
IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Lessons Learned

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LESSONS LEARNED ACROSS RECENT PROJECTS

There is some new evidence, and new thinking about next steps to be tried, about what it might take for children, families and communities to thrive.

- New psycho neurological research supports the necessity to pay attention to the very earliest years of a child's life (pre-conception, prenatally and in the first three years).
- There is a renewed focus on individual responsibility for children's well-being across very different political ideologies.
- There continues to be no institutional or system home charged with overseeing a collective responsibility for the well-being of young children.
- Efforts to improve outcomes at the system level tend to pull attention away from practice at the front-line, or specific interactions between children and those responsible for their well-being (child care providers, teachers, recreation sponsors).
- Evidence of the effectiveness of some promising interventions — family support, family preservation and home visiting — is mixed.
- Early child well-being is made up of multiple dimensions with respect to the child (cognitive, social, physical, emotional) and with respect to factors that influence well-being (family, neighborhood, community). School readiness is an emerging concept that focuses on these multiple dimensions. The concept includes, for example, making schools and communities ready for children, not just the reverse.
- There have always been trade-offs between developing universal, non-stigmatizing efforts to improve outcomes for children and meeting the needs of specialized populations. Given scarce resources, one of the ways out of this bind is to broaden our thinking about the full range of individual and collective actions that might improve outcomes for children, and to create both universal and targeted activities within each sphere. For example, there are opportunities to embed child development activities more fully within libraries, recreational and spiritual settings, etc.

Experience indicates better ways to design and share models:

- A broad vision is critical for creating a broad-based constituency to improve outcomes, but it must be tempered by realistic short-term and interim goals and benchmarks. There is a tension between working from a vision that is worth the effort and making people feel the work is doable.
- Using an outcomes orientation, and working from jointly developed theories of change (see examples) are useful strategies to help people manage complex change processes and to keep work focused.
- Models that are sufficient to achieve improved outcomes for children, families and communities are necessarily complex, comprehensive and long-term. When they are based on research, they will also have some elements that are fixed (to avoid reinventing the wheel). But because there is much that we do not know about how to improve outcomes, particularly for all children or on a broad scale given current systems and funding constraints, models must also incorporate flexibility to promote innovation.

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- Not only are these models difficult to build and implement, they are quite difficult to communicate.
- It is useful to work on ways to break down complex models in component parts so that they can be communicated more easily and so that early tangible successes can be celebrated.
- Clarity about what's fixed and what's flexible is essential.

There are specific capacities that need to be developed to improve the likelihood that efforts to improve outcomes will begin well and succeed over time:

- Work on governance structures tends to overwhelm work on improving outcomes, and there is disagreement in the field about whether new structures are worth their cost in energy, resources and political capital. It is clear that communities consider governance issues more effectively after they have built trust, established the strengths and weaknesses of current structures for achieving the specific improvements in outcomes being sought and developed their strategies to improve child and family well-being. Capacity to deal with this issue is developed over time.
- Successful efforts to improve outcomes for young children and their families have political and/or community champions. These champions have been the Mayor, Governor or key legislator and/or respected business leaders.
- Leadership development and capacity building at all levels is needed to ensure effective participation of a broad range of individuals.
- There is a trade-off between inclusiveness and efficiency in collaborative efforts (long noted in the literature). There are specific steps that communities can take to form and maintain inclusive efforts; absent these specific steps, efforts will tend to exclude those with different ideologies and theories of change. In addition, issues related to class, race and gender may interfere with the work unless surfaced and addressed.

Some activities previously considered as tangential or separate — engaging the public in support of the behaviors that need to be changed to improve outcomes; addressing institutional racism; fostering and providing access to normal, positive child development activities and opportunities in communities — need to be fully embedded within any efforts to improve outcomes for young children.

- Efforts to engage the public are an essential programmatic strategy to improve outcomes, but they need to be very carefully targeted and crafted.
- We have tended to underplay the role of racism, and particularly, institutional racism, in the development of strategies to address children and family outcomes.
- We tend to focus our efforts on improving poor outcomes, rather than on a higher standard of having all children thrive; thus making the individual child and family the unit of intervention, not the community. A focus on poor outcomes also leads to remedial and targeted strategies rather than strategies aimed at creating a community which supports high levels of well-being and achievement of children and families. A different strategy showing promise is to think more about normal child development and to build communities with the services, activities and supports most likely to foster those positive goals.
- The non-profit sector provides myriad opportunities to support normal child development that are often overlooked, or not thought about in a systemic way.

The process by which communities, foundations and others (intermediaries, technical assistance providers, evaluators) can most effectively work together is important. New forms of partnership need to be implemented.

- Such partnerships entail more equitable relationships between funders, communities, intermediaries and states, as well as different relationships between families and systems.

