

Weaving Stronger Social Fabric:  
Kaleidoscope Play & Learn  
and Community Cafés Together



The **National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds (Alliance)** holds the unique position of serving as the membership organization for state children’s trust and prevention funds. Children’s trust and prevention funds are the backbone of our nation’s infrastructure to support children and their families.

The Alliance leads a national **Early Childhood Initiative (ECI)**, which includes a 30-state Learning Community of state children’s trust and prevention funds and their partners, including parents and community members. Through this national initiative, the Alliance is focusing on strategies that strengthen families, build protective factors, promote individual growth, help systems be more responsive to families and children and strengthen communities’ capacities as safe and healthy environments.

The Alliance has engaged in collaborative partnerships with members of the ECI Learning Community and expresses appreciation to the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF)** for supporting the development of the valuable resources resulting from these partnerships. The DDCF improves the quality of people’s lives through grants supporting the performing arts, wildlife conservation, medical research and the prevention of child maltreatment, and through preservation of the cultural and environmental legacy of Doris Duke’s properties.

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This document is part of a series of resources that were developed as a result of the Alliance’s partnership with states. All are available at no cost. To see the full array of resources developed, please visit the Alliance web site at [www.ctfalliance.org/collaborativeprojects](http://www.ctfalliance.org/collaborativeprojects). You may also contact the Alliance at [info@ctfalliance.org](mailto:info@ctfalliance.org).

## Introduction

A collaborative project in Washington State explored the potential of linking two popular grassroots strategies to strengthen families: the Kaleidoscope Play & Learn model and the Community Café approach. Five communities accepted the invitation to participate in the project, expanding their existing work, forging new partnerships, and bringing new opportunities to parents, caregivers, and children in their communities. Their work was supported by a small grant from the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds. This paper tells the story of that process, beginning with an overview of the Community Café approach, the FFN Initiative, and Kaleidoscope Play & Learn. It describes how the projects unfolded in different communities, what changed as a result of the collaboration, what was learned, and how this knowledge can be applied to policy and used in other communities. In essence, the project tests a theory about what is possible when partnerships among parents, caregivers and practitioners are intentionally created at local, state and national levels for the purpose of building knowledge together.



## Strengthening Families Washington and the Play & Learn and Community Café Partnership

In Washington State, the Strengthening Families framework has been adopted and advanced by a diverse stakeholder group working together as the Strengthening Families Washington Steering Committee (SFWA). The Council for Children and Families, the children’s trust fund of Washington State, facilitates and leads this steering committee, comprised of representatives from a variety of organizations, as well as unaffiliated volunteers interested in promoting and supporting child and family wellbeing.

During the past five years of collaborative work, two initiatives, Family, Friend & Neighbor (FFN) and the Community Café Collaborative (CCC, see below for more information about each initiative), came to know and respect each other’s work. They share social justice goals, core values, community based strategies and desired outcomes, and are both working from the Strengthening Families protective factors framework.

Conversations developed about what might emerge if the Community Café approach was integrated with the Kaleidoscope Play & Learn model that has been developed to reach and support FFN caregivers and parents. Could that integration be a leverage point that increases community capacity to strengthen families?

**“This (experience) could help us have learning goals; help our children to be ready for school.”**

Photos and quotes throughout this paper come from partners involved in implementing these projects and participants in Community Cafés and Kaleidoscope Play & Learn groups throughout the state of Washington.

## Community Café Goals

The Community Café Collaborative views strengthening families through a social justice lens. Its goals are to:

- ✦ Build partnerships between parents and systems that provide services to children and families at the local, state and national level;
- ✦ Invite the voices of marginalized, remote and rural communities and families not typically represented at local, state and national meetings into conversations that matter;
- ✦ Increase opportunities for parents, youth, and community members to contribute to the Strengthening Families work;
- ✦ Grow a network to communicate what is being learned; and
- ✦ Increase capacity for parents to advocate for policies that strengthen families.

NOTE: Throughout this paper, we use the terms “parent” and “caregiver” interchangeably. Parents, grandparents, other relatives, and child care providers all participate in both Play & Learn groups and Community Cafés.

## The Community Café Approach: Conversations that Change the Lives of Children

The Community Café approach uses meaningful conversation to spark leadership which develops the relationships necessary to strengthen families. The practice of this approach typically looks like community gatherings in a variety of neighborhood settings. Dispelling the predominant provider/recipient mental model, parents, caregivers, staff and community members gather and learn together how they can better provide the protective factors needed for all children to thrive. These gatherings are planned, hosted and coordinated by parents and other community members. Parents who have been coached in the Community Café practice, which includes the World Café method of hosting ([www.theworldcafe.org](http://www.theworldcafe.org)), design conversations that address the issues of the community. They typically leverage small seed grants with assets in the neighborhood and use their networks to ensure diverse participation. Café designs include local traditions and culture, a meal, and meaningful participation for all ages. Relationships that strengthen families develop as parents and community partners participate as equals in a new community system of reciprocity.

