Parent Engagement in Out-of-School Programs:
Learnings from Sowing Seeds with Faith



About the Bounce Coalition

Bounce, a program initiative of Kentucky Youth Advocates, builds the resiliency of children, adults, and families by improving knowledge about the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the skills to help people "bounce" back from adversity.

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Introduction

Family engagement is an essential component of youth well-being and development. Considerable research has examined the impact of family engagement across the lifespan of child, adolescent, and adult development, demonstrating a range of positive outcomes when caring adults are involved in the process. Some scholars have also examined how being an engaged adult contributes to parental and family resilience.

In an effort to better understand how to support and increase parent and family engagement in out-of-school time spaces, the Bounce Coalition conducted a multi-method study using focus groups, organizational interviews, and surveys. The study sought to answer the question: What factors within the parent council from Sowing Seeds With Faith (SSWF) enhance parental engagement and parental resilience?

This report discusses the findings to this question and explains the key factors and conditions of SSWF's "The Village" Parent Council model that contribute to family engagement and resilience. It also offers insights to build parent engagement efforts through key action-oriented opportunities for organizations seeking to enhance family engagement and resilience.

Key Takeaways:

- Research suggests family resilience is critical to cultivating strong and healthy child and adolescent development, and family engagement can build resilience.
- SSWF success with family engagement results from the trust they establish with parents.
- Engaging families with a focus on their strengths is an essential component that fosters successful parent engagement.
- Establishing a strong foundation of family engagement enables SSWF to undertake practices to boost resilience.

Who is Sowing Seeds with Faith (SSWF)?

SSWF is a nonprofit organization located in Louisville, Kentucky, that empowers youth through tutoring, mentoring, and summer enrichment camps to engage youth academically and socially in mastering developmental challenges through educational expectations, structure, faith, and accountability. Their signature youth initiative, Teen Talks, creates a protected space for young people ages 12-18 to discuss issues that matter most to them, from relationships to financial literacy. Adult staff serve as guides as youth facilitate, lead, and create a space that allows them to build trust, explore sensitive topics safely, and learn from experts they invite to the space.

"The Village" Parent Council

A core component of SSWF's work includes involving parents through a robust parent council. While other youth-serving organizations in Louisville report difficulties engaging parents, SSWF is excelling in this area. SSWF has an incredibly active council of over 50 parents. Given their success, the factors and conditions they create are worthy of examination. Please note that this council will be referred to as "The Village" Parent Council throughout this report.

Understanding Family Engagement

Family engagement is defined as "a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators and community partners to promote children's learning and development from birth through college and career."[1]

Research has shown that family engagement both supports positive academic outcomes and family resilience.[2] National survey data show that children in resilient families are much more likely to be thriving and successful in school, even when families are facing poverty, health challenges, or other adversities. Meta-analyses have found similar, improved education outcomes for children whose parents are engaged in their education. [3]

- Students with engaged parents/caregivers are more likely to perform better in school when their parents are involved both at home (home supervision) and at school (attending events, communicating with teachers).[4]
- Students with engaged parents/caregivers are more likely to stay engaged in school and succeed academically even when facing adversity like poverty, health challenges, or high levels of adverse childhood experiences. [5]

The Relationship Between Family Engagement and Resilience

Family resilience is a family's ability to adapt, cope, and stay connected when facing stress or adversity, in a way that continues to support its members' well-being. Family engagement in a child's life helps parents build skills, confidence, and social networks that enable family resilience. Family engagement in the planning and implementation of programs helps develop stronger parenting and leadership skills and increases parental and caretaker confidence in supporting their children.[6] These skills support more stable and loving family environments, which in turn lead to better child development and less exposure to adversity.

Engagement also creates social connections and access to community resources. Families linked to peers, trusted adults, and community resources are better equipped to handle economic, emotional, and social stressors, as these networks encourage cooperative problem-solving and provide tangible support. [7] Together, stronger caregiver capabilities and deeper social connections form the protective factors that promote family well-being even in difficult circumstances.

While the research foundation focuses on school settings, the study conducted with Sowing Seeds with Faith offers important takeaways for understanding factors and conditions in out-of-school settings that bolster family engagement.

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework & Relational Trust

Several research-informed frameworks help explain what specific steps organizations can take to boost family-level resilience, including the **Dual Capacity-Building Framework**.[8] This framework argues that family engagement improves when both families and schools gain capacity to partner together to support student success.

