



Parenting Communities – Program Evaluation 2022-3

Prepared by Avenue ISR

June 5, 2023

Executive Summary

Avenue ISR is an independent research and strategy consultancy based in Traverse City, Michigan contracted to provide an evaluation of the Parenting Communities program operated by the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department.

Avenue ISR examined extensive survey data collected from parents and other caregivers between January, 2022 and March, 2023 in preparing this program evaluation report. Avenue ISR also reviewed relevant historic data from 2021 for comparison purposes.

Based on this analysis, it appears that despite the real challenges that many Leelanau County parents and caregivers continue to face, Parenting Communities is providing an essential role in supporting parents and families, enhancing parenting, connecting families to resources and otherwise setting up young children (0-6) and their families to thrive.

Detailed findings are as follows:

- The underlying stressors on parents and caregivers remain significant.
 - In 2022 and 2023, only 56% of parents and caregivers surveyed would be categorized as experiencing “minimal anxiety” according to the General Anxiety Disorder assessment. 23% were experiencing mild anxiety, 16% were experiencing moderate anxiety and 5% were experiencing severe anxiety
 - Similarly, in 2022 and 2023, only 56% of parents and caregivers would be categorized as experiencing “no symptoms” of depression according to the PHQ9 depression assessment. 33% were experiencing minimal symptoms of depression and 11% more severe gradations of depression
- Parenting Communities may be having a direct impact in the mental health of parents and caregivers. For those parents who have participated in multiple rounds of assessments:
 - The percentage experiencing mild, moderate or severe anxiety (combined) has fallen from 50% in 2021 to 39% in 2022 and 25% in 2023.
 - The percentage experiencing symptoms of depression has fallen from 63% in 2021 to 47% in 2022 and 38% in 2023.
- Parenting Communities program participants agree that being involved in Parenting Communities:
 - Helps them feel less isolated (95% strongly or somewhat agree with this statement)
 - Helps them navigate the ups and downs of life (86% agree)
 - Helps them learn about resources and supports to help them as parents/caregivers (97% agree)
 - Makes them better parents or caregivers (91% agree)

These are dramatic results that imply that the vast majority of parents and other caregivers recognize that the connections, information and support they gain from Parenting Communities literally make them better parents.

- For those parents who are receiving Home Visiting Services from Parenting Communities, program participants report receiving both tangible and intangible supports through the program. These respondents agree that Home Visiting Services:
 - Helped them learn about their children’s development (100% strongly or somewhat agree with this statement)
 - Helped them improve their parenting skills (97% agree)
 - Helped get help from community resources (97% agree)
 - Helped get medical, dental or mental health care (78% agree)
 - Helped find ways to improve their families’ financial situation (61% agree)
- So, the vast majority of parents and caregivers who are benefiting from Home Visiting Services are not only gaining parenting skills and knowledge, they are also getting connected to supports that can create pathways for improved family circumstances.
- Avenue ISR is actively working to develop the model that will measure the community and economic impact of Parenting Communities. Several multi-year longitudinal studies from Michigan and other states have shown that programs that build protective factors, reduce the risk of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and build attachment between parents/caregivers and children – all of which are elements of Parenting communities program design – have been shown to significantly reduce future costs in terms of use of public services, special education spending, public safety spending, health care services and other societal costs, all while improving the potential of young children and their families to thrive and succeed in life. We anticipate being able to relate the work of Parenting Communities to these studies in a model to be included in the 2023 annual report.
 - For the most part, program participants continue to have few complaints or requests for changes to the way Parenting Communities is operated in Leelanau County. Survey respondents are grateful for program staff and would like to see current program activities continued. Some would like additional options for evening and weekend events.

In its first two years of full implementation in Leelanau County under the auspices of the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department, Parenting Communities appears to be having a dramatic and positive impact on families in Leelanau County, providing the knowledge, connections and community support to help these Leelanau families navigate challenging times.

“[I appreciate] always knowing that I have a great support team behind my family and me for any issues that may come up. I’m excited to have them all on my team especially now that I am having another baby in 2 weeks. I know that I will be able to get the help and support I need.”

