

# Community Cafés with Families of Young Children in Whatcom County

## Introduction

In the summer of 2017, the Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) partnered with the Whatcom Family & Community Network (WFCN) to host three Community Cafés with parents or caregivers of young children. The goals of the Cafés were fourfold: to learn firsthand what Whatcom families want and need to be strong, resilient and thrive; to build an avenue for ongoing peer support and connection for families; to improve services and supports in the community based on family input; and to expand community capacity to lead meaningful facilitated conversations about issues that matter to families. This report provides qualitative data as part of a larger Child and Family Assessment project, which provides an overview of the health and well-being of Whatcom County children under five, their families, and the community in which they live, learn, work, and play. In order for children to thrive, their families and communities must also thrive. By centering families at the heart of the conversations, the hope is for a connected, sustainable and effective system of support.

## Development of Community Cafés

The Child and Family Assessment convened a community advisory group with representatives of community coalitions and service providers who provided input on key issues they saw families facing and helped shape the methods of gathering qualitative data. In addition to using focus groups to learn about service utilization, needs and gaps, the group embraced the Community Café method as a way to learn directly from families about their lived experiences and for that knowledge to inform program and service improvements.

Staff from the Whatcom County Health Department and the Whatcom Family & Community Network worked together to form planning committees within interested organizations or in specific geographic areas. Three groups committed to hosting Cafés during the summer of 2017: the Whatcom Infants and Children's Council (ICC), providers at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRC), and Lydia Place. Two more are interested in the fall of 2017: Rebound of Whatcom County and the YMCA of Whatcom County Child Development Centers.

The planning committees refined questions crafted by WCHD and WFCN staff. The goal was to create durable and universal questions that would identify the factors that contribute to family strength. Staff created a table harvest template that participants could sort their thoughts and doodles into five areas in which they derive strength: self, family, community, friends and other. Staff also created a template for a graphic recording, which captures ideas and themes in words, images and color. Recording conversations graphically allows the whole room to see the collective work process, can foster greater participation and trust in the process and serves as a group memory or guide for later action. The process of recording graphically is time consuming so creating a template allowed a small group to have a product they might not have considered including in this process.

Planning committee members brainstormed how to reach families and extended invitations via flyer, email and phone calls. Because child care and food were provided, an RSVP was needed which may have created hesitation among families to commit to an unfamiliar event format. Planning committee members who fit the particular Café population criteria were ready to don their parent or caring adult hat in order to fill out any tables without enough participants.

## Community Café Method

The Community Café method operates with the following assumption: the people gathered for conversation have the knowledge and wisdom needed for deep insight and action planning. 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 three Cafés hosted participants from different parent populations: parents of children enrolled in the early intervention Birth to Three services (ICC), families living in the Kendall area (EWRRC), 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 the Café. Each Café used the same set of questions as well as the following operating principles (from [A Quick Reference Guide for Hosting World Cafe](#)):

- Create a hospitable space
- Explore questions that matter
- Encourage each person's contribution
- Connect diverse people and ideas
- Listen to understand and listen together for patterns, insights and deeper patterns
- Make collective knowledge visible

Each Café followed a similar format. Parents socialized briefly and then shared a meal. During the meal, they learned about why hope, resilience and toxic stress matter in the lives of families, especially those with young children. [Chan Hellman's work](#) has shown that hope contributes to greater family resilience and well-being. Having hope indicates that a family is thinking and planning for the future; resilience is the ability to face and navigate difficult situations brought on by stress and trauma; toxic stress is frequent, prolonged and unrelenting stress without the adequate mitigating protective factors. One of those protective factors is social connection with others through trusting and healthy relationships that help build resilience at the individual, family and community level.

After the presentation, parents grouped in tables of 4 or 5 and discussed three questions, moving to a new table after each question. Each round lasted about 15 minutes. One person stayed at the table after each round to act as host, sharing key insights, ideas and questions with the new table members. During each round, participants wrote, drew or doodled emerging ideas on large butcher paper in the center of the table. These ideas were also captured on a large graphic recording created during the Café by harvesting patterns and themes from each table's shared written or drawn contributions. The Café ended with time to discuss the larger patterns that emerged during the progressive conversations.