This volunteer-driven effort was started three years ago in Washington State by a team of dedicated parents who were invited to join SFWA. Two parents developed this approach as a means of contributing to the work of SFWA and growing a Strengthening Families movement in their own community. The initial team of two parents quickly grew into a Community Café Collaborative – a volunteer leadership team of 12 members and their partner organizations. Since then the Community Café approach has become an on-going practice in almost 30 locations in Washington State, engaging thousands of participants in multiple languages, with nearly 40 community and agency partners. These efforts are sustained by thousands of volunteer hours every year. In Washington, the “harvests,” or what communities are learning from these cafés, are shared with community, state and national networks. This collective learning is influencing policy and practice in local and state systems. The Community Café approach has been supported nationally by the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds as a component of its commitment to partner with parents. In addition, the Alliance has provided technical assistance and ongoing support to its members and national partners in more than a dozen other states as they implement the Community Café approach.

## Family, Friend & Neighbor Initiative: An Emerging Field

When young children are not with their parents, they are often in the care of grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, and extended family. Across the country family, friends and neighbors (FFN) provide the majority of care for infants and toddlers, and often help care for children with special needs. Families from all backgrounds use FFN care; it is prevalent in rural and immigrant communities for whom informal care is often a cultural norm.

In Washington State, the FFN Initiative was initially developed as a program by Child Care Resources in Seattle, and has been expanded statewide by the WA State Child Care Resource

& Referral Network and its member agencies and their community partners. The goals and strategies of the statewide FFN Initiative stem from the belief that all children will be successful in school and in life when they, and their families and caregivers, have equal access to culturally relevant early learning opportunities, and to family and community supports, services and programs.

WA State's approach has been to build a system of information and resources for family, friend and neighbor caregivers through coordinated strategies:

- ✦ Creating partnerships with parents and caregivers, family resource centers, library systems, elementary schools and school districts, Community Schools Collaboration, immigrant and refugee serving agencies, and others serving children and families;
- ✦ Increasing community awareness about the prevalence of FFN care and its potential to support child development and school readiness;
- ✦ Development of culturally relevant outreach, programs and materials;
- ✦ Inclusion of FFN in the development of the State Early Childhood Comprehensive System;
- ✦ Evaluation of system-building outcomes and Kaleidoscope Play & Learn participant outcomes; and
- ✦ Participating in the national learning community that is building this field of service.

### Kaleidoscope Play & Learn: A Promising Model

Kaleidoscope Play & Learn was developed within Child Care Resources' FFN Program as a strategy to reach out and provide support, information, and resources to FFN caregivers. In partnership with the State Resource and Referral Network, Kaleidoscope Play & Learn has expanded across Washington, as well as into the states of Iowa, Texas, and Pennsylvania.

Kaleidoscope Play & Learn groups are weekly facilitated play groups for young children and their caregivers. The groups are run by a wide range of community partners: family resource centers, elementary schools, community centers, public libraries, early intervention programs, and community-based organizations serving immigrants and families with low incomes or in transitional housing.

The intent of Kaleidoscope Play & Learn is that the caregivers and parents who attend learn what they can do at home to support healthy child development. Each Play & Learn group has a trained facilitator who plans and sets up activities for the children and their caregivers to engage in *together*. Through facilitator guidance and modeling, peer learning, and hands-on experience, caregivers discover how to support children's early learning at home, and they gain confidence in their ability to prepare children for success in school and life. Participants develop healthy social networks and connections with organizations in their community that they can turn to for support and assistance as needed. They experience leadership opportunities, and some have become group facilitators or assistants.

**Current research indicates that as many as 50% of children under age 5, and 60% of school aged children, are cared for by family, friends & neighbors.**

### Key Messages for Caregivers

- ✦ You play an important role in children's development and early learning.
- ✦ Children are learning all the time, in all settings.
- ✦ Children learn through play, trying and doing things, and relationships.
- ✦ You can provide quality early learning experiences through everyday activities.
- ✦ You can learn from and support other parents and caregivers.

**“Community Café gave me the opportunity to be more confident, to talk more to people and get to know more people. My kids can be proud of their mom now; they can see that I’m doing this for them.”**



## Play & Learn and Community Cafés Together

The FFN Initiative and the Community Café Collaborative have both developed their practices based on many stories from families whose children are not in licensed child care or structured early childhood activities. Many come from cultures in which the extended family traditionally cares for young children. Many live in rural and remote areas where basic needs and a lack of family and early childhood support are an ongoing challenge. Courage abounds where parents make do with a very limited income, may speak or read little or no English, lack transportation, or are recent war refugees unfamiliar with Western systems of child care and education. Even when free community activities are available, they are difficult to access due to these barriers, which contribute to isolation. These same issues often marginalize families from the community and from influencing program and policy decisions that affect their lives.

The FFN Initiative and the Community Café Collaborative saw commonality in their social justice work. Both focus efforts in rural, remote, and marginalized communities. Providing culturally relevant early learning opportunities is a strategy to address disparities in school readiness. Community Cafés convene meaningful conversations among people whose voices are too rarely heard. Immigrants, refugees, migrant workers, racial minorities, and families in poverty are under-represented in community discourse and tend to be over-represented in negative statistics. When community members gather for the sake of the children, they build relationships with each other and create community-led, synergistic efforts that improve childhood outcomes.