- Parenting Communities Parent

Sources and Methods

Avenue ISR relied primarily on survey data collected from parents and other caregivers (e.g. grandparents) responsible for caring for young children (0-6 years old) in Leelanau County. Surveys typically involved both prompted questions and free-response (open-ended) questions to allow respondents to share their detailed opinions and experiences regarding Parenting Communities. Surveys and number of respondents are as follows:

- Family Check In and Home Visiting Satisfaction Survey (57 responses from 2022-23) – a survey rating overall impact of Parenting Communities in the lives of program participants including Home Visitation Services, for those who are taking part in home visiting
- Home Visiting Questionnaire (64 responses from 2022-23) – an assessment of parent and family dynamics, parent anxiety, parent depression and overall presence of protective factors¹ among parents and caregivers.

Respondents to all surveys live in Leelanau County.

In all cases, participants were promised that their remarks would be confidential and anonymous for any public reporting so that they could feel comfortable answering questions frankly.

In addition, Avenue ISR reviewed results from a Kindergarten Readiness Survey conducted in April, 2022 among 13 teachers and school administrators working in Leelanau County schools.

Current State: Parent/Caregiver Mental Health and Kindergarten Readiness

Parent/Caregiver Mental Health

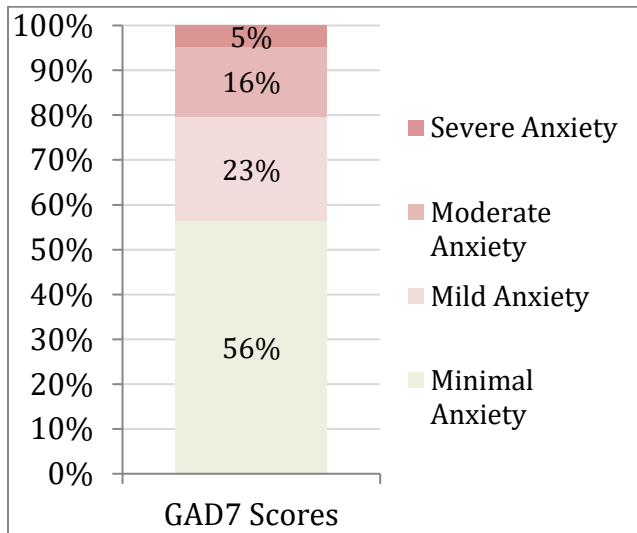
As **Chart 1A** shows, in 2022 and 2023, only 56% of parents and caregivers surveyed would be categorized as experiencing “minimal anxiety” according to the General Anxiety Disorder assessment. 23% were experiencing mild anxiety, 16% were experiencing moderate anxiety and 5% were experiencing severe anxiety.

As **Chart 1B** shows, in 2022 and 2023, only 56% of parents and caregivers would be categorized as experiencing “no symptoms” of depression according to the PHQ9 depression assessment. 33% were experiencing minimal symptoms of depression and 11% more severe gradations of depression.

¹ Protective factors are characteristics or strengths of individuals, families, communities or societies that act to mitigate risks and promote positive well-being and healthy development. Most often, we see them as attributes that help families to successfully navigate difficult situations. Source: <https://www.bldhd.org/what-is-parenting-communities/>

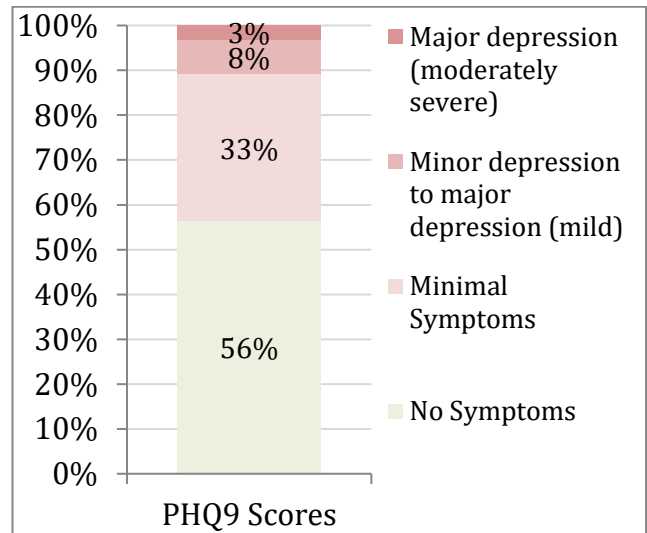
These results are broadly consistent with the results reported in 2022, when 54% of parents were experiencing minimal anxiety and 49% were experiencing no symptoms of depression, suggesting that underlying stressors affecting parents are similar to what they were in the recent past.

