

Community Cafés with Families of Young Children in Whatcom County

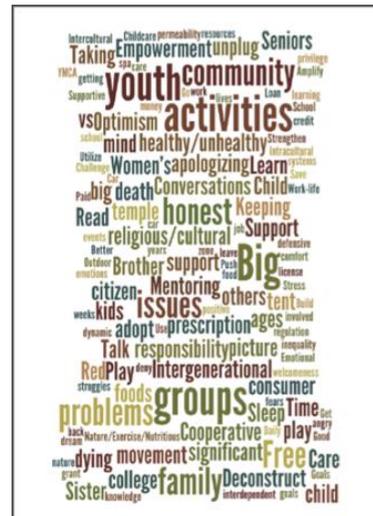
In the summer of 2017, the Whatcom County Health Department helped facilitate three Community Cafés with parents or caregivers of young children in order to learn firsthand what lends strength to Whatcom families during the good times and what would contribute to becoming stronger during the challenging times. In a series of guided questions, families shared their own knowledge and wisdom in small group discussions and then built on shared wisdom as they moved to new tables throughout the evening in order to develop ideas about small steps families and communities might adopt to build resiliency and support. The hope is to build another avenue of ongoing peer support for families as well as community action and advocacy.

The three Cafés invited participants from different parent populations: parents of children enrolled in the early intervention Birth to Three services, families living in the Kendall area, and families receiving parenting support from Lydia Place. Respectively, we had 14, 8 and 23 participants at each Café. A few providers associated with each group put on their parent hats to participate in a Café. The format and the questions were the same for each Café. Parents socialized briefly, shared a meal, listened to a talk about why hope, resilience and toxic stress matter in the lives of families, especially those with young children, and discussed three questions, moving to a new table after each question. The evening ended with time to discuss the patterns that emerged during the evening. The patterns were also captured on a large graphic recording which was created during the Café by harvesting patterns and themes from each table's shared written or drawn contributions.



Families discussed the following questions.

- **Round 1**--When things are going well, who or what helps strengthen and support your family and your child's well-being?
- **Round 2**--During challenging times when things are not going so well, what support, help, or services might you hope and dream to have?
- **Round 3**--What achievable thing could you do that would make a difference in strengthening your family? What are the steps it would take to do that? What support would be helpful?



Although the shared experiences of the Café populations were different from one another, the themes and patterns that emerged had more similarities than differences. Overwhelmingly, the dominant theme was the desire for connection: to one another as individuals, as families to other families and to build larger community connections. Families want these connections to be non-judgmental, supportive, affordable or free and multi-generational. Additional themes highlighted the benefits of self-care, child care and access to supports, which included basic needs, physical and mental health, social services, training and education. Reinforcing the strong yearning for connection was a hope for building communication skills that alleviated stress, increased mindfulness and emotional regulation, and helped resolve conflict in a way that built empathy and understanding within families and communities.