We utilized this framework because it offers a systematic explanation of how organizations can take tangible steps to authentically engage with families and boost their resilience and aligns with the methods SSWF uses to authentically engage parents. However, SSWF did not use this framework in the development of their parent council. The framework was used in the development of topics to cover and questions to ask in the research, as well as to help frame action steps organizations can take to increase parental engagement.

The framework identifies common barriers to successful family-school partnerships. On the part of educators, challenges include not being exposed to strong examples of family engagement, minimal training, not seeing partnership as essential, and/or developing a deficit mindset, meaning focusing on the problems they see. On the part of families, challenges include not being exposed to strong examples of engagement, having past negative experiences, not feeling invited to contribute, and/or feeling disrespected, unheard, and unvalued. As noted below in the themes, SSWF specifically addresses many of these challenges by engaging parents as partners.

> *"Parent engagement is where a lot of organizations lack. You can feed a parent information all day long, but if you don't ask for feedback or if you don't ask for help, volunteer, see what we may contribute to help build your organization, which I think that's what [SSWF staff member] does very well…When you shut that door to parents and they say, I want your child to be here, but I don't want nothing that you've got to offer, you're not going anywhere. You can't build off of that."*
>
> *-SSWF Staff Member*



To overcome these challenges, the Dual Capacity-Building Framework identifies essential conditions that must be in place to build effective partnership between schools and parents. First and foremost is relational trust.

Relational trust is defined as four core components: respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard.[9] Without relational trust, the goals pursued are unlikely to be achieved.

Assessing Relational Trust[10]	
Respect	Am I seeking input and listening carefully, without bias, to what all families have to say?
Competence	Am I demonstrating to families that I am competent and that I am honoring their role as valued and competent caregivers?
Integrity	Do I keep my word with families?
Personal regard	Do I show families that I value and care about them as people versus objects?

Once essential conditions have been met, the framework identifies ways to build capacity among both groups. Goals of the program should enhance capacity in the following areas, known as the 4 Cs:

- Capabilities (skills & knowledge)
- Connections (network)
- Cognition (shifts in beliefs and values), and
- Confidence (self-efficacy).

This study found factors and conditions of "The Village" Parent Council offered in an out-of-school time setting that align with the Dual-Capacity Framework and relational trust elements that enhance parental engagement and resilience.

Learnings from Sowing Seeds with Faith Parent Council

For caregivers, SSWF offers "The Village" Parent Council that strengthens families through shared learning, resource connection, and community support. The organization is deliberate about creating a system that supports both young people and their caretakers. SSWF recognizes and understands that stronger adults are essential to youth success. The parent council meetings introduce parents to community partners, practical tools, and culturally responsive education that helps reduce stress and build protective factors that are linked to child well-being.

The findings of this study centered around several themes:

- **Trust**: SSWF focuses on the trust of parents as a foundational factor. Parents trust that SSWF has the best interests of their child in mind and values their roles and expertise as parents.
- **Safe Space:** SSWF approaches families from a focus on their strengths, creating a safe space for them to authentically engage.
- **Community:** SSWF is deliberate about building a community among members of its parent council, helping parents create a network of support among fellow parents.
- **Shared Commitment:** SSWF staff care personally about the children in their programs and are willing to advocate for them outside of formal programming, tapping into the shared values of wanting what is best for children.
- **Staff Value Parent Input:** SSWF actively invites parents to engage in decision-making, as well as values and incorporates feedback and ideas offered by members of "The Village" Parent Council.
- **Engagement around Child Development:** SSWF engages parents in ways that tie to children's healthy development, building parent skills and knowledge and promoting family resilience.

Theme 1: Trust

Focus group participants spoke of the importance of trust as a core component of their engagement with the parent council. Parents expressed trust in the staff to act in the best interests of their child and treat parents with respect. In the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, trust includes the elements of respect and personal regard, and participants expressed how that is conveyed within the Village Parent Council. One reflection of the respect shown to parents is how staff members respond to parent participation. Parents shared that staff members do not judge them when they have to step away from the council for a time, recognizing that life circumstances sometimes prevent them from being active with the council.