Chart 1A – Parent and Caregiver GAD7 (General Anxiety Disorder) Scores 2022/2023



Source: Parenting Communities Home Visiting Questionnaire 2022-2023 (64 respondents)

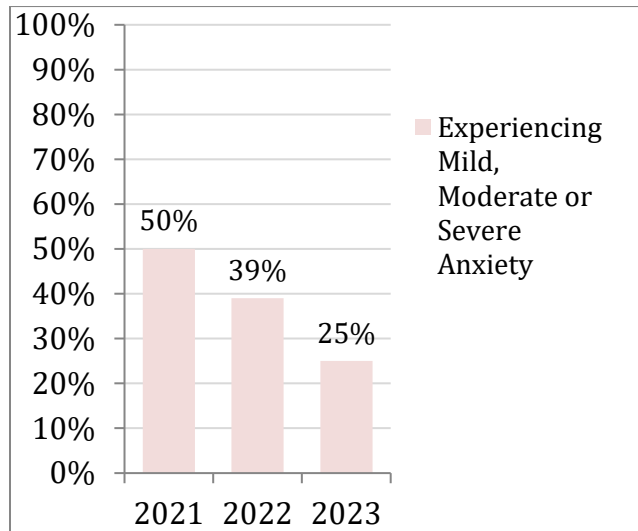
Chart 1B – Parent and Caregiver PHQ9 (Personal Health Questionnaire) Depression Scores 2022/2023



Source: Parenting Communities Home Visiting Questionnaire 2022-2023 (64 respondents)

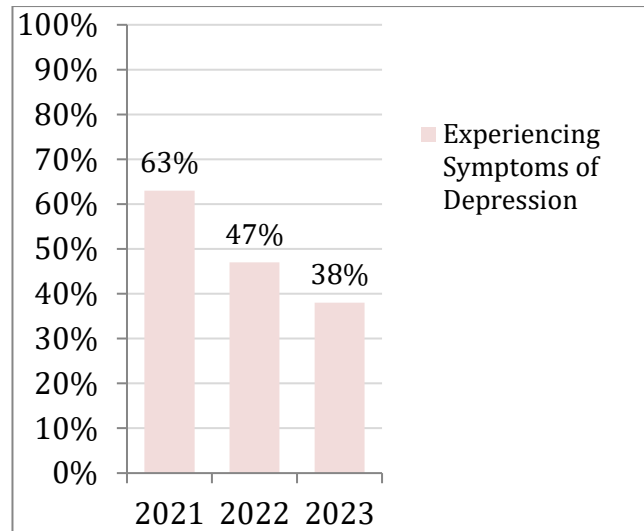
However, participating in Parenting Communities appears to have a positive impact on both anxiety and depression. **Charts 2A** and **2B** show that for parents that participated in multiple rounds of assessments the incidence of anxiety and depression is declining. The percentage of respondents experiencing mild, moderate or severe anxiety (combined) has fallen from 50% in 2021 to 39% in 2022 and 25% in 2023. The percentage of respondents experiencing symptoms of depression has fallen from 63% in 2021 to 47% in 2022 and 38% in 2023. This would be consistent with the Parenting Communities approach to both teach skills to deal with behavioral health and to connect parents and caregivers with each other and with sources of support.

Chart 2A – Parent and Caregiver GAD7 (General Anxiety Disorder) Scores, Trending 2021-2023: For Respondents Who Participated In Multiple Assessments



Source: Parenting Communities Home Visiting Questionnaire 2022-2023 (64 respondents)

Chart 2B – Parent and Caregiver PHQ9 (Personal Health Questionnaire) Depression Scores, Trending 2021-2023: For Respondents Who Participated In Multiple Assessments



Source: Parenting Communities Home Visiting Questionnaire 2022-2023 (64 respondents)

Kindergarten Readiness

As **Table 1** shows, many children are arriving at Kindergarten in Leelanau County Schools with significant gaps in preparation. In particular nearly 40% of educators and administrators report that many children entering kindergarten are unprepared in terms of literacy and language skills and social emotional skills. Therefore a program like Parenting Communities – that helps parents and other caregivers learn how to help their young children gain these competencies – is vital to helping long-term success of Leelanau County students. Note: These data form a baseline against which to track future progress as more children graduate out of Parenting Communities and enter Kindergarten in larger numbers.