Finally, the two approaches also share a common outcomes framework, aligned with the Strengthening Families protective factors. Both approaches attend to caregiver resiliency, knowledge of parenting and child development, healthy social connections, concrete support in times of need, and children’s social/emotional development.

Building on strengths and common ground, this project explored two main questions:

- ① Would communities be interested in a learning project integrating the Community Café approach and the Play & Learn model? If so, how would that integration leverage community efforts to build family and community partnerships?
- ② How would these new partnerships impact practice or systems in ways that build community capacity to reach their intended goals?

In addition to maintaining the integrity of both approaches, additional working principals were involved:

- ✧ Due to the short term of the grant (a few months), the work would take place in places where the Community Cafes or Play & Learn groups were already present.
- ✧ Each community would have the freedom to design their own project goals, activities and outcomes based on community needs and interests.
- ✧ In integrating these two models each community would work in partnership with their local Child Care Resource and Referral agency and parents and/or caregivers on the design, implementation and managing of the project.

## Project Harvest: Stories and Lessons from Five Diverse Communities

The five communities that accepted the invitation to participate were quite distinct from each other and each approached the project in a different way. Some had active Play & Learn groups, some had active Community Café efforts, and some had both. All of them agreed to explore how these two approaches could be woven together.

Since the goal of the project was to learn through the experience of those living and working in the different communities, local leaders were encouraged to develop their own project process. Teams were supported by members of the Community Café Collaborative leadership team and the Child Care Resource & Referral Network, who devoted time to develop new relationships, build upon existing ones, and learn about community strengths, desires, and needs. Exploratory conversations with leaders in each community at the beginning of the project determined the grant amount needed for them to participate without taxing their resources. This collaborative structure influenced project outcomes by modeling shared decision making, leadership and mutual learning.

At the end of the project, interviews were conducted in each of the five communities with local child care resource and referral staff, community partners, and caregivers. Interviews focused on understanding the goals, accomplishments, what was learned, and outcomes of this work in each community. While the work was still underway at the time of the interviews (May 2011), partners, parents and caregivers were eager to share what they were doing and the results they had already seen. The site profiles in this section reflect what was shared in those interviews.

### What Emerged

Across the sites, there was consensus that Community Café and Play & Learn were welcome additions to these communities. Partners reported that the two approaches were working well together. Even if both approaches had not yet been implemented, partners learned how they complement and reinforce each other, and were looking forward to expanding Cafés, Play & Learn, or both. Through these two approaches, the partners in each community were able to give parents and caregivers a voice, build community and agency capacity to strengthen families, and set the stage for improving children's school readiness. Moreover, more families





### Port Angeles

In Port Angeles on the Olympic Peninsula, Lutheran Community Services Northwest (LCSNW) has offered literacy-focused Play & Learn groups at a family center in a public housing development for several years. LCSNW began implementing Community Cafés this spring, inviting Play & Learn participants to a family evening event that included dinner, Community Café for parents, and activities for children. This became a strategy to bring the whole family and community together.

During the project, LCSNW began a new Play & Learn group in the remote, rural town of Clallum Bay. This community had recently lost its only preschool program. With no other child-focused resources available, families of young children were so isolated and disconnected that the elementary school was anticipating little or no Kindergarten enrollment for the fall of 2011. Play & Learn has brought these families together, and to the attention of the school district which is now planning for a full Kindergarten class. The families are eagerly anticipating a planned series of three Community Cafés which will provide opportunities for deeper connections and leadership to further support early learning in that community.

Next steps for LCSNW will be to work with the Community Café Collaborative to support Play & Learn group participants in hosting Cafés, such as a husband and wife who are well respected natural leaders in their community.

attended or became involved and many of those already involved took on more active roles.

**More parent voice in service systems.** Parents/caregivers who were involved in planning and some who participated were galvanized into wanting to do more for their children and their community, and saw new possibilities for action.

- ✘ In two communities, parents and caregivers had an equal voice in designing, implementing and evaluating this project which resulted in quick uptake in attendance and community adoption.
- ✘ In addition to the opportunity to work as a team from the beginning of the project, partners from several sites described their excitement at seeing parents and caregivers begin to speak up once they realized that what they said would be heard and valued and that the Café was a safe place for them to express themselves.
- ✘ For organizations that were newer to partnering with parents, staff recognition of the power of those partnerships and importance of that voice was also noteworthy.

**Critical social connections were forged.** While both Play & Learn and Community Café contribute to increased social connections for parents and caregivers, the two approaches together proved particularly effective. Encouraging relationships between adults is one of many tasks competing for the focus of the facilitator at Kaleidoscope Play & Learn. With the addition of the Community Café approach, Play & Learn facilitators and host organizations had a new strategy for supporting the healthy social network that is so important to family and child wellbeing.

- ✘ The coordinator at one site described seeing social connections made and relationships deepened, in particular with a Birth to Three Play & Learn group for children with special needs. The coordinator said that group members become the friends the parents and caregivers involved can count on, taking care of each other's children and providing other forms of support and friendship.
- ✘ At another site, the participants in Play & Learn had become a tight-knit group who arranged play dates and took their children to other community events together, and the Community Café gave parents and caregivers time together to deepen those existing relationships by reflecting and learning together.

