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20 Ways Your Community Programs Build Strong, Healthy, and Nurturing Families

How can I help make it happen?



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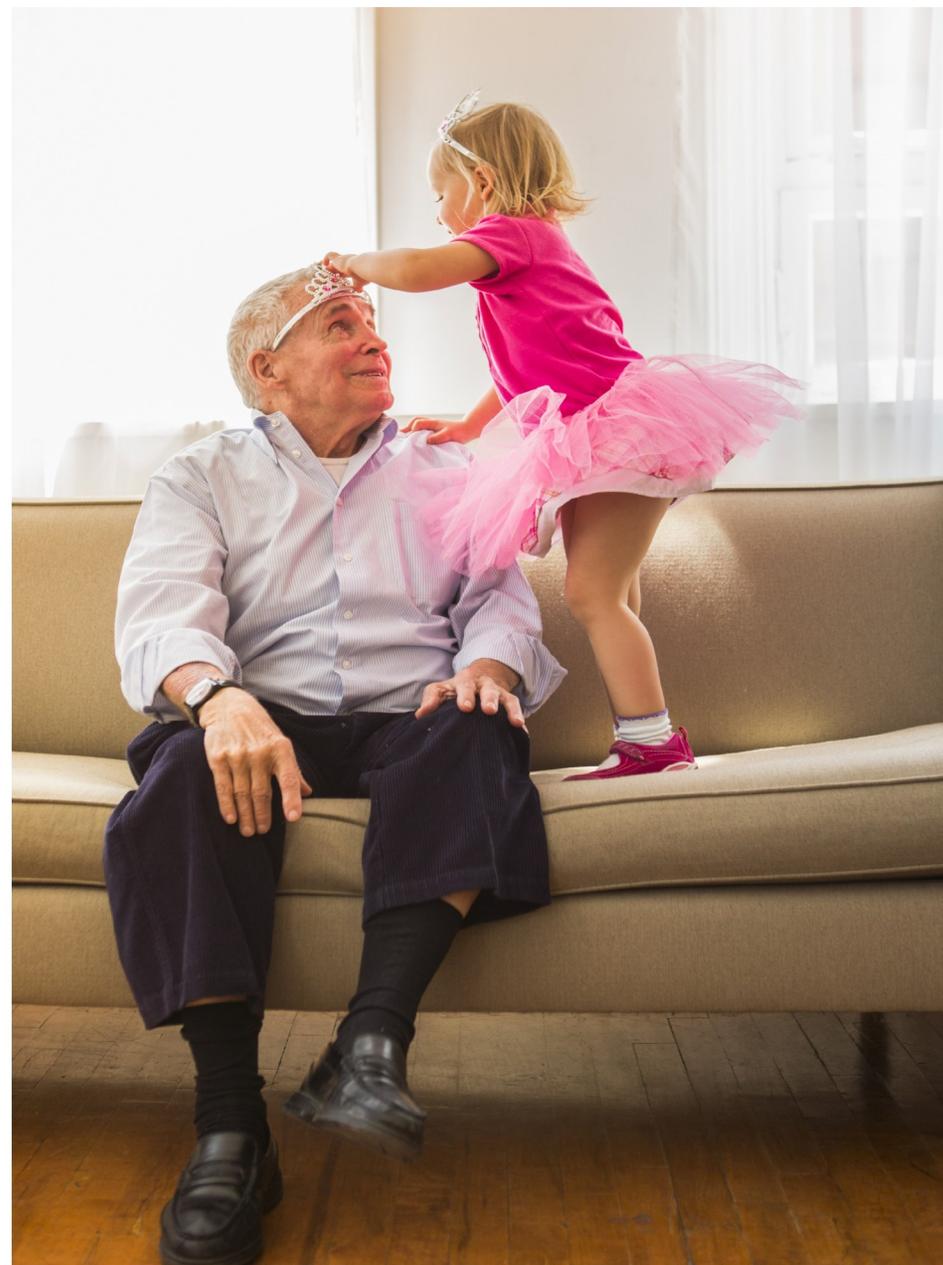
A Handbook for Parents and Caregivers

WHAT IS THIS HANDBOOK ABOUT?

The programs, services, groups, and information that are available through the organizations in your neighborhood were created for *you*. They were developed and funded to support you, your children, and your family. This handbook was created to help guide you in choosing the program that best matches your family's needs. It offers questions you may want to ask and important points to consider in keeping the program you choose focused on supporting you and your family.

WHAT IS THERE TO KNOW ABOUT PROGRAMS IN MY COMMUNITY?

It's important for you to know that a set of guidelines, known as the New Jersey Standards for Prevention Programs, were designed to ensure community programs are useful and effective. These guidelines have been heavily studied and used in many different areas to keep families strong and support child well-being. By learning about these Standards, you, too, can ask questions that lead you to a strong program that best matches your family's needs.