Table 1 – Educator Assessments of the Extent to Which Children Are Prepared When Entering Kindergarten

Competency	Almost All Prepared	Most Prepared	Neutral	Some Unprepared	Many Unprepared
Gross Motor Skills	15%	38%	15%	31%	0%
Cognitive Skills	8%	31%	8%	54%	0%
Self-Sufficiency Skills	0%	15%	8%	62%	15%
Fine Motor Skills	8%	23%	0%	46%	23%
Literacy and Language Skills	8%	0%	0%	54%	38%
Social Emotional Skills	0%	15%	8%	38%	38%

Source: Kindergarten Readiness Survey April, 2022 (13 respondents)

The Parenting Communities Approach

Parenting Communities is a program provided by the citizens of Leelanau County (through the 2019 EC millage) and the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department. Parenting Communities of Leelanau County seeks to promote healthy children living in stable, nurturing families, supported by strong communities that provide comprehensive supportive services.

In practical terms, Parenting Communities uses multiple points of contact to help parents and families build connections within their families, with other Leelanau County families and with potential resources that can help them. These points of contact include:

- **Newsletters** with information about parenting, upcoming events, family activities, and other resources that connect families in Leelanau County
- **Home Visits** by community health workers, social workers, and public health nurses who provide positive direct support to parents and other caregivers in their homes
- **Developmental Screenings** to help parents and other family members understand children's development, learn activities in the home that can be done to support children's development, and provide early identification and referral for developmental delays.
- **Playgroups** in which children are engaged in fun, developmentally-appropriate activities while parents and caregivers build social connections and learn about important information and resources to support parenting
- **Community Events** are fun celebrations such as the Summer Street Fair, Harvest Fest and Holiday Gatherings that provide fun, developmentally-appropriate activities for young children while parents build social connections and connect to the broader community

Not every family takes advantage of every Parenting Communities activity and program. The programs are designed to create a web of support for parents and families that can adapt based on the needs of any one family. But the collective whole works to help families be more resilient, more supportive and better connected to potential resources.