## Community Cafés in Action

The Café hosts described the Café process for families using table handouts and large posters as reminders for Café etiquette. Participants at each Café 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?



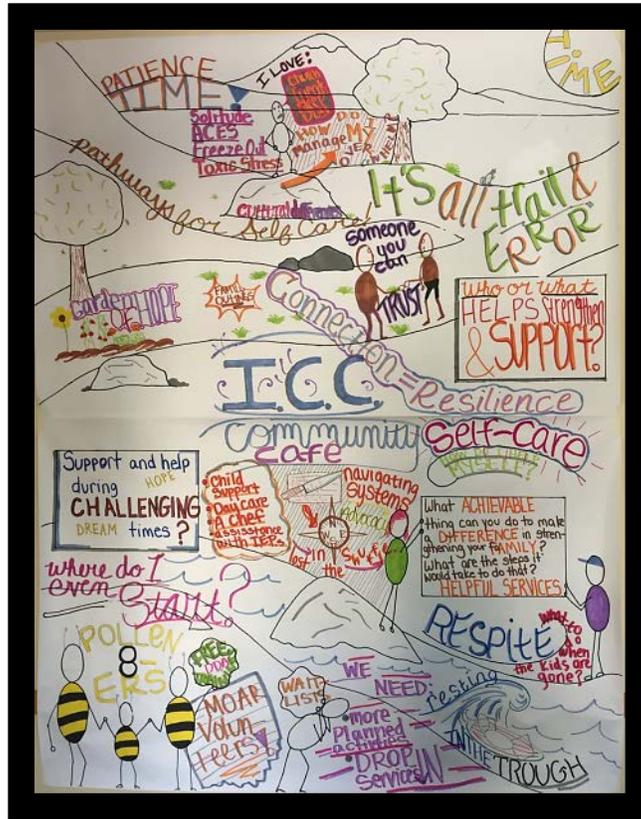


## Themes

Although the shared experiences of the Café populations were different from one another, the themes and patterns that emerged had more similarities than differences. With a few exceptions, universal themes bubbled up in all three Cafés. Some of the themes mirrored the key issues that service providers and community coalitions identified as the most pressing issues for families as well. Words in **bold** identify themes that appeared more frequently. Words in **blue** are themes that overlapped with those identified by service providers.

- Theme 1: **Connecting**
  - To one another through volunteer work, with friends, and **non-judgemental support** from family and friends
  - To other families through activities for the entire family, support groups, family meals, celebrations, social networks
  - To the community through free activities in parks, nature, **play groups**, and activities that bring people together cooperatively, **intergenerationally** and as neighbors
- Theme 2: Self-care
  - **Asking for and accepting help**
  - Developing self-esteem, hope, love, optimism, contentment, empowerment
  - Getting sleep, **respite**, exercise, meditation, spiritual fulfillment, counseling
- Theme 3: **Child Care**
  - **Play groups**, **respite**, need appropriate daycare
- Theme 4: **Support**
  - Through access to **basic needs** like food, economic opportunities, housing, transportation, communication connections, and paid family leave
  - Access to health care in a timely, convenient and knowledgeable manner
    - **Shorter waitlists, drop-in appointments, access closer to home**
    - Mental and behavioral health therapies
    - Case management, faster law enforcement response as well as alternatives to law enforcement for crisis response
    - **Help navigating services**—in **pediatrics**, preventive services, peer support
    - Expanded continuum of services for children who age out or don't qualify for services
    - **Skill building**—child care training, time management, for family and friends to understand family's experience, **for pediatric staff to understand system of services**, communication skills like conflict resolution and emotional regulation





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. 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. Developing community capacity to host Community Cafés could be a step towards meeting this desire for connection. In turn, the Cafés could also be a place for families and providers to shape together the support and services needed for a thriving, healthy, and nurturing community in which all children are valued.