



## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & SOCIAL CAPITAL: How Family Resource Centers Can Promote Them

### THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS

Given their structure and programming, Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are well equipped to support families in building their social connections and increasing their social capital. In fact, many FRCs view this as a part of their mission. Donna, a long-time director, describes her FRC's perspective:

*“... we’re really looking at ... building capacity [to expand social connections and increase social capital] with our parents, in regard to ... a support system. ... we’re gauging, ‘Are our parents feeling connected and supported?’”*

Though family support organizations are often thought of primarily as supporting the development of children and cultivating parenting skills, they are also positioned to support parents and caregivers in building both social connections and social capital. Research has demonstrated how elementary schools (Shoji et al., 2014), child care (Small, 2009), and Head Start (Sommer et al., 2017) have successfully increased connectedness. One Head Start program assigned partners, who lived in close proximity to one another, among the parents of children in a classroom. Over the course of the school year, the social ties between partners were intentionally encouraged. These parents experienced growth in the size of their social networks and an increased willingness to ask for help in comparison to parents who were not partnered (Sommer et al., 2017).

Like Head Start programs, community-based organizations, such as FRCs, leverage a range of strategies to facilitate social connections (Small, 2009) and foster social capital (Cook, 2016). The approach taken by organizations influences whether social capital can and will be accessed and utilized (Small, 2009; Small & Gose, 2020).

## THE WAYS IN WHICH SOCIAL CAPITAL BUILDS

Trust and reciprocity are essential elements for building social capital (Sander & Lowney, 2006) and can be cultivated in different ways. Research indicates that social capital forms through multiple mechanisms, including (Shoji et al., 2014):

- *Responsive and reciprocal communication:* Parents need to feel that others are interested in what they have to communicate and that they have been heard. Not only do they need to experience being the recipient of this kind of communication, but they must also be willing to respond in kind.
- *Shared experiences:* When parents have time together, common interests and shared experiences (whether positive or negative) can help them form a bond from which their connection can grow.
- *Institutional linkages:* Organizations and institutions are sources of information and resources that can support parents in expanding their social capital.

The core services offered by FRCs are an existing avenue for structuring opportunities that can put these mechanisms to work. By influencing the context in which interaction occurs, FRCs can play a role in determining the quality of social connection and the formation of social capital (Small, 2009). FRCs can cultivate an enhanced level of trust between participants, augment the



strength of social ties, and increase extent to which people are willing to give to those with whom they have social ties (Small, 2009). FRCs can purposefully create a physical environment that is advantageous to interaction, develop organizational norms that build trust among families and staff, and focus on engagement that promotes reciprocity (Small & Gose, 2020).

Social norms and environments that support emotional safety and well-being, promote equity, and facilitate inclusion are equally important for the development of social connections and the sharing of social capital between parents and caregivers. FRCs strive to build their awareness of the needs of marginalized and underserved communities within their service area because these experiences can be, in and of themselves, isolating. Parents who have experienced institutional discrimination or discrimination by those representing institutions will likely be wary of organizations and what they claim to offer, requiring more efforts to engender and maintain trust both individually and organizationally. FRCs have a growing awareness of the need for

intentionality in expanding diversity, ensuring equity, and fostering inclusion into programming and institutionalizing this practice within organizational policy.

Threats of prejudice and microaggression from staff, other parents, collaborating partners, or community members make responsive and reciprocal communication impossible. FRCs seek to understand and address these challenges to create inclusive and supportive environments. Failure to address the marginalization of certain groups of parents disadvantages not only that group, but all of the parents and caregivers outside of that group as well. The opportunity for transracial, cross-cultural, and other intersocial connections and shared experience is enriching for all.

The work of researchers Small and Gose (2020) points to specific features that organizations might leverage to be effective in brokering social connections and increasing social capital:

- *Frequency:* Recurring opportunities for social interaction are needed to foster connection and increase capital.
- *Duration:* Longer blocks of time that can be spent together for the purpose of socializing strengthens social ties.
- *Outward Focus:* Orienting activities towards others, such as creating a norm of sharing stories with others, allows for finding common ground and similarities which can engender trust.
- *Joint Task:* Activities can facilitate cooperation and collaboration through the accomplishment of objectives and tangible tasks, which also promotes trust.

Furthermore, it is thought that beyond the emotional, instrumental, informational, and spiritual support that individual social ties can provide, when organizations step into the role of

brokering these connections to build social capital, benefits to those involved may extend to a generalized exchange of support among the whole network of individuals, a sense of belonging within a community, and more direct access to other organizations and their resources (Small & Gose, 2020).

