



**SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & SOCIAL CAPITAL:  
Opportunities, Challenges, and Barriers**

**THE OPPORTUNITY**

Building social connections and social capital can be challenging. Early research focused primarily on two aspects of the connection making process: (1) the number of opportunities an individual has to interact with others, and (2) the decision whether to actually act on those opportunities and associate with others (Small & Gose, 2020). While these factors are significant, they do not take into account the important role of context (Small & Gose, 2020). For example, Small (2009) found that parents in early care and education settings, who displayed the same motivation to make connections, experienced varied outcomes based on their specific setting. This suggests that organizations, like community-based Family Resource Centers (FRCs) can be influential in helping families to build social connections and increase social capital. Conversely, it's also possible

for FRCs to contribute to barriers that impede families' ability to attain social benefits. The intentionality and awareness with which FRCs support relationship building among participants can make all the difference.

**RESOURCES AND ACCESS**

When it comes to the opportunities parents have to interact with others, access and resources play a pivotal role. Many FRCs in Wisconsin take a universal approach to services, which includes significant proportion of families with limited incomes. The availability of discretionary financial resources and other tangible supports can be a determining factor in families' opportunities for social connection. Without childcare or reliable transportation, parents are much less able to take advantage of opportunities to connect with

others. This is something that Carla, the Executive Director of an FRC in rural Wisconsin, knows well:

***“The other big challenge for us and for the families that we serve is transportation. There’s just nothing up here. There’s nothing. And, if your car breaks down, there’s nobody to repair it for free and quickly.”***

When families have fewer resources available, this may mean allocating limited resources to meet basic needs in ways that don’t extend to social connections.

Time is also critical for building social connections and social capital. Some families, including families of color and families with low incomes, experience more time scarcity than others (Gee et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2004) and are also more often bound by external timetables (Roy et al., 2004). For example, daily tasks may take longer when families must spend more time waiting for transportation or services. As families find themselves apportioning limited free time, hours for building and sustaining

social connections are in competition with other activities and responsibilities. Not having adequate time to attend to basic responsibilities is stressful for families. (Roy et al., 2004). This stress can negatively impact social interactions.

Time and resources are also factors in the development of social capital. Building and accessing social capital requires reciprocity. Parents must be willing to give support if they are going to access the supports available to them (Sander & Lowney, 2006). Parents have to account for what they have to offer and the time commitment it could require (Small, 2009).

The availability of different types of social capital also dictates the breadth of a family’s access to a wider range of advantages, connections, and assets. Bonding social capital occurs in the context of those with whom one is closest, while bridging social capital builds across networks with whom one has a more distant relationship (Levine, 2013). Bridging social capital comes with more exposure and access to a different set of resources (Small, 2009). Due to the structure of our society, stratification of resources based on factors such as on socioeconomic status, race, and gender perpetuates inequities in social capital (Lin, 1999). This increases the difficulty of accessing resources from different social networks via bridging social capital. (Lin, 1999).

## TRUST AND DISTRUST

Trust is a major determinant of whether a caregiver is willing to invest in a social connection. With trust comes risk. Trusting the wrong person or entity can sometimes result in negative consequences, not just for the individual caregiver, but for the whole family. Conversely, choosing to trust and connect with the right person or entity can result in valuable benefits for the whole family (Levine, 2013).



Issues of trust and mistrust apply to individual, community-level, and institutional relationships. According to Levine (2013), mothers who express distrust in their social networks have often had their family resources drained or their lives disrupted by their social connections. Their social relationships lack reciprocity. Conversely, Levine finds that women who trust their social networks often describe how the assistance that they have received has contributed to their family's ability to survive or thrive.

Payne and Williams (2008) also describe the importance of trust at the community level, when working to build and mobilize social capital. They explain that for social capital to be successfully leveraged, trust must be pervasive, extending to not only the particular effort, but also among those in the community. Underserved communities may respond with wariness or hostility when initiatives are connected with institutions, like the government or other entities, that have historically been untrustworthy (Payne & Williams, 2008). These perceptions can also extend to community-based organizations if their approaches do not engender trust.



## ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

The recent work of Small and Gose (2020) posits that simply examining opportunities for social interaction and the choice to engage fails to account for the organizational influence on the context of social capital building. Organizational norms and environments influence outcomes. This influence can foster social connectedness, but also has the potential to hinder connections and social capital building.

Families first need to engage with an organization and its programs to benefit from opportunities for building social connections and increasing social capital. Researchers have identified three different types of administrative burdens that discourage individuals and families from accessing government programs and benefits: those related to compliance, those that stem from the need for knowledge, and those burdens that are psychological in nature (Moynihan et al., 2015). While government programs and FRCs differ, the types of burdens that can impede access to community-based organizations and their supports for social connections are similar. Compliance burdens might present as program requirements, like filling out enrollment forms or proving eligibility. Learning burdens encompass the need to simply be made aware of opportunities. They also include understanding where to go, norms of behavior, and how to maximize engagement in programs. Experiencing program participation as stressful or having stigmatizing interactions with others in the organization could create psychological burden. Lack of culturally appropriate services, lack of a feeling of inclusion in services, and lack of equitable access to services are all potential sources of psychological burden. Streamlining initial processes and attending to ease of access encourages family engagement, as does ensuring programs and services are welcoming, inclusive, and culturally relevant to all members of the community served. Increased trust and feelings

of connectedness among families and with staff can increase social capital.

When opportunities to strength social connections are intentionally integrated as a component of FRC programming and services, parents are more likely to feel empowered to take the initiative. Virginia, an Executive Director of an FRC, has seen this occur in the context of their current programming. Here, she describes how this has occurred through her center’s play group.

***“When we hear parents say things like, ‘Oh okay, let’s meet tomorrow at the park’, as they’re walking out of play group, how powerful is that? Those two parents probably didn’t know each other a year ago or six months ago. Not only do they have that trusted relationship within the context of our programming, [but] they’ve also got it outside of our walls. We’ve been a part of them building their own support ... outside of our programming. That’sphenomenal.”***

The challenges and barriers described in this brief are not necessarily unique to social connections and social capital. FRCs face similar difficulties when working with parents to achieve other goals and objectives. Consequently, FRCs have already begun the work of developing innovative strategies and solutions. Nevertheless, centers need to be intentional about taking steps to strengthen social ties and increasing social capital amongst parents, caregivers, and families. The more effort FRCs dedicate to removing resource-related barriers, whether by providing concrete goods or implementing strategies to maximize time, the more opportunities parents have to connect with one another both within programs and services and outside of them.



Acknowledging and embracing diversity, addressing issues of equity, and intentionally fostering inclusion, creates an atmosphere that is welcoming and encouraging of connection. Implementing programs in ways that engender trust with the FRC staff and between parents are all critical for families’ social connection and social capital building.

***Note: In January 2021, we interviewed the leadership of eight Family Resource Centers serving diverse communities and representing different regions of the state of Wisconsin. The content of these interviews informed this brief, and the quotes featured here capture the voices of FRC leadership.***

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