A parent described how she was welcomed back to the council and asked to get involved, sharing, *"I was really heavily involved at one point but then - like you said - life happens in [dance or sports] practices and all of that so when I had to like step away and I wasn't as involved as I was at one point and then I wanted to come back it wasn't like, 'Where you been at and You ain't,' but 'What do you want to do? Let's go. What [do] you want to sign up for? Go, go ahead. We need you.' So I love that part of it."*

Parents also noted and provided examples of the personal regard staff demonstrated that they held for them and their children. This included describing instances of staff members participating in meetings with the child's school.

One parent shared how a staff member supported her child during a school meeting detailing, *"I [be]came involved when my son was in kindergarten. And what made me stay is that he had a school meeting. So I had to call [a SSWF staff member]. And he was in a meeting, and he was on the speakerphone at the school meeting for my son. He was like, no, we've been working with him on this. We don't notice that with the tutor. And so it made me stay because of the closeness and the trust and the family. And he's in the sixth grade now."* SSWF staff are intentional about walking alongside parents as they navigate complex systems.

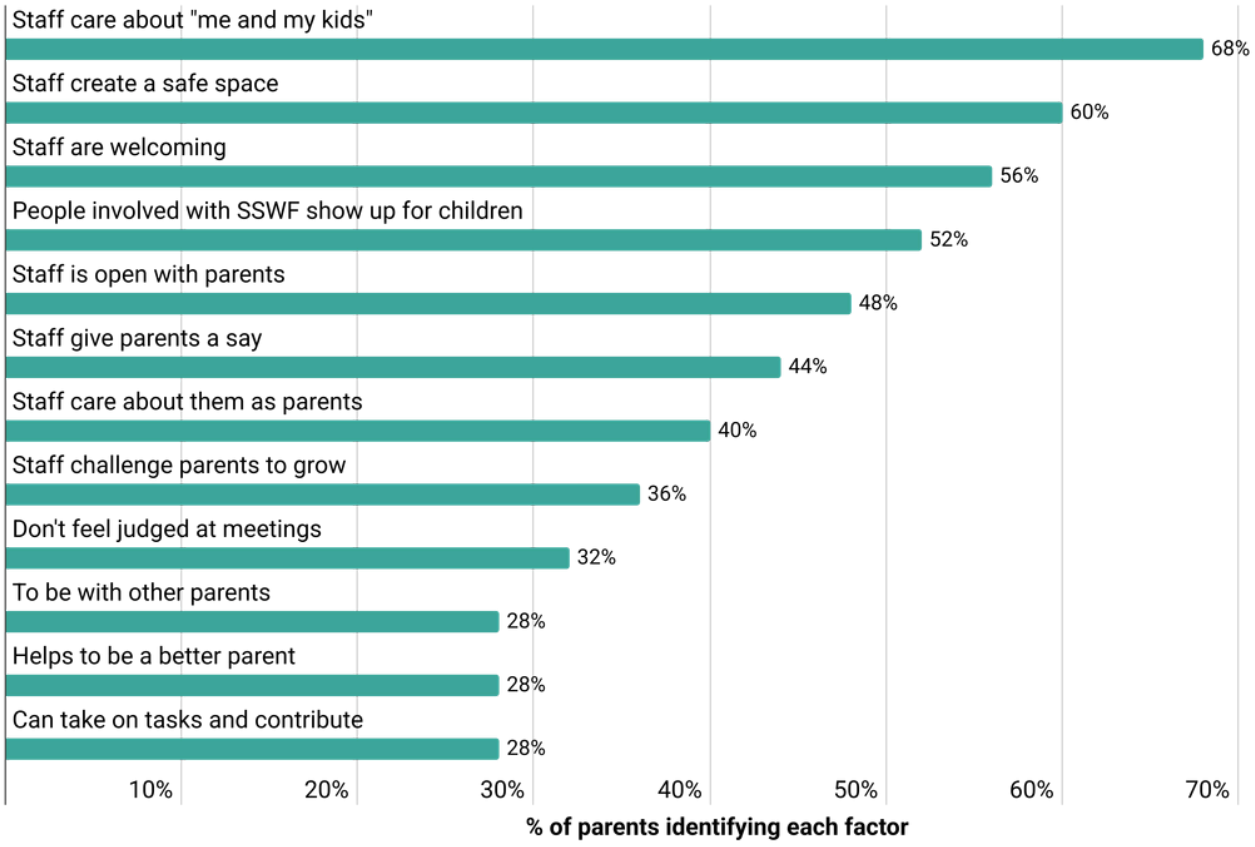
Parents also reflected their trust in the SSWF leadership and the competence with which the organization handles challenges and interacts with their child. For some, concern about trust was what motivated them to become involved in the organization and to learn more about the activities in which their child was engaged. Ultimately, trust underpins the continued involvement of parents and caregivers in The Village Parent Council.