**Improved school readiness.** Partners talked about school readiness in two ways. The first was the direct effect of Play & Learn groups on children's pre-literacy, social/emotional development, and other skills related to school readiness. Children's school readiness was also affected indirectly, through effects on the adult participants – the intended aim of

the Kaleidoscope Play & Learn model. Parents and caregivers learned new ideas for activities to do with their children at home while also learning about the importance of play for school readiness. In Cafés, parents gained knowledge and insight from each other, in a culturally relevant context that they described as beneficial.

- ✂ A parent who did not speak English described his pride at watching his young daughter read off the letters and numbers from the vision chart at an eye exam – skills she gained through participating in Play & Learn, and which his older children had not developed before entering school.
- ✂ One mom from a refugee community particularly valued the school readiness component of these approaches in the context of adapting to American culture. She offered that this project could help their whole neighborhood develop learning goals for their children through the café process. At Play & Learn Cafés, parents and caregivers had an opportunity to talk about what they experienced as well as share stories about ways their new knowledge and skills are influencing behaviors at home.

**Increased community capacity to strengthen families.** In several communities, the process of building new relationships and partnerships to carry out this project had results that promise to go far beyond “just” implementing a new grassroots program for parents and children. The modest funds and time spent coordinating this project led to positive results for many families. Community partners were able to leverage existing funds, programs, and relationships to create unexpected opportunities for parents, caregivers, and organizations.

- ✂ Agency staff in one community attended the Community Café orientation and came back renewed and reenergized for their work with families with many ideas for how to improve their own communication with parents, and with partners at other organizations.
- ✂ In another community, this project brought an agency into partnership with a well-established, parent-led, grassroots collaborative. Both grassroots leaders and agency representatives learned about new ways of relating to partners; in their interview, they all stressed the importance of taking the time to build relationships and explore ways of working together before diving in to event planning. The end result of these newly forged or strengthened relationships is a better understanding of community needs and improved capacity to respond to those needs in family-strengthening ways.

## Rochester

The small, rural community of Rochester, south of Olympia, has a tradition of strong parent and grassroots leadership. Parent leaders have been convening Community Cafés in English and Spanish for two years. This grant allowed them to begin offering Kaleidoscope Play & Learn groups in conjunction with the Community Cafés. The partners saw this project as way to bring resources to the community, to provide additional leadership opportunities for parents and caregivers, and to improve relationships and connections – both among families and between agencies serving the community.

The partners began by hosting a Community Café to introduce the idea to the community and invite involvement. Parents and grandparents then attended a workshop on the Kaleidoscope Play & Learn model. Usually conducted in English and located in Seattle, this workshop was brought to Rochester and facilitated in Spanish. Challenging the perception that parents would not be interested in the full, two-day Kaleidoscope Play & Learn facilitator training, at the end of the full-day workshop the parents and caregivers were enthusiastic about becoming fully trained facilitators. A second workshop will be brought to Rochester in June.

Through this project, some family, friend, and neighbor care providers have expressed interest in becoming licensed providers and will receive support and education from Child Care Action Council to achieve their goals.

**“When the community is hungry for something, good things happen.”**

## Skyway

The Somali Youth and Family Club (SYFC) is a grassroots non-profit started by residents in a community of refugee families living in a large apartment complex in an isolated area. It is not unusual to find families of six or eight in this community. Many of the parents came of age during a time of war in a failed state with no education system, and are overcoming experiences of trauma and being suddenly uprooted. The majority of the mothers stay home with their children and speak little or no English. Some of the parents expressed feeling they had little to offer their children to prepare them for success in school in a new country. SYFC leaders saw the combination of Community Café and Play & Learn as an opportunity to provide this community with a more supportive social structure and early childhood development learning opportunities, as well as helping parents and caregivers to see that their contributions are important – to their children and to their community.

SYFC began hosting a weekly daytime Kaleidoscope Play & Learn group in December 2010. Cafés were being hosted once a month in the evening. This project helped establish a Play & Learn Café once a month, where one hour of Play & Learn is followed by lunch and a Community Café. Participants include mothers, fathers, grandparents, and a small number of in-home child care providers.

At a recent Café, participants discussed whether they should use the television to keep children occupied. Many mothers felt that watching television was more educational for children than playing or being with their mothers. But many also said that with so many children, it was difficult to control what the children watched. During the Community Café, they discussed strategies to control children's television use. Through Café conversations and Kaleidoscope Play & Learn, mothers and grandmothers are coming to see that play and interaction will stimulate their children's development.

Community Café has provided a structure for parents to talk about meaningful things, and to socialize with other adults while their children are cared for. Formerly shy parents and caregivers are speaking up in Café conversations; adults with no formal education are asking for job training. As a group, families have begun to advocate for establishing formal, high-quality child care in their community, where none currently exists.

This community found resources to increase the frequency of these activities during the summer due to parents expressing the critical need to continue the learning and dialogue.

## What was Learned

**New ways of working with grantees.** This project was a departure from the usual power dynamics that are created when funders come into a community with a large amount of money and preconceived objectives.