There's a Plan to Keep My Program Running

Finding a program we like is hard. Discovering that this program is being cancelled is worse. Avoid disappointment by asking the following:

- How long has the agency been delivering the program I'm interested in attending?
- How is the program funded?
- What long-range plans are in the works to keep this program going?

These questions might feel strange at first, but imagine how difficult it would be to have to find a new program after you *just* started feeling comfortable where you are.



HOW CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS USE THIS HANDBOOK?

This handbook is intended to empower you with new information so that you can advocate for yourself and your family. It is a guide to finding a strong program and ensuring that it works to help you build a strong family.

Use the questions and points you'll read on the following pages to learn about the people who work in the programs, ensure that a program fits your family's schedule, understand how the program includes your loved ones, make certain the program respects your family's culture, and so much more!

Take this handbook with you so you can ask effective questions and make notes on conversations as you interact with different programs in your community.



WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS FOR PREVENTION?

In recent decades, we have learned so much about what keeps families strong. We have also learned how to prevent threats to a child's health or safety. These lessons were incorporated into the New Jersey Standards for Prevention Programs, created by the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect. These Standards function as a tool to guide the work of organizations who support and strengthen families, promote well-being, and ensure healthy childhoods. They help shape the prevention programs that are funded to support families.



My Program Collects Information

It can be overwhelming to see how much information a program wants or needs to collect. Signing all of those attendance sheets can seem like a nuisance, but collecting data helps keep programs on track. Without data, it's difficult for a program to reflect the changes occurring for participants. We can play an important role. Ask how data is being used to better understand why it is so important.

My Staff Listens to Comments, Criticism & Concerns

An agency that collects evaluations can determine if the program is achieving its goals and outcomes. Reviewing data helps programs evaluate activities and make changes needed to better serve families. We may want to head right home at the end of a session instead of taking a few minutes to provide feedback on how things went; however, this information helps the organization improve the program and our experience.

- Be honest!
- Offer constructive ideas and suggestions.
- Don't just fill in the boxes; write about your experience. Use your voice!



I Have a Voice and It Is Heard

As parents, we know what we want and what's important to us. An agency that has a plan for both community and participant involvement demonstrates respect.

- Are opportunities available for parents to be on advisory boards or to participate in program activities?
- Is there a program that mentors parents to take leadership roles?

I Know This Will Help Me Be Successful

Parents want a service that is effective and want to be part of a program that reflects community values and practices.

- Do the program materials feel like a fit for me and my family?
- Does the program have a research component? Has it been used in a community like mine? *This will tell you if the program is capable of meeting your goals.*

There's a Smart Staff That Cares About Me

It's important to have competent and committed individuals working with families, but all the smarts in the world mean little without mutual trust and respect. Have a conversation with staff and ask about issues that concern *you*.

- Ask questions. If they don't know the answers, do they know where to find the information?
- Is the staff kind, compassionate, and genuinely concerned about *me*?
- What experience do they have working with families like mine?

The Standards are divided into three categories:

- **Practice with Families**

Since parents, caregivers, and their loved ones know what's best for their family, it is important to include them.

- **Practice with Communities**

Because families interact with other homes, apartments, and members of their neighborhoods, it is important to also include the larger community in resources.

- **Administrative Standards**

It is important that the people who work in programs created to support families understand how to offer effective and high-quality services with both respect and skill.

Learn more about the NJ Standards for Prevention:

Visit the NJ Department of Children and Families website at

<http://www.state.nj.us/dcf/about/divisions/dfcp/>

OR

Call the Division of Community and Family Partnerships at 1-855-INFO DCF

A STRONG PROGRAM WORKS WITH FAMILIES

Involves the Entire Family

Research shows we do our best when we have support from our families. *Family* includes everyone who supports and cares for us. When deciding on a program or service, you can ask the staff:

- How can my family be involved?
- What about my friends who support me?

Focuses on What's *Strong*—Not What's Wrong!

We all have strengths and do better when others help us build on them. A good program helps meet challenges by recognizing resilience and developing skills. Consider:

- Does the staff acknowledge my skills and abilities?
- Do they see me as a strong person who wants to learn new skills?
- Do *I* define my goals? Will the agency join me to set goals for my family as I see them?

“There's so much more to me than what you see on the surface. I am more than just the current challenge I am facing.”

Responds to My Family's Changing Needs

Family situations and schedules are constantly changing. It's important to find an agency that is flexible, responsive, and willing to accommodate our family's needs. A program that keeps families involved and fits within routines is one we will want to continue working with for the long haul.