## WHAT FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS HAVE TO OFFER

While specific FRC programs and services are conducive to building social connections and social capital, the overarching approaches used by FRCs also promote these for parents. Many FRCs take a universal approach in structuring their programs and services, so there is programming available to all families in the community and additional supports and services can be tailored to meet unique needs of families. Providing universal services means that FRCs have the potential to bring parents with different social networks together, as well as those whose existing resources and social capital vary. FRCs can foster the bridging of networks which extends parents' social capital



outside of their immediate circle of friends and acquaintances, thereby, introducing new resources that they can access.

FRC leadership have the shared ideal which dictates that a central function of an FRC is creating an atmosphere that is safe and nurturing to families, whether within the physical walls of the center or out in the community. By creating opportunities for families to connect, through designed physical spaces that encourage interaction or by scheduling programming to give families time to mingle, FRCs can leverage their physical environment and social atmosphere in support of social connections. Facilitation and delivery of services and programs provides FRC staff with opportunities to strategically introduce and connect parents as a means to broker social ties among families. Staff also strive to establish institutional linkages between families and the FRC, so that families have a touchpoint in building connections and accessing social capital.

Family resource navigation is typically part of the menu of services offered by FRCs. It is generally integrated across programs but can sometimes be a stand-alone program. Staff support families to find resources that meet their self-defined needs,



whatever they might be. Despite differences in structure, family resource navigation is about connecting and brokering. Often, this service is focused on the tangible needs of families either through referrals to other organizations or with direct support. However, the basic premise is also applicable to social connections and social capital. Extending the scope of family resource navigation to include efforts to intentionally connecting parents to other parents, as well as to other organizations for resources and support, can increase the social capital of families. One FRC Director, Julie, describes:

***“I’m just the person sitting on the other side of the desk but let me introduce you to this mom who’s been where you’ve been and can talk to you in, you know, real terms about what things are and what it’s like.”***

FRCs offer an array of group-based programs and services to families in their community. Group activities are a fruitful source of social interaction and provide ready opportunities for building social connections and social capital. Tricia, an FRC Director, describes potential benefits of their group-based programming:

***“It’s when you leave, can you call on your neighbor or your friend in that group and say, ‘Gosh! You know I’m having struggles with so-and-so today. And I know they told us to try this, but it’s not working. What else do you think?’ So, it’s more of a self-sustaining, sustainable tool that they can respond to themselves.”***

Different kinds of group-based programs have unique advantages for building connection. Play groups are generally regularly scheduled sessions

that parents and caregivers attend with their child(ren). The less formal atmosphere can ease parents who find social interactions to be more stressful into building social ties. Through their play, children themselves facilitate connection as their interaction with other children also brings parents and family members together. Play groups meet frequently, as they are generally scheduled weekly. Consisting generally of a structured component and a longer block of time for unstructured socialization, they offer duration. Play groups can also help alleviate caregiver tension between investing time in social connections and investing in quality time with their child. During play group parents have the opportunity to do both.

Parent education in small group formats, such as Triple P Discussion Groups, Be Strong Parent Cafés, and Early Childhood FAST create structure, making it for easier parents and caregivers to convene and connect. Recurring group sessions and moderated discussions can foster responsive and reciprocal communication that help to promote social connections and build social capital. When parents and families are provided with a safe environment for sharing their experiences with others, they often discover commonalities and establish trust. Tailored groups, like those for first-time parents or fatherhood initiatives, often facilitate the development of strong ties by focusing on the commonalities between participants.

FRCs create meaningful, cooperative experiences for parents to share in together, both within programming and as stand-alone activities. By identifying objectives important to the families they serve, FRCs provide the opportunity to organize joint tasks where families can collaboratively engage with one another. This could include caring for spaces in the community, preparing and sharing meals, organizing celebrations, or accomplishing a task to support the families using the FRC itself. These occasions translate



into increases in social capital by building trust and setting the stage for reciprocity among parents, caregivers, and staff.

The structure of how programs and services are delivered is critical to building social connections and social capital. Research contends that the most effective individuals or organizations create sustained and frequent opportunities for regular social interactions over the long-term (Small, 2009). They also cultivate an atmosphere and environment that encourages cooperation and eliminates competition (Small, 2009). FRCs can be effective brokers of social capital by advancing their mission, leveraging their existing infrastructure, and intentionally integrating these elements and strategies into their core programs and services.

***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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