- ✦ The combination of (a) a small amount of funding, (b) intentionally honoring and building upon existing leadership, expertise, programs, and relationships, and (c) encouraging communities to develop their own goals and strategies generated creativity and hope among participants.
- ✦ The lack of externally imposed guidelines proved to be an asset to the project and the process by challenging assumptions typically associated with receiving a grant. Community and parent leaders frequently asked questions such as: “How many sessions do we have to have?” and, “Do the Cafés have to happen at the same time as Play & Learn?” The answers were consistent: “Do what works best for your community.” Some communities and collaborative groups were more prepared than others to make these important decisions based on local knowledge and relationships. Partners had to reflect upon and come to consensus about existing needs and strengths, which ultimately set the stage for success, whether that process came naturally or was a struggle due to new relationships. In each community, the decisions that were made reflect what was right for that community at that time.

**Building trust.** Partners at the sites emphasized the importance of developing trusting relationships among those involved in planning and implementing these activities.

- ✦ At one site, as described above, this project brought two very different spheres together – grassroots community leaders and an agency from outside the community – and the process of building mutually trusting relationships took

time, patience, flexibility, and open-mindedness. Face-to-face meetings were important for partners to understand each other's points of view and negotiate expectations for the project. The agency staff emphasized the importance of listening to the other people around the table who know their community well.

- ✂ In another community, relationships were forged between agencies that had not worked together before. Staff from those agencies described the importance of building relationships as people, not just partnerships as agencies, and said that while this approach takes more time and effort, the result is true partnerships that are able to benefit children and families.

**Community partnerships.** Partnerships between community agencies and with other community members were critical to the success of these projects. Reaching family, friend, and neighbor care providers can be difficult. Participants were recruited to Play & Learn and Community Cafés through agencies and services with direct connections to those families and caregivers.

- ✂ The funding for this project was a small seed grant that didn't stretch the capacity of local agency staff and valued community process and learning as much as conducting the community activities. The project design allowed parents to help determine how those funds would be expended.
- ✂ The community process *was* the activity in one community, and will likely result in significant benefits in the long term that are not reliant on outside funding sources. In a series of conversations, a community partner said, "I want to see how we can do this without relying on outside funding so that whatever we start we can sustain in the long term."
- ✂ In one location, spreading the word about these initiatives in the broader community resulted in local funding to sustain the project.

**"Nothing is better than talking about our common problems and finding common solutions."**



## Spokane

In Spokane, both Community Café and Kaleidoscope Play & Learn were already being implemented, but in different systems and with different audiences. In this project, Children's Home Society worked to build partnerships across those systems and communities so that the two approaches can be used together. This complements a broader, community-wide effort to increase collaboration and coordination between child- and family-serving agencies in Spokane.

The Spokane Library System currently hosts Play & Learn groups at five library branches. Parents, grandparents, and child care providers come with children to the weekly groups. The library system has now been introduced to the Community Café approach, and is considering when and where to offer Cafés. The response to Play & Learn groups has demonstrated that residents are looking for information and support related to parenting, child development, and school readiness.

The Regional Health District recently began implementing Community Cafés in the neighborhood of East Central Spokane as part of a maternal and child health project. Parents responded positively to the first Café, and were far more receptive to this approach than they have been to traditional parenting education. The Health District has expressed interest in bringing Kaleidoscope Play & Learn groups to this high-poverty neighborhood. This grassroots work requires a paradigm shift for the Health District, working together with residents to figure out solutions to community problems. How to evaluate the community level effects of these efforts continues to be an issue for the Health District.

## Wenatchee/Leavenworth

At the beginning of this project Catholic Child and Family Service (CCSF) shared that they had begun weaving together Community Café and Play & Learn more than a year ago. CCFS, a child care resource and referral agency, coordinates Kaleidoscope Play & Learn and Community Cafés in a rural four-county area of Central Washington. After starting Play & Learn groups three years ago, CCFS and other community partners learned about the Community Café model and felt it would complement Play & Learn for the families they serve. They currently operate nine Play & Learn groups and will offer eight series of five Community Cafés in conjunction with those groups this year. Play & Learn is funded through partnerships with other agencies and local philanthropists.

Play & Learn and Community Cafés reach a variety of populations in this agricultural region. During the summer months, a Play & Learn group serves the residents of a migrant worker camp. Some groups are affiliated with local Birth to Three service providers, reaching families whose children have special needs. Some groups serve mostly parents, while others serve mostly family, friend, and neighbor caregivers.

In Wenatchee/Leavenworth, implementing the approaches as they were designed is seen as critical to their success. There is alignment between the two models and participants feel very comfortable moving from one to the other.

The project supervisor described Play & Learn and Community Café as a “perfect marriage” providing role modeling and parent education in a way that builds on parents’ and caregivers’ strengths rather than correcting “something wrong” in their parenting skills. She described one Hispanic grandfather who brought his grandchild to Play & Learn and displayed a belief that taking care of a child was not supposed to be his role. Over time, through participation in Play & Learn and Community Cafés, this grandfather warmed to his role as a caregiver, playing on the floor with his grandchild and contributing actively to the discussion at Cafés. He was able to connect with other caregivers in similar situations.