The importance of relational trust also emerged in the parent survey results. Parents were given a number of options to indicate what motivates them to attend parent council meetings. The top reasons were that staff care about the parent and child, create a safe space for them, and are welcoming to parents.

As the Dual-Capacity Building Framework suggests, relational trust is the glue that undergirds the ability to build family engagement, which creates the opportunities to build resilience.

Key Opportunity #1: Assess how your organization builds relational trust with families.

Figure 1: Factors identified by parents that encourage them to attend parent council meetings (n=25)



Theme 2: A Safe Space

Another common reflection among parents and staff focused on the environment created for parent council members. Focus group participants identified the safe space created by staff as an important factor of the council. This aligns with one of the essential components identified in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework of taking an asset-based approach to engaging with parents. The framework describes an asset-based approach in parent engagement as recognizing all caregivers as capable of being equal partners in supporting their child's education. Critically, it means looking to understand structural factors that impact families' engagement rather than judging or assigning blame.[12]

Parents spoke of the council as a place where they could speak openly about challenges they experience as parents. As one parent shared, "They listen and they don't judge."

The staff demonstrate their respect for parents in their role as good caretakers by their lack of judgment of parenting decisions/abilities. A parent described that they did not feel like they had to know all the answers or that they would be critiqued for what they shared about their parenting experiences. The parent shared that they liked that they do "... not feel judged about not knowing and not feeling like you're in a hot seat. I think that that is the most, the biggest confidence part is being able to come in knowing you're not the first parent or the last parent to go through whatever it is you're going through."

Staff also elevated the importance of creating a safe environment for members of the Black and Brown communities to engage authentically. This environment gives members the space to discuss systematic and structural challenges unique to their community. As a staff member reflected, "Whether we spoke about it publicly or privately, to be able to go around like-minded individuals in a safe space, it can be therapeutic, and it does help build some level of confidence. It does help build resiliency. It does help build vulnerability and transparency."

As identified in the Dual-Capacity Building Framework, an asset-based approach that recognizes families as equal partners in supporting their children represents an essential component for successful partnership with families.

Key Opportunity #2: Identify practices to focus on family strengths and create a safe space for parents when they engage.

Theme 3: Building Community

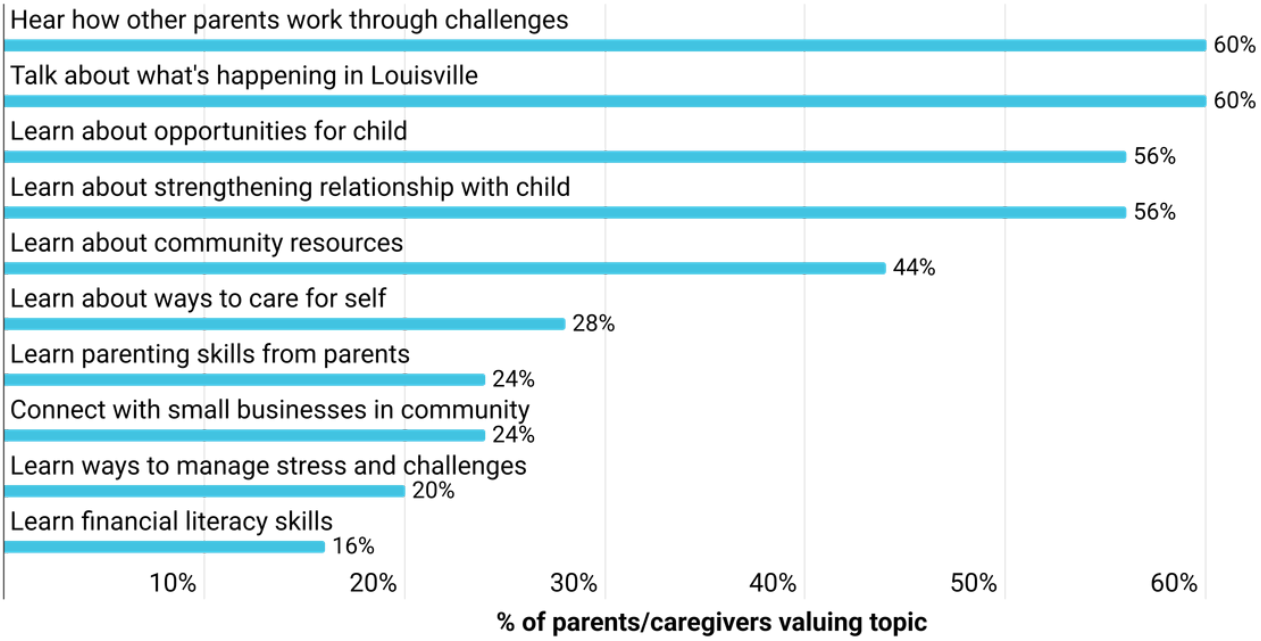
Parents and staff shared during focus groups that creating a community among parents is a critical component of the council. Discussion revealed the importance of connections among participants themselves, distinct from parent-staff relationships. The sense of community and the interpersonal relationships built were identified as a factor in building parental resilience, a motivator for remaining engaged with the council, and an important condition contributing to the strength of council. Parents said the sense of community helped them feel like they were not alone in the challenges that can come with parenting teens.

