

Using the Two-Generation Approach to Improve Strategy, Program Cohesion

The Family Partnership guided by vision of resilient children and parents

Overview:

The Family Partnership understands the impact of trauma on the developing brain. In fact, preventing and overcoming adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) undergirds the organization's work of clearing the path for family success.

"Executive functioning is important to positive outcomes later in life," said John Till, senior vice president of strategy and innovation. "Adverse childhood experiences erode the brain development that leads to good executive functioning, getting youth into troublesome situations with law enforcement, the courts, accessing services, maintaining sobriety, maintaining housing, getting and keeping a job—all kinds of things."

A provider of community, school, and in-home mental health services, parenting and early childhood education, home visiting, and advocacy programs for low-income children, youth, and families throughout Minneapolis, The Family Partnership also has a long history of public policy work including involvement with the successful passage of Minnesota's Safe Harbor Law for sexually exploited youth. In addition, the organization benefits from partnerships with experts in the fields of resilience, brain science, and the two-generation approach including the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis, Reflection Sciences and the Future Services Institute at the University of Minnesota, EMPATH in Boston, and Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

When the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities released its call for organizations to apply for Change in Mind, its brain science initiative developed in partnership with Palix Foundation's Alberta Family Wellness Initiative and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Family Partnership leapt at the chance to participate. Till, who has a master's in biological sciences and has researched the cognitive development of children, had the enthusiastic backing of leadership to pursue the organization's involvement.

"Our CEO Molly Greenman told me that we had to apply for Change in Mind, so it was the organization's primary executive feeling like this was an absolute must," he said.

As a member of the Change in Mind Learning Collaborative, The Family Partnership's theory of change—as well as its beliefs, purpose, and pursuits—would evolve to include advances in brain science as central to a renewed sense of meaning and value.



Advances in Neuroscience:

The first Change in Mind convening, one of six in-person meetings between participating sites and a central component of the initiative, took place in 2015. The presenters included Marjorie Sims, managing director of Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

“The first convening was very focused on foundational content around brain science and experts sharing what they knew, one of whom was Marjorie. She aligned the concept of the two-generation approach with brain science-informed strategies,” explained Till. “Our organization sat with that information for about a year while it percolated.”

According to the Aspen Institute, the two-generation approach considers the role both children and their parents or caregivers play in fostering healthy relationships and child development through economic supports, early childhood education, social capital, health and well-being, and postsecondary and employment pathways. In turn, this simultaneous parent and child intervention empowers families from one generation to another.

Brain science shows that environmental factors directly impact the architecture of the developing brain and its ability to build cognitive, emotional, and social capacities. Through holistic, two-generation programs, services, and interventions such as comprehensive whole-family assessments and increasing parent voice, families can counter the damaging effects of ACEs, trauma, and other toxic stressors on a child’s brain development and build resilience and a stronger sense of support and security.

“We operate two therapeutic preschools for kids who are in very high ACE environments and have mild-to-moderate delays due to trauma, as well as provide really good mental health programming for adults, children, youth, and families. So, we said to ourselves, ‘Couldn’t we create a curriculum to build skills with children in the classroom on executive functioning and engage their parents at the same time to achieve a two-generation effect?’” said Till. “We then made a commitment across the organization and in our strategic plan to pursue a two-generation approach.”



The Family Partnership’s aptitude for building executive functioning and community engagement informed the creation of a complex theory of change that, while robust, required further focus to effectively address systems change. After learning more about the power of the two-generation approach, the organization now had the lens through which it could accomplish its strategic goals in an innovative, sustainable way.

Change in Mind:

Before the Change in Mind initiative, The Family Partnership understood that brain science was important to addressing trauma. Staff at its Four Directions Family Center preschool had attended an annual conference on brain science held on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota and were familiar with concepts like mindfulness and mind-body wellness. However, Change in Mind delved even deeper into those concepts, helping the whole organization to decipher what was already working and what could work better.

“Through the initiative, we found that the average number of ACEs for one of our clients was four, and in some programs—particularly our programming for individuals recovering from addiction, domestic violence, and sex trafficking—the average number of ACEs was more like six,” said Till.

The Family Partnership’s work relies on integrating the two-generation approach into its program, operations, and organizational culture. Through the strategic use of a two-generation executive functioning curriculum, holistic assessments of families during counseling, and Mobility Mentoring, the organization has fully adopted the two-generation approach as the root of its theory of change.

Mobility Mentoring, a coaching strategy developed by Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) that uses motivational interviewing to help program participants who are living in poverty set goals to advance their education and/or employment opportunities, is a two-generation approach favored for its use of brain science in achievement-based planning and decision making. It has proven a popular method; Mobility Mentoring is being used by additional Change in Mind cohort sites as well.

“In terms of having a complete two-generation approach in place, EMPath’s Mobility Mentoring model is a core strategy for upping our game in the areas of educational and economic mobility,” noted Till “EMPath has selected The Family Partnership as one of five organizations nationally to pilot InterGen, a ‘next level’ version of Mobility Mentoring in which the entire family sets goals around educational and economic mobility.”

Lessons learned from Change in Mind, have informed four of the organization’s strategies for achieving family success:

- Championing the two-generation approach
- Preventing and overcoming adverse childhood experiences
- Demonstrating leadership in thought and action
- Building partnerships based on trust

“Funders that work in the early childhood space have heard a lot about ACEs and trauma, but less about building executive functioning and resilience through brain science. Some of them have asked why The Family Partnership isn’t focusing on just trauma, and the reason is because we need all the kids in our community to become executive functioning superstars.”

John Till, senior vice president of strategy and innovation, The Family Partnership

“The four pursuits give us a framework for thinking about our work and making decisions about what partnerships we want, what grants we apply for, how we want to develop our services in the future, and what opportunities are most important to us,” said Till. “It’s really the foundation for building our new organizational theory of change.”

The Change in Mind initiative provided The Family Partnership with the language and tools to build capacity and infuse brain science into its policy and practice. Now, with the launch of the Change in Mind Institute, the Alliance is expanding its ability to provide similar resources across its strategic action network and beyond.

“We need the Change in Mind Institute,” said Till. “We’re discovering the ways brain science will

intersect long term with programs and services, and the institute has already found applications it may not have originally anticipated in areas like community engagement and capacity building. The Alliance has shown a long-term commitment to this initiative and that's very positive."

"We aren't just talking about adverse childhood experiences, child development, or resilience on its own. The institute has real potential to integrate the approaches that are being used in a variety of sectors in ways that align with emerging science," he concluded. "I think that's important."