CCFS is expanding Kaleidoscope Play & Learn and Community Cafés into the other counties in Central Washington through its other child care resource and referral contracts. In one county both approaches are supporting families; in a second, Play & Learn groups are underway and funding is being sought to bring in Community Café.

**Clear communication.** One site learned the importance of communicating clearly about definitions of terms. After a series of miscommunications, they realized that partners within the group had attended Community Cafés that were structured differently, and had never discussed exactly what model they were implementing in their community. Related to this, partners at this site emphasized the importance of attending a Café before trying to implement the model – perhaps along with your collaborative partners, so that all involved have a similar concept of how a Café works.

### **Relationships among parents and caregivers.**

Relationships with and among parents and caregivers participating in Cafés and Play & Learn also need to be nourished.

- ✂ At one site, staff and Café hosts personally invite parents and caregivers to come to the Community Café. Responding to a personal invitation is more meaningful than seeing something advertised or announced more generally.
- ✂ Another site stressed the importance of recruiting and training facilitators who spoke the language of the dominant population, understood the culture of the participating caregivers and, when possible, came from the same culture themselves.
- ✂ At another site, the organizers are relying on the closeness of families that already participate in Play & Learn groups to build on those existing relationships and encourage to make it more enticing for people with busy lives to invest the time to have deeper, transformative conversations.
- ✂ In one community, about 100 caregivers attend Play & Learn groups at libraries; most are not parents. Cafés held in the evening will allow rare opportunities for parents, caregivers and community members to participate in conversations together.

- ✦ In another community, the practice of integrating family fun into Community Cafés was structured with child development in mind and adapted to fit a wider range of ages. For instance, Play & Learn activities were combined with activities that appeal to older children and could include everyone that currently attended Cafés. This concept will be integrated into Community Café orientations. Busy families seemed to value both the time to talk with other adults, and the opportunity to enjoy high quality, fun learning opportunities with their children.

**Partnership with parents.** Working with parents and caregivers in these collaborative, grassroots efforts is often a new experience for staff members of social service or public health agencies. This project highlighted the importance and value of partnering with parents and caregivers in all aspects of a project, from planning through implementation and evaluation.

- ✦ The work progressed more rapidly and reached deeper in the communities where parents and caregivers were completely integrated into the project from the beginning. These communities were able to accomplish much with little funding in a short time because of effective partnerships. A shift to *developing partnerships* in addition to *increasing parent leadership* leveraged unanticipated resources for agencies. Some examples were parent and caregiver volunteers contributing to the work, interpreters and translators helping to culturally norm materials and activities, and assistance with avoiding design pitfalls due to a lack of knowledge about the community.
- ✦ A partner at one site described how she and her colleagues found it eye-opening and challenging to take an approach of *working with* community members to identify issues and find solutions. Staff members leave their professional roles at the door and share their own stories when participating in a Community Café, so that

## Recommendations

Reflecting the lessons learned in this exploratory project, community participants, the FFN Initiative, and the Community Café Collaborative offer the following recommendations for those who are interested in pursuing similar activities:

- ✦ Invest the necessary time and resources in building trusting relationships among agency staff, community leaders, parents, caregivers, and other stakeholders.
- ✦ Seek out like-minded programs and groups in the community with aligned missions, goals, and/or populations reached. Not everything has to be aligned for a fruitful collaboration to develop. Unexpected partners may emerge with critical contributions.
- ✦ Communicate clearly among collaborative partners about expectations, needs, and contributions to the project.
- ✦ Be clear – and sincere – about making an invitation to join a learning opportunity to reinforce everyone’s comfort in thinking creatively to fit the needs and strengths of their own community.
- ✦ Build on or adapt existing programs and initiatives to meet the needs of the community and to leverage resources.
- ✦ Nurture relationships among parents and caregivers to increase their opportunities to participate and learn together and to enhance their social connections and decrease isolation.
- ✦ In order to effectively partner with parents, caregivers and communities, mutual reciprocity of knowledge and contributions by all parties involved need to be encouraged and equally valued and respected.



they are able to engage with the other participants in an authentic way. In this and many other ways throughout the planning and implementation of the project, agency staff learned to shift their thinking about their role and the role of community members.

- ✧ The enthusiastic response from families to strength-based messages about how to support their children's early learning, and their eagerness to carry this information to their broader community, provided FFN Initiative leaders with renewed commitment to working in partnership with caregivers and parents. A specific instance of this is bringing Kaleidoscope Play & Learn facilitator training, usually given to paid staff at community organizations, to a group of Spanish-speaking parents and caregivers in a rural area. The parent leaders will host groups in their community, will be mentored by trained staff from the local Child Care Resource and Referral agency, and will share materials purchased by this grant, to be stored and checked out at a local family resource center. This is a new way of bringing Kaleidoscope Play & Learn to a remote community.
- ✧ One partner described her skepticism about the Café approach at the beginning of the project. She has been pleasantly surprised to find that community members really can leave their agendas at the door to participate openly in a Community Café. She and other partners described seeing people feel listened to and valued, perhaps for the first time, as they come together with their neighbors to effect change in their communities.
- ✧ Parents and practitioners alike learned to exercise patience and deepen their understanding of how to work with each other's established community or agency practice, especially in new relationships. Successful partnerships emerged when those involved were willing to develop trust amidst restrictions and agency policies, or established community norms. Differences in practice and culture came to be appreciated as a learning opportunity rather than a lack of caring or respect.