Impacts of Parenting Communities

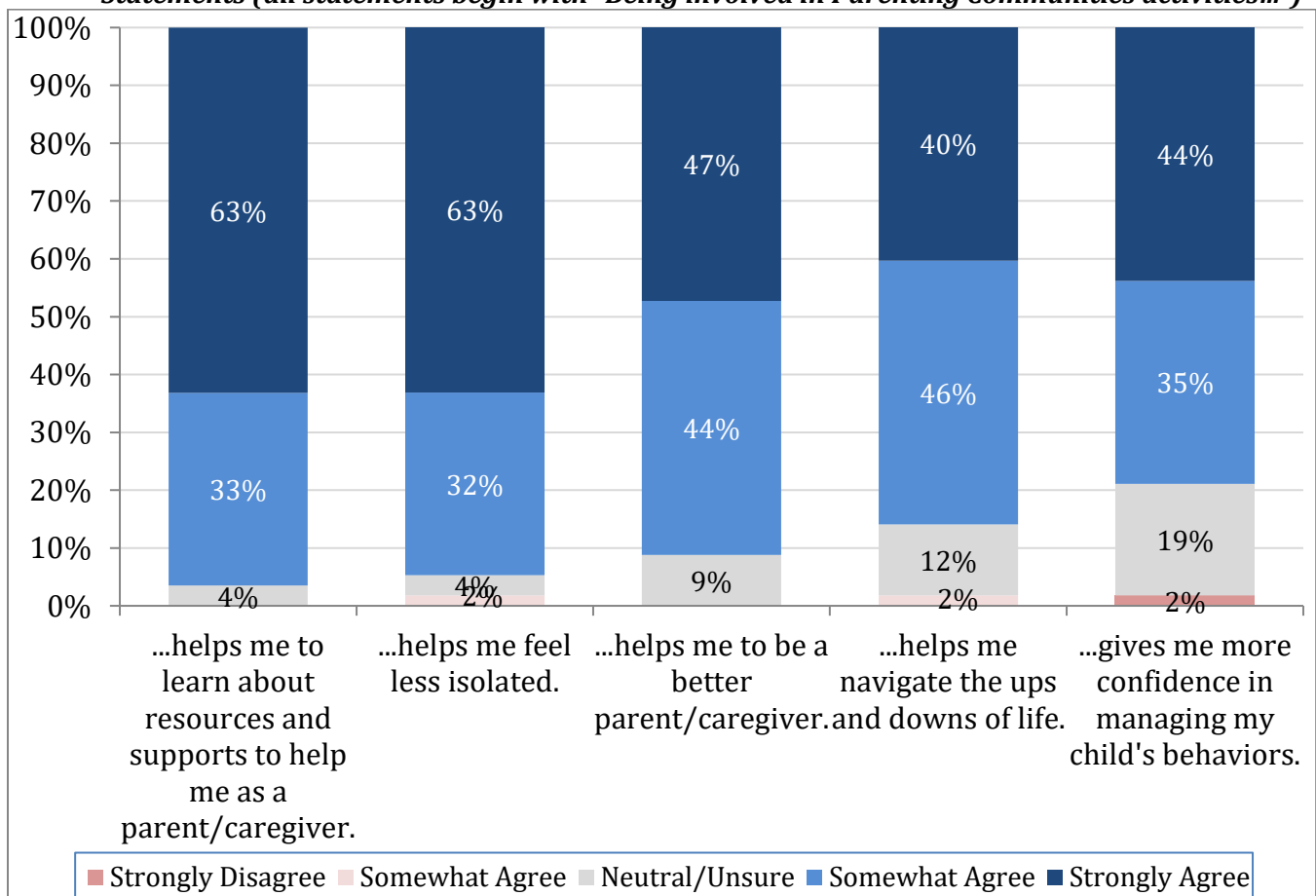
Overall Impact

As **Chart 3** shows, the vast majority of these parents and other caregivers participating in Parenting Communities report significant and important impacts arising from the program. 91% of respondents would agree (strongly or somewhat) that being involved in Parenting Communities makes them better parents or caregivers. This is profoundly positive that parents and other caregivers would recognize that the connections, information and support they gain from Parenting Communities literally make them better in their caregiving role. In addition, **Chart 3** shows that 97% of respondents would agree (strongly or somewhat) that being involved in

Parenting Communities helps them learn about resources and supports to help them as parents/caregivers. This ensures that whenever parents experience difficulties, have questions about their children’s development or have other needs, they have some ideas of where to turn for help.

Chart 3 further shows that 95% of respondents would agree (strongly or somewhat) that Parenting Communities helps them feel less isolated and 86% would agree that Parenting Communities helps them navigate the ups and downs of life. These strong results show that the program is helping to build resilience in parents and caregivers. Parental resilience is an important protective factor in families because parents who can deal with the stresses of everyday life, as well as an occasional crisis, are able to reduce the stress these events can cause for young children. Finally, **Chart 3** shows that 79% of respondents would agree (strongly or somewhat) that Parenting Communities gives them more confidence in managing their children’s behaviors. So nearly 4 in 5 parents and caregivers would agree that Parenting Communities has played a positive role in their learning how to manage what may be challenging behaviors. Only 2% of respondents disagree (strongly or somewhat) that Parenting Communities has given them confidence in managing children’s behaviors, suggesting the remaining 19% who were neutral or unsure on this question did not need this additional confidence in managing children’s behaviors.

Chart 3 – Impact of Being Involved in Parenting Communities on Parents: Agree or Disagree with Statements (all statements begin with “Being involved in Parenting Communities activities...”)



Source: Parenting Communities Family Check In Survey 2022-2023 (57 respondents)

Home Visiting Services

Not every family participating in Parenting Communities receives home visiting services. However, those who do appear to be gaining significant tangible and intangible benefits.

