

Healthful Relationships for Healthy Families and Children

The Situation

During early childhood, children’s brains are developing at a rate unequaled through the rest of their lives. Children’s ongoing interactions, primarily with adult caregivers, form the basis for how their neurological pathways are constructed and how their brains process emotional, cognitive, and sensory information. In addition, when children live in nurturing environments they increase their success in school, ability to build relationships, and build a path for future life success.

By focusing on what adults can do to advance positive brain development in children, we can provide opportunities for caregivers to build better brains and provide positive nurturing environments that allow children to work collaboratively, get along with other people, and control one’s emotions. These are the skills most valued in the future job market, in family relationships, and in personal health and well-being.

What We Did

The Family and Child Development PFT has spearheaded efforts to provide evidence-based programming across Kansas to help families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals become proficient in supporting positive neurological development in young children.

Adapting and implementing the *Better Brains for Babies* curriculum, a collaboration with the University of Georgia, has provided the opportunities for many professionals to move from a deficit-based approach to parenting and child care (e.g. “you need training”), to a strengths-based approach (e.g. “let us make smarter kids!”).



Strengthening Families Program 7-17, is another program the Family and Child Development PFT has implemented and devoted resources to support. *Strengthening Families 7-17*, is offered for all families in a community including at-risk and the general population. The program emphasizes the parenting skills of bonding, setting boundaries, and monitoring. *Strengthening Families Program 7-17* is designed for all parents who desire to improve family relationships and develop a family prevention program to keep their kids safe from alcohol and drug use. K-State Research and Extension currently has 18 individuals trained to implement the program.

In addition, the Family and Child Development PFT has offered several programs and resources to build the community’s knowledge of brain development, strengthen family relationships, and provide positive nurturing environments. These resources and programs include but are not limited to: *Together We Can*, *Relationships Smarts*, *Suddenly In Charge*, *Bonding Thru Board Games*, *StoryWalk®*, mental health initiatives, and efforts to increase access to child care across the state of Kansas.

Outcomes

Participants increased their own understanding of neurological development, the importance of positive and intentional adult-child interaction, and how to mitigate the effects of stress and trauma on young children. Further, the trainers are now providing their own audiences with these skill-building resources, and effecting change in their own communities:

- Better Brains for Babies feedback from evaluation forms: "I plan to spend more time with my kids, and provide opportunities for my child to explore. I need to learn my babies cries better so that I can build a more trusting relationship with him. I need to get clean from the drugs in my system and get my children back where they belong. I want to make a schedule and stick to it. When I say I am going to do something I need to do it."
- After completing the *Strengthening Families Program 7-17*, Pre and Post surveys collected from parents revealed those that completed the class improved their awareness and knowledge of the six qualities of strong families and had a heightened awareness and knowledge of the practices that promote pro-social behaviors. From a parent in Geary Counties class "Thank you for being a part of our families success and by the way we have done some refreshers with the Strengthening Class videos with the kiddos! So our family truly appreciates the resources and extra tools you provided us! Some of the best part was just having your support and our talks on those Wednesdays together!"
- Agents from across the state completed Teen and Youth Mental Health First Aid with Kansas youth. In Halstead and Peabody schools, 79 youth completed the trainings which allowed teens to identify when their classmates or friends might be going through a tough time and how to get them help.
- Utilizing the Suddenly in Charge and Babysitting Curriculum, Agents from across the state completed Babysitting Clinic Program. Chisholm Trail District had 22 youth complete a clinic, Harvey had 22 youth, Riley/Wabaunsee and Pottawatomie had 46 youth complete two Babysitting Clinics. From an evaluation in Pottawatomie County, "I really liked learning about all the different dangers that I have never thought about when watching children. I will never leave my purse on the floor around them."-Babysitting Youth, Age 13

Success Story

The Grooming Project is a program of Empowering the Parent to Empower the Child (EPEC), a 501c3 nonprofit in Kansas City, devoted to helping impoverished families become self-reliant through job training in the high-demand, high-pay trade of pet grooming. The Grooming Project's education-based approach not only financially empowers single parents in poverty through equipping them with credentials in a competitive market, but it also ensures they focus on improving their family's future as a whole through parenting and budgeting classes, mental health support, life skills courses, and other needed medical services.



The Program created life skills component to work with the parents in the program and they are all required to complete the *Strengthening Families Program 7-17*. This has been an on-going partnership and many parents have successfully completed the program. 50 parents have completed the program in 2022.

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