



Pitt

HealthyCHILD Program Bridges Resource Gap For Schools, Families at Home

Tuesday, April 14, 2020



Hausaan Burton and his wife, Kimberlee (EDUC '13), find comfort in the resources provided by HealthyCHILD as they care for their children Brooklyn, age 3, and Rowan, 19 months. “HealthyCHILD provides us parents the resources to connect with our children more frequently, and in a deeper manner,” he said. (Hausaan Burton)

For the past five years, Tracy Larson and her team of consultants with HealthyCHILD at the University of Pittsburgh have helped over 100 teachers in Pennsylvania develop skills to keep their students engaged in the classroom. In particular, they help teachers address behaviors that often come as a result of trauma, mental health challenges and racial discrimination—and have reached nearly 20,000 local children through age 8.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Pittsburgh, Larson and the HealthyCHILD team—whose work was recognized with a Partnership of Distinction Award at Pitt’s Community Engaged Scholarship Forum in March 2020—quickly recognized that their interventions needed to

continue, in order to support the social-emotional learning and mental wellness of students, and their families in this challenging time. And they realized they needed to pivot.

“When schools announced they were going to be closing, we started to plan right away on how we can continue to offer support to families. As a team, we met daily on Zoom to come up with a virtual plan,” said Tracy Larson, director of HealthyCHILD, which is rooted in the Office of Child Development within the School of Education.

On social media

Follow HealthyCHILD on Facebook to participate in mindfulness moments, story hours and more.

HealthyCHILD is a partnership between the School of Education and early childhood programs, Pittsburgh Public Schools, COTRAIC Early Head Start, primary care physicians and more. The program is designed to provide trauma-informed developmental, behavioral and mental healthcare support to children by providing teachers, caregivers, parents and administrators with consultation, intervention, mentoring, education and technical assistance.

While many parents are getting help with their children transition to online learning this spring, Larson and her team saw a lack of information addressing the overall well-being of children—and of their caregivers, too.

“We noticed a lot of information being shared with parents, but we thought there was a gap in offering support around social-emotional well-being versus tips for teaching math or literacy, for example,” said Larson.

By sharing information on their Facebook page, Larson and her team are providing daily resources to support the holistic well-being of families across Pittsburgh—and the country.

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) has also shared HealthyCHILD resources with their families via their Early Child Facebook page, and the PPS Early Childhood Program will provide links to the HealthyCHILD resources in their distance-learning instructional packets, according to Kimberly DelleFemine, early childhood program officer with PPS.

“I think this will be a tremendous resource to families. This is uncharted waters for families and many are learning to navigate their families and their own social-emotional well-being,” said DelleFemine. “HealthyCHILD is providing information to navigate and build bridges through this difficult time.”

Activities from daytime to bedtime

Throughout the day, Larson and her team fill the HealthyCHILD Facebook page with activities, storytelling and ways to be mindful—and the engagement has been skyrocketing since March, said Larson.

“Activity Avenue” is a daily post that provides parents and caregivers with ideas for fun and easy activities that they can do at home with their children of different ages, according to Larson. “We want to keep it simple and recommend activities parents can do with items they already have in their home, like finger painting with yogurt, for example,” she said.

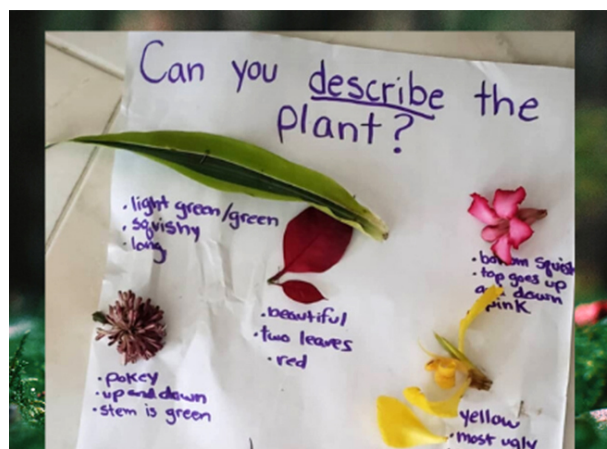
At lunchtime, the page features a “Social-emotional Story Hour,” which includes a storytelling along with a complimentary activity sheet.

“We’re focusing on emotional support with these stories,” said Denise Esposto, developmental health care consultant with HealthyCHILD. “We’re reading stories such as ‘Mouse was Mad.’ We’re giving children and adults validation and permission to express their feelings, especially related to the transition over the past few weeks.”

The activity sheets, according to Larson, contain questions that parents can ask their child while they’re listening to the story or when finished with the book—and a suggested activity related to the book, involving items found in the home, like paper, pencils and crayons.

At bedtime, the team posts a “Mindfulness Moment,” that encourages children, and parents alike, to engage in a calming activity such as yoga or a guided meditation, or just listen to a story together about mindfulness.

“We already had a library of thousands of books on social and emotional topics,” said Larson, who said each of her team members are highly experienced and skilled in delivering social emotional learning and support. “We’ve gone into classrooms to do these lessons for many



Activity Avenue, one of the daily HealthyCHILD resources, provides ideas for fun and easy activities that parents can do at home with their children of different ages, such as this plant describing lesson. (Denise Esposto)

years; now we're transferring our work to online, as best we can."



The HealthyCHILD team celebrates its Partnership of Distinction Award, which they received at Pitt's Community Engaged Scholarship Forum in March 2020. (Tracy Larson)

Compassion for parents

"Emotional contagion is a real thing, and we want to keep adults in a calm space," said Esposto. Emotional contagion involves the transfer of moods and feelings from person to person.

For adults, the team created "Compassion Corner," a daily Facebook post on the HealthyCHILD page catered to adults to help manage stress and provide them with self-relaxation and self-care exercises.

Hausaan Burton and his wife, Kimberlee (EDUC '13), use Compassion Corner as a basis for their family's schedule, he said, which includes keeping 3-year-old Brooklyn and 19-month-old Rowan busy.

"During a time of worry and fear, HealthyCHILD has maintained a positive and warm message," said Burton, a Pittsburgh native who now lives in Hawaii with his family. "With work slowing down and the transition to stay-at-home parenting, many parents don't have the resources to make that transition. This is the bridge in that gap."

Larson said that's why HealthyCHILD has resources for the family as a whole—so parents can look back on this time not as a traumatizing event, but a time when their families felt more connected and enjoyed spending time together.

“We want to help decrease the stress that's inevitably happening in every home right now. Many parents are worried about homeschooling their kids, as well as their own job security and how they will keep paying the bills,” said Larson. “We wanted to figure out how to be that other voice that tells parents to relax and use this time to enjoy their kids and build relationships.”

Burton said that HealthyCHILD's resources have allowed him and his wife to be more connected to their children during this uncertain time. Some of his family's favorite activities have included making homemade play dough and going on nature walks.

“With fear spreading quicker than the virus itself, resources from HealthyCHILD are important for parents to focus on the positive,” said Burton. “HealthyCHILD provides us parents the resources to connect with our children more frequently, and in a deeper manner.”

He said that it's already showing.

“One of my daughter Brooklyn's favorite books is ‘What if I know My Feelings,’ by Michelle Nellson-Schmidt,” said Burton. “Now, she always reminds me that ‘mommy says it's OK to feel shy.’”

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