

Community Leaders Shine the Light in Detroit

Integrating community and researcher voices in the design and evaluation of programs

Abstract

In Southwest Detroit, the number of children who need child care vastly outnumber the available, licensed, child care slots. Enhancing informal child care – i.e., unlicensed care provided by family, friends, and neighbors – is a promising strategy for improving outcomes for children experiencing vulnerability by providing them with access to high quality early care and education in home-based settings. Our project is part of a city-wide initiative to make Detroit a world-class city for its children and their families. Transforming children's early care and education into a high quality learning experience is central to this effort. Funded by the W.K Kellogg Foundation, three community partners and researchers formed a collaborative to develop, test, and implement strategies for enhancing informal child care by adhering to the key principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR). Focusing on the community context and the lived experiences of the partners, the project team worked to ensure that participants' voices are incorporated into the design and implementation of the strategies. Three pillars support the collaborative and its evaluation:

Build partner rapport

- Collaborative work requires trust between partners.
- Our collaboration created a space for honest, critical feedback within and between organizations.

Create solutions designed by partners

- In the research and evaluation community, there is an increasing awareness that participants' voices are central to informing the policies and programs that serve them.
- The collaborative used human-centered design techniques to generate creative ideas and solutions.

Design a collaborative-driven evaluation

- Input from community partners was gathered for all data collection tools and evaluation results.
- The project is based on a continuous improvement framework (Learn, Innovate, Improve; LI²) to ensure that programs incorporated participants' feedback.

Each community partner offered a unique set of programs and supports to **informal child caregivers** in Southwest Detroit based on their **interests, resources, and strengths**. Partners worked together with researchers in a **learning collaborative** to strategize and to continuously improve program implementation.



Researchers' reflections on community-based participatory research

- **Co-create and establish a mission statement.** Our mission statement underpins community-based participatory research.
- **Provide community partners with flexibility and support.** Partners need the freedom to design culturally responsive programming to meet the needs of caregivers in their communities.
- **Defer to community partner expertise.** Partners have strong community relationships and reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the communities they serve.
- **Practice equity.** Throughout the process, center and celebrate partners' and participants' voices.
- **Clarify roles and expectations of all partners.** Start the conversation about expectations at the onset of the project. Discuss expectations frequently throughout the process.
- **Ensure that all data collection tools are reviewed by community partners.** A review of tools invites input from partners to avoid unintended bias.
- **Create time for reflection.** Collaboration takes effort. Make time to share reflections.

Reflections from a community partner on working with the research team

"[The researchers] have been very reflective and responsive...If I say that I think we need a change, [they] have listened and acted accordingly...[They] have said that we are experts, and I've appreciated that...[it] comes through in how...[they have] interacted with us."

– Staff member, Community partner

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