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- This work requires an understanding and appreciation that inclusiveness and trust take time to create and maintain, that work will not proceed in a linear or smooth fashion, that improvement against intermediate markers is progress, and that there are some things each community has to learn for itself. Timing and funding decisions should reflect this reality.
- At the same time, there is considerable resistance to altering existing power relationships necessary to change the status quo. Interim markers of progress can be used to promote accountability and identify and overcome resistance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEXT GENERATION COMMUNITY/FOUNDATION PARTNERSHIPS

Some of the lessons above have implications for how communities might do their work:

- Consider establishing positive goals (children thriving, school readiness, normal child development) rather than goals tied solely to reduction of negative outcomes. These goals reduce stigma, set the stage for universal efforts and draw in a broad range of community stakeholders beyond traditional service providers and systems (for example, parents; neighborhoods; recreational, spiritual and educational activities and services; schools, etc.).
- Consider establishing the community (rather than individual children and families) as the target of intervention. This avoids blaming the victim, it helps to establish a collective responsibility for children (and helps make their roles clear) and it sets the stage for taking smaller efforts to scale.
- Create and continue to refine a theory of change about the strategies, short-term and interim outcomes that are required to achieve the long-term outcomes of interest. Use this as a tool to refine strategies and develop benchmarks or markers of progress.
- Do a careful analysis of the behaviors that need to be changed to achieve short-term and interim outcomes, identify the groups who can make those

changes, and the communication and other strategies that influence their behavior. Target change efforts (including public will efforts) based on the results of this analysis.

- Take advantage of available technical assistance about strategies to achieve outcomes.
- Also take advantage of available technical assistance about group process, collaboration, conflict resolution and other process skills.
- Take specific (and known) steps to build inclusive collaborations.
- Build on research and best practice, taking care to replicate the features of efforts that contribute to positive outcomes. (Don't allow efforts to become diluted and expect them to work.)
- Negotiate benchmarks, and develop ways of measuring results and reporting progress, that help the community hold itself accountable for making a difference in the lives of children.

Many of the above lessons have implications for funders. In addition to supporting the communities' work in the areas noted above, foundations can:

- Be the glue that holds initiatives together across changes in leadership, including changes in political administrations. Given that efforts to improve outcomes for young children and families require long-term, sustained attention, foundations need to stay with them over the long haul, including through predictable periods of reduced or stalled activity.
- Practice new forms of partnership with communities (go beyond rhetoric, especially in the tough decisions). Implement joint identification of problems and joint problem-solving in decisions about initiative goals and processes. Negotiate benchmarks and be clear how they are tied to funding decisions.
- Do the necessary internal work to know the rules under which an initiative will operate, and communicate those rules clearly to communities.

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- Take special care not to communicate mixed messages, in the guise of appearing to be flexible.
- Build assessment in from the beginning. Think about “authentic assessment” (analogous to authentic assessment or portfolio assessment of children in school).

Fund an effort that is worth doing, even if it does not lend itself to easy evaluation, for example, in the case of community saturation models.

- Be sure to make race and racism an explicit part of the diagnosis of poor outcomes or failure to achieve more positive outcomes, and consider racism (including institutional racism) in developing strategies.
- Provide resources and expertise that allow communities to implement effective public will strategies based on results of analysis of behaviors to change.

CAPD has incorporated many of these lessons into its work. Ways that CAPD and other planning, intermediary, evaluation organizations might change our work include:

- Temper prescriptiveness. Where prescriptiveness is justified, based on research and analysis, make sure we are absolutely clear that guidelines are a framework to be modified locally.
- Implement a new form of partnership not just in planning and design work, but in evaluation. Focus evaluation on strengthening the success of an initiative, through joint work on articulating theories of change, establishing benchmarks, providing practical and timely feedback, and establishing tracking and assessment systems that support management, public will activities as well as evaluation.

- Spend more time up front with all of the parties clarifying the roles of the partners (communities, foundations, CAPD) and the exact nature of the partnership.
- Spend more time up front with foundations helping them articulate expected outcomes for an initiative, setting realistic expectations and establishing what's fixed and what's flexible.
- Spend more time with communities and foundations on how to implement a broad vision while still paying sufficient attention to the quality of interactions between children and those who influence their development.
- Make more use of joint development of theories of change to clarify: the relationship between strategies and intended results; assess sufficiency of proposed strategies; identify appropriate interim markers of progress; and support communication.
- Take a community's lead more in TA, paying more attention to providing practical, specific and timely advice (consistent with lessons above).
- Share with communities lessons from a variety of experiences that can inform their work (draw not only from early childhood efforts, but relevant work related to leadership development, anti-racism and public will work and from work to establish assessment and tracking systems to monitor community and individual well-being).
- Continue to refine how we do our work, including how we approach planning, implementation and evaluation from a partnership perspective.