HOW A STRONG PROGRAM IS MANAGED

We want to be invested in whatever programs we choose—which creates questions. Does it really work? Is it careful with my personal information? Is it effective in doing what it says it will? Does the staff relate well to people? All of these things are part of how a program is managed.

My Program Meets the Needs of 21st Century Parents

To meet the ongoing needs of families, a program must continually assess, plan, and revise. It should be useful to the family and be willing to adapt to the community's changing needs. Ask the program staff:

- Are there regular planning meetings where successes and failures are tracked?
- How successful is the program at attaining its goals?



The Staff is Supported

The skills and knowledge of the staff that works with us are critical to meeting our needs. Although everyone has to start somewhere, look for agencies where the staff is continually learning new and different approaches to working with families.

- Is the supervisory staff also involved in the program?
- Do I observe a supportive work environment in the program?
- How often do staff members mention workshops or seminars they've attended?

Offers an Early Start for One and All

How often have we heard someone say, "I wish I knew then what I know now?" Parenting is truly on-the-job training. Think of how well prepared we would have felt if we had known how to handle that first toddler tantrum in the grocery store before it happened.

- Look for programs that are open to all parents, not just ones who are experiencing "challenges"—*everyone* faces challenges in parenting.
- Ask if the provider offers a broad spectrum of services for parents with children of different ages—from new and expecting parents to those who are parenting teens.



Respects My Schedule and My Family's Needs

We want to do the best we can for our kids—including attending programs and events that are beneficial to our busy family at times that are realistic. Ask the staff:

- When and where are meetings being held? Can I get there?
- Do you offer child care or a stipend so I can pay a sitter?
- Will I have to miss a meal or is food served?

Honors My Choices and Respects My Safety

Like everyone else, parents do not want to be told what *has* to be done. If we like a service, it's because we know it will help us do or live better—it's *our* choice! When visiting a program, ask yourself:

- Does the staff make me feel welcomed?
- Is this program offered to everyone so I can learn from a diverse group? Am I invited to bring a friend?
- Do I feel comfortable and safe walking into this location?

Offers a Holistic Approach to Meet My Family's Needs

Our families can feel different and complex. In order for a program or agency to really help our families, they need to understand and work with us in meeting goals.

- Does this program offer services that meet the unique needs of my family?
- How will they help me meet my goals?
- How do these services fit with others I already receive?

Respects My Personal Situation, Skills & Experience

As parents, we learn that we guide our children differently as they grow. We, too, are always growing as parents. Our attitudes, abilities, and perspectives change as we learn from our experiences, successes, and mistakes.



Ask yourself: Does this program recognize my skill level and knowledge as well as my children's changing needs as they grow?

Meets Often and is Long Term

Change takes time. We need time to practice new parenting skills to see what works best. We need to attend programs frequently to feel comfortable with those who support us through the process. Look for programs that offer more than a one-shot workshop and allow use of the services whenever you need them.

Considers My Cultural Identity

Our ideas, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped by our culture, spirituality, past generations, and community around us. These factors influence our parenting practices. A provider who is willing to learn about our family and cultural practices on surface levels (music, language, dress, food) as well as deeper levels (beliefs, traditions, values, world views) is better able to meet our needs.

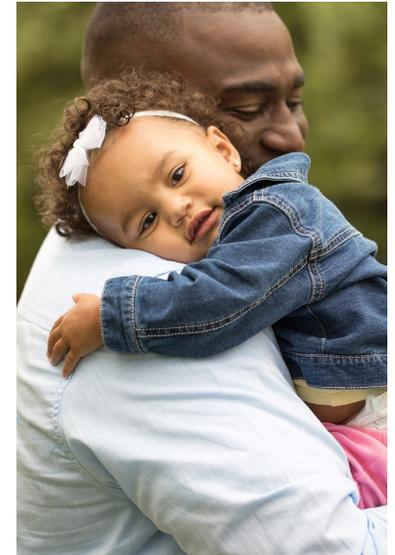
A STRONG PROGRAM WORKS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Families are part of a community. Programs build stronger, healthier, and more nurturing families when they include both the family and the larger community.

Includes Parents in the Planning Process

Those who *use* a program know how to improve it. When visiting a program, ask:

- Does the staff believe in the saying, "Nothing about me without me"?
- Are there decision-making positions reserved for program participants?
- How can I get involved if I want to have a voice in the decision-making process?



Shares Responsibility

As a community, we feel a sense of responsibility to the families in our neighborhood. When programs involve our community and then partner with other agencies, they ensure a wide net of services for families. Cooperation, collaboration, and shared decision making are critical.

- Look for community-based programs, and ask for a list of partners with whom they regularly network.
- Ask friends and neighbors if they have ever used the program.