## Continuing Efforts Sparked by This Project

Building on the successes experienced and lessons learned in the brief project period, plans are underway to bring the Kaleidoscope Play & Learn/Community Café partnership to other communities in Washington and across the country. The two initiatives will continue to collaborate to promote partnering with and supporting parents and caregivers through these and other strength based approaches. They will advocate and seek resources, with the goal of expanding into every county in Washington. The FFN Initiative and the Community Café Collaborative are currently looking for opportunities to spread this new knowledge, and will be sharing information with Early Learning Coalitions, United Ways of WA, and the SFWA Steering Committee which includes the Department of Early Learning, as well as the State Child Care Resource & Referral Network and Community Café contacts statewide. Nationally, this paper will be presented at the Strengthening Families Leadership Summit in June 2011; members of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds' ECI initiative will be encouraged to consider implementing similar activities.

At the local level, much has already been leveraged from this small investment. In the final days of the project, a small amount of state funding for the FFN Initiative was reinstated (although small, it totaled more than the ECI project grant). Child Care Resource and Referral agencies in the five project communities were poised to accept these funds and develop scopes of work to capitalize on the new partnerships and momentum generated by this project. Here are some snapshots of ways the collaborations begun in this project will continue and grow:

- ✦ A mom who lives in Rochester will become a Kaleidoscope Play & Learn facilitator and will partner with the CCC to bring Play & Learn and Community Café to a migrant population outside of Yakima. CCC will be providing a seed grant to this community to get it started. A husband and wife who participate in a Play & Learn group in Port Angeles will receive orientation and support from CCC so that they can host Cafés in their community.
- ✦ A meeting is planned with a funder who heard about this project in Skyway and wants to bring collaborative partners together to help sustain it. New resources have already been found to continue programs over the summer due to parent requests.
- ✦ Six new Kaleidoscope Play & Learn groups are planned in Spokane, expanding to five new libraries and a tribal community. The connected Play & Learn/CommunityCafé approach is also being expanded to more communities in Central Washington through the work of Catholic Family & Child Service.



**“A mother is a school, she teaches many important things like language and how to behave with other people.”**

## Policy Implications

The Federal government's recent announcement of the \$500 million Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge is expected to spark sweeping change in state policy and systems for young children. There is now unprecedented support and awareness about the importance of supporting children's healthy growth and development across all domains. Research supports the widely familiar School Readiness Equation that equates Ready Children with Ready Families, Ready Schools, Ready Communities, and Ready States. However, families and communities are largely missing from the policy dialog.



In a May 2011 webinar Charles Bruner, Research and Evaluation Director for the BUILD Initiative, noted that family strengthening and village building makes the most significant contribution to closing the achievement gap for children 0-5.<sup>1</sup> Yet in developing and sustainably funding systems that support families, children, and early learning, there is still a large gap between what we know, and what we do. To achieve success – that is to ensure the protective factors are in place for all families – policies need to support an integrated, whole child, whole family, whole community, whole systems approach.

This project demonstrates effective, innovative, low cost methods that lead to positive results, but which often face funding challenges due to the very aspects that contribute to their success:

- ❖ Based upon community organizing principles
- ❖ Emergent response to community needs
- ❖ Non-linear processes
- ❖ Leadership in partnerships with parents
- ❖ Suited to qualitative rather than quantitative evaluation

To balance the current funding environment that gives priority to evidence based programs and practices, we need policy makers to create opportunities that support, enhance, and disseminate knowledge about innovative practices. In remarks delivered at a recent conference for more effective philanthropy, Eugene Eric Kim of Blue Oxen Associates asserted that solving complex social issues requires the collective intelligence of a network of diverse individuals. Conventional approaches to social issues are based on the unrealistic expectation that the extent of the problem is understandable, that it is possible to identify the best paths toward the desired outcomes, and that executing a thoughtful plan will achieve desired results. Yet social problems defy predictability and certainty and require a different approach by philanthropists and policymakers: applying collective knowledge to create positive change.<sup>2</sup>

In this integration of Play & Learn and Community Café, participants demonstrated that with the right systemic supports in place, the collective knowledge of parents, caregivers,

and community members can be cultivated, harvested, and continually mined for lessons, new ideas, and innovative approaches to meeting the needs of young children through strengthening families and communities. As Eugene Kim asserts and we all experience, money is a scarce resource. Once given, there is no more and there is nothing to give to anyone else. On the other hand, knowledge is an accumulating resource – when it is given away, the giver still retains the knowledge and can continue to use it as well as to give it away anew. In today’s tough economic climate, policymakers should consider knowledge a valuable public resource, and seek ways to capitalize on public investments by cultivating the collective knowledge gained through such investments. This knowledge can be shared broadly and should inform public policy decisions.