As **Table 2** shows, 100% of respondents would agree (strongly or somewhat) that Parenting Communities Home Visiting Services have helped them learn about their children's development. 97% would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped them improve their parenting skills, 94% would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped them learn about children's health and an additional 94% would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped them learn about their own health. 93% would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped them learn and use strategies to manage stress. 72%, still a strong majority of respondents, would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped them learn about nutrition for themselves and their families. In all cases, this enhanced knowledge about development, parenting, health, stress reduction and nutrition helps create a strong foundation for children to begin their first 6 years of life in a healthy and supportive environment.

As **Table 2** further shows, 97% of respondents would agree (strongly or somewhat) that Parenting Communities Home Visiting Services have helped get help from community resources. 78% would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped get medical, dental or mental health care. And 61%, still a strong majority of respondents, would agree that Home Visiting Services have helped find ways to improve their families' financial situation. So in addition to learning valuable skills, the parents and caregivers who are benefiting from Home Visiting Services are getting connected to tangible supports that can create pathways for improved family circumstances. As **Table 3** shows, Parenting Communities home visitors are seen as trusted, knowledgeable and caring individuals in the eyes of families. They can therefore help families navigate choices to improve. **Table 3** further shows that respondents agree (strongly or somewhat) that home visitors are good listeners who are available, organized and on time, among many other positive attributes.

Table 2 – Family Impact of Home Visiting Services: Agree or Disagree with Statements (all statements begin with “Home visiting services have helped me/my family...”)

Benefit	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree (Strongly or Somewhat)	Neutral/ Unsure	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Learn about my child's development	72%	28%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Get help from community resources	70%	28%	97%	3%	0%	0%
Improve my parenting skills	61%	37%	97%	3%	0%	0%
Learn about my children's health	55%	39%	94%	6%	0%	0%
Get medical, dental, or mental health care	53%	25%	78%	19%	3%	0%
Learn and use strategies to manage stress	53%	39%	93%	8%	0%	0%
Learn about my own health	50%	45%	94%	6%	0%	0%
Find ways to improve our financial situation	39%	22%	61%	39%	0%	0%
Learn about nutrition for myself and my family	38%	33%	72%	26%	3%	0%

Source: Parenting Communities Family Check In Survey 2022-2023 (57 respondents)

Table 3 – Ratings of Home Visitors: Agree or Disagree with Statements (all statements begin with “My home visitor...”)

Attribute	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree (Strongly or Somewhat)	Neutral/ Unsure	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Accepts me	97%	3%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Encourages me	94%	6%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is a good listener	97%	3%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is available	92%	8%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is caring	97%	3%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is knowledgeable	97%	3%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is on-time	92%	8%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is organized	92%	8%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Is sensitive to my cultural beliefs	94%	3%	97%	3%	0%	0%
Is trustworthy	97%	3%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Provides information that is easy to use	94%	6%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Visits often enough	89%	11%	100%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Parenting Communities Family Check In Survey 2022-2023 (57 respondents)

Points of Pride and Potential Improvements

Points of Pride

Following are select open-ended verbatim comments from parents and caregivers in response to the question “What about Parenting Communities have you found most helpful?” These comments showcase just how meaningful Parenting Communities is in the lives of these families.

- *Activities for my child, friends gained, educational books*
- *All the resources and how available everyone is.*
- *Availability for a person in my court in helping my kids grow*
- *Being able to always count on someone. They always make themselves available to me when I have a question or concern.*
- *Building connections with other parents in the community.*
- *Classes and constant support*
- *Connection to activities*
- *Connection with other parents who are navigating the same stage of parenting as we are.*
- *I have found the home visits to be extremely helpful. It's less stressful than trying to get out of the house with two kids. I love how well everyone listens to me and offers solutions and community resources I did not know about.*
- *I'm glad it exists for when I may need extra resources in the future.*
- *Knowing I am not alone and there is someone I can always call for support (help/advice/assistance) in many ways.*
- *Playgroups as a way to meet other families; newsletters with links on where to access resources for children*
- *Sense of community*
- *Support and encouragement and more positive people in my child's life*
- *Talking with someone through tough times*
- *The space to feel and think through parenting.*
- *Always knowing that I have a great support team behind my family and me for any issues that may come up. I'm excited to have them all on my team especially now that I am having another baby in 2 weeks. I know that I will be able to get the help and support I need.*
- *Connecting with other parents and health department employees. It's really nice to socialize with other adults who have or are focused on working with young kids because I'm the only one in my social group with an under 2-year-old.*
- *Connection to tools and resources that help my family with our current struggles*
- *Connections with other families in the community*
- *Events and classes, specifically music classes and yoga classes*
- *Feeling less isolated and giving my kids a safe environment to socialize*
- *Having an understanding ear to listen to me in my isolation*
- *Having somebody to talk to when I need it*
- *Help connect with other families in the community, but it has helped me the most to connect with other Spanish Speaking families to continue the legacy for my son, which is so important to me*

