

Making and Celebrating Community

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The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development in partnership with the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County Family Centers Network

ABSTRACT

The "Making and Celebrating Community" project is a partnership between the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County Family Center Network (FCN). It reimagines the traditional ways that families connect and build community by offering opportunities for them to learn and grow together through making. This project builds upon the benefits of virtual learning and connecting that have surfaced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

PROJECT GOALS

1. Children of all ages, though focused primarily on those under six, will engage in nested learning opportunities led by their parents as their first teachers to explore concepts of community and accelerate brain development.
2. Parents will embrace their roles as community network builders and demonstrate amplified civic voice as they create projects that speak for their communities.
3. Family centers will redefine educational places and spaces with the families they serve via on-line and real-world opportunities.
4. Communities will benefit as two generations engage in study and collaboration to complete representations of community pride, prototyping a learning model that can be replicated.



PROPOSED MEASUREMENTS

1. Family centers will recruit approximately 12 families per center to participate in the project. Attendance will be tracked for each interaction.
2. Across the family center network, staff will learn how to use online platforms to engage families in two-generation learning and making activities. Each center will have at least one key staff person assigned to learn how to facilitate the projects and to then support families in completing the activities.
3. Allegheny County Department of Human Services staff in the Analytics, Technology, and Planning Department will design, implement, and analyze pre- and post-test surveys to assess participants' changes in community knowledge and pride.
4. Families' social networks will be assessed at the beginning of the project and after the culminating celebration event. Throughout the project, interactions with other families in the centers working on the projects as well as across the centers will be provided to practice exchange of ideas and to build relationships.



OUTCOMES

1. The number of families participating across centers, varied between 10 and 50 families per center.
2. Across the family center network 21 out of 28 centers participated and 31 staff member participated in monthly trainings and implemented the activities with families.
3. Four of the seven maker activities gave families the opportunity to venture out into their neighborhoods and experience their communities firsthand.
4. Many families reported that attending the maker sessions was therapeutic for both parent unusual stress. Adults would typically follow along and participate while their children completed the activities. Likewise, the professional development sessions provided by the Children's Museum were calming for the staff as they followed along, allowing for a much-needed time to slow down and express themselves creatively.
5. The in-person culminating event was a positive way for both staff and families to celebrate the whole community coming together after an incredibly challenging year. 19 different FCs participated in the event, and approximately 30 FC staff volunteered to facilitate the maker activities and interact with families.

One of these projects, "Cardboard Communities", showed families how to create their favorite neighborhood spots using everyday household objects and recyclable items. Families were encouraged to walk through their neighborhood and identify buildings that were meaningful to them and build a replica neighborhood. Despite many of these buildings being closed at the time, families were able to revisit them in their own homes and were reminded of all the things they love about their community.

CONCLUSIONS

While the project was launched at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, families and staff had an overall positive experience.

Many families reported that attending the maker sessions was therapeutic for both parents and children during a time of unusual stress. The professional development sessions provided by the Children's Museum were calming for the staff as they followed along, allowing for a much-needed time to slow down and express themselves creatively. Lastly, the in-person culminating event was a positive way for both staff and families to celebrate the whole community coming together after an incredibly challenging year. Children eagerly participated in a variety of activities, completed art projects and put their artwork on display. The feeling of community was truly palpable as families and staff from all centers came together to celebrate all they had overcome during the pandemic.

Due to the success and enthusiasm of this project, all the partnering organizations are looking forward to other opportunities to collaborate in the future.



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