As one parent shared, *"It's a space where I can talk, I can speak freely about the things that I'm going through as a parent, the frustrations, and you have a community that's like, oh, that's your daughter too?"* They also shared that the council creates a support system and opportunities to learn from fellow parents, which supports their resilience and confidence.

Responses in the parent survey reflected similar findings on the community built within the parent council. Parents were asked to identify what information and discussions that take place at the parent council meetings they found valuable. The highest percentage of parents indicated that they valued hearing how other parents work through challenges and being able to talk about what is happening in the Louisville community.

In the staff focus group, participants described how those topics are discussed among council members, sharing, *"I think if anything, a lot of the things that happen externally makes them want to be more involved. A lot of times we have … open space for … parents to share different ideas or different issues that they see going on around them that they feel like we can have a change in. So a lot of times they're bringing those issues to us and trying to figure out how we can adapt programming to help those that are dealing with things happening externally."*

Figure 2: Information/discussions most valued by parents (n=25)



Theme 4: Shared Commitment

Parents and staff members identified how a shared commitment to the well-being of the child by parents and staff established a strong foundation for parent engagement. Alignment showed up around parents recognizing staff are invested in what is best for their child, parents valuing positive programming that engages their children, and parents seeking to better support their child.
In the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, personal regard is an element of relational trust. Parents provided multiple examples of how staff demonstrated that they held personal regard for their children, which further encouraged parent engagement.

During the focus group, one parent reflected on why she engaged in the parent council based on her experience of realizing that her child was in trusted hands in SSWF activities. She shared that her son experienced developmental delays that impacted his interactions with peers. As a protective parent, she was hesitant to send him to camp, but the SSWF staff encouraged her to. She shared the story of recognizing he would be well cared for, describing her drop off experience: *"So I'm leaving now, and I'm just kind of sticking around, trying to see. But the way that he was embraced, and I felt like everybody was so welcoming and treating him fairly."*

Another parent reflected on how valuable it was to see her son's respect for the program leader and having people he could talk to about difficulties. She shared that her son told her about how he was talking with SSWF staff about challenges he was facing. She valued the fact that SSWF staff built relationships with her son, so he had a trusted adult he could discuss issues with when he was not ready to discuss them with her.

Collaboration represents another process condition of the Dual Capacity Framework. Many parents shared that they were motivated to be involved because they recognized the impact and importance of the program to their child. SSWF, with the emphasis on engaging programming for youth, has created a space for true collaboration with parents on what matters most to them - their children's well-being.

Demonstrating personal regard for the children in the program strengthens relational trust, which is the foundational component of the Dual Capacity Building Framework. Establishing that trust creates the space where parent engagement can occur and resilience skills can be developed.

Key Opportunity #4: Implement practices to demonstrate shared commitment to the well-being of children.

Theme 5: Staff Value Parent Input

Parents and staff noted the importance of engaging parents in meaningful ways. Relational trust, as included in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, includes the element of respect, described as seeking input and listening carefully to what families say. Participants shared the many ways in which parents were given an opportunity to help shape and support the work of Sowing Seeds with Faith, such as being asked for suggestions on improvement, to take the lead on identified action items, and vote on decisions. One parent shared, "So the fact that you do get an open invitation to say, 'Hey, this is what we got going on. We need your help to improve, to add on, to volunteer.' That welcoming makes a difference."