Inherent in this approach will be provision of funds required for the time and diverse expertise necessary to learn how to document and value the outcomes being achieved in grassroots, parent-led, community organizing initiatives, so that these methods and programs can be considered promising or best practices. A challenge for practitioners, policy makers and funders alike is to capture the transformations that take place in families because of their involvement in these kinds of initiatives.

Projects such as this collaboration can bring attention and focus to families and children from diverse or marginalized communities and who are mostly invisible to systems until their children reach age four and enter programs like Head Start. Policy makers can make it easier for state systems to provide seed grants like this to communities by allowing flexibility in program design, and awarding community process as much as direct service delivery. Evaluations can include community outcomes and child wellbeing outcomes, and we know from research that these are inextricably linked.

At state and local levels, policies can make it easier for community-based organizations to provide a gratitude stipend to parents who want to help but are prevented from doing so because barriers such as gas money and child care make contributing too challenging. More resources and increased flexibility can be directed toward creating infrastructure that supports innovative volunteer-run activities designed and implemented by parents and caregivers.

At the federal level, grants that provide funding for services to children and families can include a budget line item that would provide states with the resources to partner with parents and caregivers and allow stipends for participation, meals at meetings, child care, transportation costs, and compensation for lost wages if parents need to take off from work or use vacation time for participating in meetings.

At all levels, the value of community-led work can be acknowledged and highlighted by changing policy and grant language from “increasing parent leadership and engagement” and “empowering parents” to *partnering with families*. Policies can require practitioners and service providers to work with parent and community leaders to design programs that address local priorities. Small, neighborhood-focused capacity-building grants can be offered that support collective leadership, promote civic engagement, and build the healthy neighborhoods and communities we know lead to child well being and success in school and in life.



**“Thank you for this type of program that helps us be better human beings.”**



## Conclusion

The vision of this collaboration was to build upon existing programs and partnerships to develop methods to improve linkages between Kaleidoscope Play & Learn and Community Cafés. Given growing interest in Community Cafés across the country, expansion of Kaleidoscope Play & Learn within Washington and in other states, and the number of children in FFN care, *the goal of the project was to learn* from partnerships with parents, caregivers and communities. The idea proved attractive to the diverse community members involved. In addition, the supportive infrastructure of national/state/community partnerships, that allowed communities to partner with parents and caregivers to design a project that could leverage their strengths and resources, resulted in an increased capacity for communities to strengthen families. Because of the flexibility and the success partnerships experienced from a short term project, each community found a way to sustain efforts started with this project. It is the hope of all project partners that the ECI Learning Community will be able to apply the methods developed and lessons learned to similar community-based efforts to strengthen families.

**“Our children understand our heart beat, our smell and our feelings even when they are in our womb.”**



## Thanks

Thank you to the parents and caregivers who planned and/or participated in this project in the following communities:

### Port Angeles

- ✂ Cape Flattery School District
- ✂ Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
- ✂ Housing Authority of Clallam County
- ✂ Lutheran Community Services Northwest\*

### Rochester

- ✂ Centro Integral Educativo Latino de Olympia
- ✂ Child Care Action Council\*
- ✂ Family Support Center of South Sound
- ✂ Rochester Head Start
- ✂ Rochester Organization of Families
- ✂ United Way of Thurston County

### Skyway

- ✂ Child Care Resources\*
- ✂ Creston Point Apartments
- ✂ Somali Youth and Family Club
- ✂ United Way of King County

### Spokane

- ✂ Children's Home Society of Washington
- ✂ Community-Minded Enterprise\*
- ✂ Educational Service District 101
- ✂ Spokane Public Library
- ✂ Spokane Regional Health District
- ✂ Spokane County United Way

### Wenatchee/Leavenworth

- ✂ Birth to Three therapists
- ✂ Catholic Family & Child Service\*
- ✂ Central Washington Head Start
- ✂ Educational Service District 430
- ✂ Enterprise for Progress in the Community
- ✂ Thrive by Five Washington
- ✂ United Way of Chelan and Douglas Counties
- ✂ Wenatchee Valley College

### Washington State

- ✂ Children's Trust Foundation
- ✂ Community Café Collaborative
- ✂ Council for Children & Families
- ✂ Foundation for Early Learning
- ✂ Strengthening Families WA
- ✂ WA State Child Care Resource & Referral Network



\* Members of the Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network

## Endnotes

1. Bruner, C. (2011). "Early Childhood Data Systems: Linking school readiness, early childhood systems building and third grade reading." Webinar, May 17, 2011. BUILD Initiative. Accessed June 10, 2011 from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/content/ec-data-systems>
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## For more Information

For more information or to get help to start something like this in your community, contact:

- ✦ Paula Steinke, Family, Friend & Neighbor Program Manager, Child Care Resources, Seattle, WA. [www.childcare.org](http://www.childcare.org) or [steinke@childcare.org](mailto:steinke@childcare.org)
- ✦ Robin Higa, Community Café Leadership Team Member, Community Café Collaborative, Olympia, WA. [www.thecommunitycafe.com](http://www.thecommunitycafe.com)
- ✦ Martha Reeder, Director of the Early Childhood Initiative, National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds. [www.ctfalliance.org](http://www.ctfalliance.org) or [martha.reeder@ctfalliance.org](mailto:martha.reeder@ctfalliance.org)

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