



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FOR EARLY CONNECTIONS



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We also extend deep appreciation to the parent and provider participants of the Co-learning Teams at: Brighter Beginnings Early Head Start Program, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland's Early Intervention Services and Center for the Vulnerable Child, and Through the Looking Glass' Early Head Start Program.

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Executive Summary

Current practice in early childhood mental health is based on research showing that trusting relationships between parents and providers model healthy attachment and, by doing so, strengthen the bonds between parents and young children with behavioral and social-emotional challenges. At the same time, building trusting partnerships between parents and providers in public systems is much more complicated than it seems. When parents do not feel their voice is valued they may miss more appointments and are less satisfied with their care. Young children with social emotional and related developmental challenges go without needed services and supports, and are less likely to be ready for school.¹ **Co-learning is an innovative approach to bringing parents and providers together to build their capacity to partner as peers through co-creating the tools that support the wellness of young children and their families.** This report describes the model, contributions, and impacts of Co-learning, as it has been innovated over a two year period in Alameda County's early childhood system of care.

Co-learning emerged from Early Connections, an initiative funded by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to promote a more family driven, culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood system of care. Co-learning is generating significant interest in Alameda County and nationally, showing great promise as an effective workforce development, family engagement and leadership strategy for developing more authentic parent and provider partnership. These authentic partnerships are critical for engaging the knowledge, lived experience and strengths of family members, and pivotal in supporting the young child's well being.

Co-learning benefits young children and families because it creates a more genuine relationship between provider and family member. This leads to a greater level of shared trust and mutual generosity—shared responsibility and equal engagement. And this strengthened partnership is a beautiful model of a healthy relationship for young children and families.

–Program Supervisor, Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation and Treatment Program, Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services

CO-LEARNING PRODUCTS AND RESOURCES: STRENGTHENING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Through a Co-learning approach, parents and providers practice partnering as members of a 'Co-learning Team,' where they jointly plan and create culturally and linguistically responsive trainings, practices, events and resources. Through the experience of developing 'products' parents and providers work across the divides of power and privilege and the limited and traditional roles they often experience in the system. These co-created "products" are used by early childhood agencies and parents to strengthen early childhood workforce development and parent engagement. Examples of products and resources co-produced through Co-learning and disseminated in Alameda County include:

- **Clinical intern curriculum and training on parent engagement** for interns at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland's Early Intervention Services and Center for the Vulnerable Child.
- **Bilingual workshops for parents and providers** on Impact of Trauma on Parenting, and training on Positive Discipline.
- **Revision of curriculum for UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland's Irving B. Harris Early Childhood Mental Health training** adapted for Family Support Professionals.
- **Community wellness and parent engagement events.**

- [Bilingual video on Co-learning](#) used to train clinical interns and service providers in collaborative approaches to partnering with parents in service delivery and planning. Recipient of the Gold ECCO Award by SAMHSA for Excellence in Community Communication and Outreach. (thecolearningproject.com)
- [Local and national presentations on Co-learning](#).

CO-LEARNING: TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

As organizations experience Co-learning through membership in a Co-learning Team or accessing Co-learning products, they begin to have new conversations about how they engage and partner with families. [In this respect, Co-learning yields a benefit that extends beyond the individual parents and providers that are a part of a Co-learning Team.](#) The reach of Co-learning's impact extends to changes in organizational policies and practices, workforce development and training, and parent leadership. Examples include:

- [Changing clinical practices](#) to support sharing the young child's diagnosis with their families.
- [Changes in staff training manuals](#) towards promoting more family-friendly language in treatment plans.
- [Changes in clinical supervision and clinical practice](#) encouraging clinicians to seek out parents in developing the treatment plan and coming up with solutions for the child.
- [Changes in criteria used to select clinical interns](#) in UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland's Early Intervention Services (EIS) and Center for Vulnerable Child programs, prioritizing a candidate's capacity for humility, comfort with not knowing and the ability to tolerate being vulnerable.
- [Jointly training parents and providers](#) on early childhood related topics at Early Head Start (Brighter Beginnings and Through The Looking Glass).
- [Parents and providers creating and co-teaching parent engagement](#) modules to (post graduate) clinical interns. (UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland).
- [Championing Co-learning approaches](#) in early childhood service agencies.
- [Use of Co-learning video](#) in graduate programs and in the workforce to train in collaborative practices with families.

PARENT AND PROVIDER IMPACTS

In addition to the system and organizational changes described above, the impact on providers and parents who are a part of Co-learning Teams is transformative:

PARENT OUTCOMES:

- Strengthened family protective factors including: parental resilience, social connections, concrete support, and knowledge of parenting and child development.
- Increased access to information about early childhood mental health, child development, parenting and the systems of care.
- Increased capacity to communicate with providers and bring their family perspectives.
- New leadership skills.
- Group facilitation and training skills.

For parents and family-members, the benefits of Co-learning include increased protective factors, which are the foundation of the research-based, Strengthening Families framework. Equipped with a deeper understanding of child development and early childhood mental health and experiences partnering with providers as peers, parents have greater capacity to communicate their needs and perspectives when seeking or receiving services for their children.

Parents seek more information, ask more questions and question the responses they receive from providers. In partnering with providers, parents access more information and can better understand their options in making choices for their child.²

PROVIDER OUTCOMES:

- Increased workforce capacity to partner with families.
- Group facilitation and training skills.
- Leadership in advocating for family driven practices and policies within their own organizations.

In partnering with providers, providers experience their own shift in perspective—more authentic partnering with families is not only desirable, it is necessary. This shift is embodied by a separate question that many providers come to ask themselves- *do we provide to families what I would want for myself and my own family?*

The early childhood mental health field is built on the premise that young children’s well-being must be supported within the family context.³ When parents play a role in designing and planning for services, services are more responsive and supportive to their needs.⁴ Co-learning is a promising strategy for helping organizations to operationalize their values in engaging the lived experience and expertise of parents to support early childhood wellness.

Endnotes

- 1 “Improving the Readiness of Children for School – A Discussion Paper for the Policy Matters Project.” Kagan, S. and Spencer, E. Center for the Study of Social Policy. February, 2003.
- 2 Center for the Study of Social Policy, “The Protective Factors Framework.”
- 3 “Family Driven Care- More than a Good Idea.” Spencer et. Al. Journal of Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. August, 2013.
- 4 Ibid.