- *Home visits and breastfeeding support when I first had my son*
- *I like that consistency of the play group. Also, that it provides opportunities for my child to be included in things with other kids.*
- *I love that we are able to meet new people. Since COVID, it has been difficult for my kids to socialize with others their age and this gives them the opportunity to do so.*
- *In home support feels so much more personal and stressless*
- *Inclusive atmosphere creating community*
- *Information*
- *It has been so wonderful to have contact with someone who gets it and encourages me to be the best version of myself. Both as an individual and as a parent. I had postpartum anxiety and depression and the home visitors visits were such a light to look forward to. She helped remind me that in order to take care of my kids, I have to take care of myself. She was instrumental in helping check in on me.*
- *Just being available, walking alongside me in everything, having social opportunities, giving resources if needed*
- *Meeting new mom friends!*
- *Opportunities to meet other families*
- *Playgroups have provided a great opportunity for my child to interact with other children within the area. It would otherwise be challenging to make acquaintances and form playgroups with other parents without this program. Home visits with Kathy has also been beneficial as it provides an individualized assessment/discussion of my toddler's milestones and progress.*
- *That it is a community and we all try to help each other in some way*
- *The abundance of resources.*
- *The community energy and just knowing support is there if I might need it!*
- *The flexibility of meeting with me.*
- *The home visits (many comments)*
- *The social interaction with other moms*
- *The support (many comments)*
- *The teachers, workers are so beyond helpful and just so reassuring*
- *Variety of opportunities for community*

Source: Parenting Communities Family Check In Survey 2022-2023 (57 respondents)

Potential Improvements

Following are select open-ended verbatim comments from parents and caregivers in response to the question "What improvements can we make to better meet the needs of you and/or your children?" These comments showcase that for the most part parents and caregivers appreciate the program exactly the way it is designed. Several would like more evening and weekend events, and there are a handful of additional comments that could be considered by Parenting Communities staff to refine programming.

- *None/Nothing/No Improvements (28 comments)*
- *Nothing I can think of you guys are amazing*

- *Nothing, doing great!*
- *None I am very satisfied*
- *None! This program works well for our family as is*
- *Unsure. Everything been super helpful*
- *So far, we are loving everything!*
- *I believe what you are doing is fantastic and can't think of any improvement*
- *I feel like the program does a very good job already.*
- *Idk you guys have pretty good setup*
- *I feel like I haven't explored all of the things you offer. So, I'm not sure what improvements can be made.*
- *Connections to other parents in similar life chapter*
- *I think there could be more promotion about PC services in the area (other than online)*
- *More community events*
- *More events, they are all so great!*
- *More group activities*
- *More evening and weekend playgroups. I work full time.*
- *Activities that are outside of working hours.*
- *Possibly more weekend options, and my wife and I both work during the week.*
- *Maybe offer more infant groups rather than play groups.. it's out of question to take my baby that can't do anything to a play group.*
- *More playgroups available during school year for the older kids too*
- *Offer morning or evening adult events*
- *Possibly more frequent weekend events*
- *More home visits and developmental screening would be helpful*
- *More opportunities for relationship building between parents*
- *Anything to help with independent financial stability*
- *Fresh snacks*
- *Having more consistent music classes or yoga classes. Play groups are at a difficult time for my daughters age since it's at nap time*
- *Make registration available through a URL as well as a QR code. It would be super helpful if there were a database of all kids activities in the county somewhere*
- *The only thing that has stopped us from going to the playgroups were nap time schedules. But now that he is older and transitioning down on therapy, we are looking forward to attending*

Source: Parenting Communities Family Check In Survey 2022-2023 (57 respondents)