Additionally, staff described how parents were involved in the planning and development of a new policy around expectations for field trips. Parents clearly felt that their contributions and input were valued by staff and shared that staff would ask for explanations and further insight to understand suggestions made by parents.

A staff member described that process of involving parents, saying SSWF is *"very intentional about making sure that they feel involved and just involving them in those conversations to build out our protocols and things of that nature. And I think it just makes them more inclined to … want to share, especially when they can see the outcomes…"*

The staff members at SSWF demonstrated that they value parent input enough to stand by it. Parents were asked to vote on the best meeting time, and after the time was decided, staff have adhered to that. For parents, it has become part of their routine and something they can rely upon as a time for connecting with other parents, feeling support, and knowing their child can come as well. One parent described the Monday meetings as time for "just pouring into each other, like just coming here on the Mondays, the fourth Monday. They feed you so you can bring your kid with you so you get to eat, get a little girl time… You know, Mondays are typically straighter days."

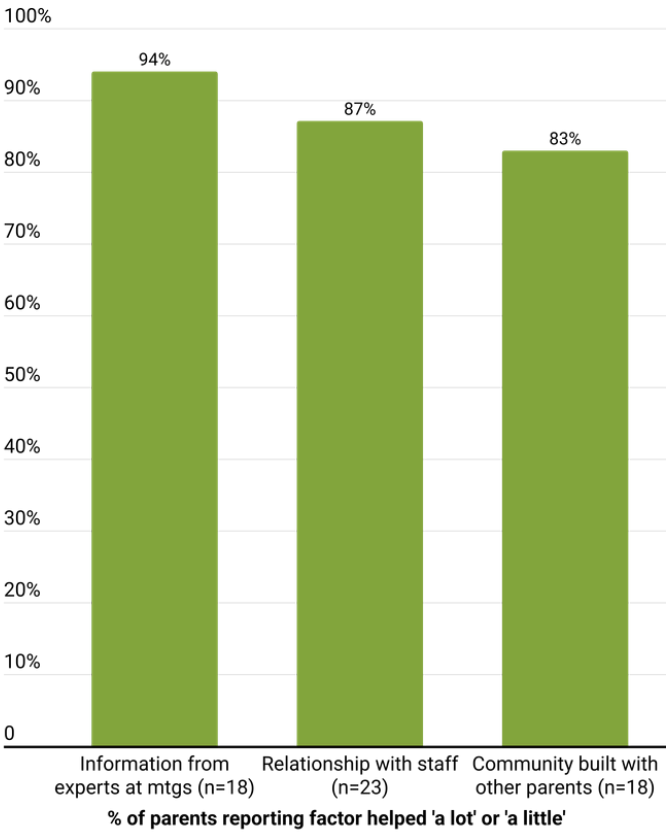
Valuing family input is another core component of the Dual Capacity-Building framework, which emphasizes that partnerships between education entities and families will not be successful if family input is not intentionally sought and incorporated. With that component in place, engaging families to lead activities to support SSWF boosts confidence, one of the 4 Cs.

Key Opportunity #5: Create organizational systems that center family input in decisionmaking.

Theme 6: Engagement around Child Development

An essential component of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework ties parent engagement to important aspects of child learning and development. In the case of the parent council, many of the most valued pieces of information and/or discussions at meetings were learning about opportunities or ways to grow parenting and relationship skills (see Figure 2 above).

Figure 3: Factors indicated by parents as helping grow their confidence in parenting



SSWF works to build capacity by boosting parents' capabilities through sharing resources and bringing in speakers at meetings. Focus group participants recognized this skill and knowledge development as important for growing parental confidence and resilience, as well as a reason parents stayed engaged with the council.

A parent described how the access to resources helps, saying, "I think it gives you that way in, that resource you need, so then you can go out and really seek it, seek what you really need also."

Parents were also asked about the extent to which specific factors impacted their confidence. Ninety-four percent of parents said that information presented by experts at meetings helped boost their confidence 'a lot' or 'a little.'

Additionally, parents were asked to reflect on their confidence in their ability to successfully parent their child. After joining and participating in the council, 78% of parents reported feeling "more confident" or "much more confident".

This past year, SSWF piloted an adult and teen night where parents and children were able to have conversations about various topics in order to understand each other's points of views. Parents and children were not in the same discussion groups, which allowed both to speak freely. Then, before the meeting concluded, everyone came together to share what was learned and how that will be applied in the caregiver-child relationship going forward. This is one example of how SSWF has worked to create spaces where parents can engage to learn about supporting their child's development through youth-led dialogue structures.

An essential component of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework is tying family engagement to child's learning and development. Grounding engagement efforts in ways to support the child reflects parent interest in knowing more about their child's development and being a part of their growth.

Key Opportunity #6: Co-plan skill and knowledge-building opportunities that are parent-informed and tie in to child development.

Increasing Family Engagement and Resilience

Gathering information on the SSWF Village Parent Council from parents and staff guided the identification of factors and conditions that other organizations can implement to strengthen and increase family engagement and resilience. The recommendations below draw on guidance provided by parent council members themselves and on research-based frameworks.

1. **Assess how your organization builds relational trust with families.**
   Relational trust is the glue that builds the foundation for family engagement, which creates the opportunities to build resilience. Using the tool below, OST providers can assess how their organization builds relational trust and consider how to better center relational trust in all programming aspects.

2. **Identify practices to focus on family strengths and create a safe space for parents when they engage.**
   Organizations can ensure staff have training on an asset-based approach and review materials and language to reflect a focus on families' strengths. Staff can also set the tone in gatherings for an environment without judgment where parents see supportive behaviors modeled by staff and other parents.

3. **Build a community support network that cultivates staff-participant relationships and interpersonal relationships among families.**
   Action steps to build community between participants might include activities, such as creating informal opportunities for parents to connect and structuring agendas in a way that allows for parents to converse and build community among themselves.

4. **Implement practices to demonstrate shared commitment to the well-being of children.**
   Staff members can demonstrate their personal regard for families in numerous ways, including checking in with parents in between meetings, furthering trust. They can also stand alongside families during external meetings that might otherwise be stressful, such as meetings with a child's school. Staff showing up for children – by supporting them at extracurricular activities or joining school meetings – deeply conveys that a child matters to staff.

5 **Create organizational systems that center family input in decisionmaking.**

Staff members can demonstrate their personal regard for families in numerous ways, including checking in with parents in between meetings, furthering trust. They can also stand alongside families during external meetings that might otherwise be stressful, such as meetings with a child's school. Staff showing up for children – by supporting them at extracurricular activities or joining school meetings – deeply conveys that a child matters to staff.

6 **Co-plan skill- and knowledge-building opportunities that are parent-informed and tie in to child development.**

Family engagement activities work best when they connect with the learning and development of the children. Staff can engage parents to identify topics of interest to them, structure activities so parents can practice new skills, and make explicit how skills are connected to child development.

Call to Action: Deliberately Building Space for Families

Parents and families, now more than ever, need safe, supportive environments that provide them access to trusting relationships. This report highlights how parental engagement is more than just a program. It is creating the conditions and space where families can experience community, discover and enrich their values, co-create programming with other families, including the opportunity to reflect on shared experiences, and receive resources that are aligned with their needs.

While significant research highlights the importance of school-based family engagement, this report puts a spotlight on a nonprofit organization and their ability to harness family engagement in a way that bolsters resilience and supports for children and families. As schools continue to be tasked with a myriad of outcomes to achieve, what this report clearly shows is an opportunity for community organizations to step up and convene parents in a way that may reciprocally support the efforts of the education system, boost parental resilience, and support child well-being.

Methods

To better understand the factors that enable successful family engagement in Sowing Seeds With Faith (SSWF) programming, one survey and two focus groups were conducted in early 2026. The staff focus group was held on January 29, 2026, and The Village Parent Council focus group took place on February 23, 2026. The Village Parent Council consists of parents whose children are actively enrolled in SSWF programming. Focus group questions were designed to identify key supports, staff action, and barriers that challenge or enable meaningful parent participation within The Village Parent Council.

A survey was distributed to The Village Parent Council members and remained open from the end of February through the end of May 2026, with 25 responses collected. The survey asked about factors influencing parents' willingness to participate in The Village Parent Council and assessed individual-level factors such as self-efficacy, along with program and family-related influences. Responses included Likert-scale and open-ended questions to capture both frequency and context of engagement experiences.

A limitation of this study is the lack of father or male caretaker participation. The SSWF Village Parent Council currently has no male members, thus the focus group and survey responses have no male respondents. Future studies could look at best practices to engage fathers and male caretakers.

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