

FAMILY & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Selected Highlights From Our Work 2006-2020



Zoom Classes

A local mom finds her voice and learns that a Zoom workshop can have a real impact by phone.



Strengthening Families

Parenting classes reach out to incarcerated parents at Tompkins County Jail.



Literacy Grant

A partnership with Even Start brings new literacy and parenting programs to rural families in Groton

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Educators ask what families need most then retool parenting workshops for online delivery. | 3 PS: It Works!
For more than 30 years, parenting skills workshops have helped families and professionals communicate more effectively. | 4 Families and Opioids
Our parenting staff partner with College of Human Ecology faculty on a major research grant |
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PARENTING EDUCATION

STAFF RESPONDS TO IMMEDIATE FAMILY NEEDS

Finding new ways to provide parenting education and support when programs were abruptly shut down due to the pandemic was a challenge faced by Family & Community Development (F&CD) program educators. They responded by successfully

food insecurity, being at home with children unable to play outside, providing home schooling, and other issues. The survey then was distributed more broadly across Tompkins County, and later was shared with other CCE associations in New York State to adapt and use.



Family & Community Development staff meeting pre-Covid; from left: Megan Tift, 4-H and F&CD Issue Leader; Jennifer Gray, Elizabeth Wolff, Anna Steinkraus and Juliana Garcia (Photo: Sandy Repp).

adapting their popular workshops to virtual delivery, choosing safer alternatives to home visits (by phone, zoom, and in-person following COVID safety protocols) and basing all their efforts on a community wide survey of participating families that guided the program's ongoing work.

With the arrival of the pandemic in March 2020, our Education Center building and classrooms were closed to the public and our staff began working remotely from their homes. Three in-person parenting education workshops that were underway were abruptly halted. To help guide next steps for these unfinished workshops, and to assess the current needs of families, F&CD staff developed and shared an online check-in survey with participants who had attended parenting programs during the past couple of years.

An ongoing challenge is that some families have no access to technology or live in locations in Tompkins County where internet service is not available. To gather input from those with limited or no internet access, parenting educators made phone calls to those who didn't respond online. They heard that many families were struggling with social distancing, transportation,

After surveying families and hearing that they were feeling overwhelmed, the F&CD team began formulating ways to adapt parenting workshops to virtual instruction. The initial pilot program provided an opportunity for those who had enrolled in the workshops that stopped abruptly in March to complete their class series. This turned out to be a positive experience for participants and staff alike, and the team decided to move forward to offer further workshops to new participants. Since remote delivery eliminated transportation and geographic barriers, educators found that the classes also attracted some parents from other counties, in communities where there are no programs of this kind offered for them.

Another response to meet the needs and concerns expressed by parents was coordination of new Parent Resource Zoom Chats, offered in partnership with Tompkins County Health Department and members of the Early Childhood Development Collaborative (ECDC). At these regular gatherings, speakers shared the latest information about community and agency responses to the pandemic, and ways to access food pantries, infant/toddler supplies, childcare, and other services, with an opportunity for open discussion and Q&A between the speakers and participants. These Chats were attended on average by more than 30 people.

Since the pandemic began, F&CD staff members have continued to listen to family needs and concerns, and have focused the content of their posts on the Tompkins Families! Facebook page on ways families can connect to resources, information, activities, home schooling, and more. With Community Foundation COVID Response Funding, the staff was able to develop activity kits that were safely delivered to families in collaboration with food distribution providers.

Throughout 2020, F&CD Program staffed virtual parenting education workshops that respond to and meet the needs of the participants.

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ZOOMING WITHOUT VIDEO WORKS!

PROGRAM DELIVERY METHODS ADAPT TO COVID-19

A parent shares “I need skills to help me redirect my son when he gets into mischief.” That said, she’s frustrated, embarrassed, and out of patience with the same old fights. She states he doesn’t listen, he’s always late, always destroying everything, the other day, he took apart their toaster. He doesn’t break them out of anger, but he rips them apart and plays around with all the parts and then they’re broken. He’s late for all his online classes. Yelling and taking away his things doesn’t work. She needs time to do her own schoolwork and can’t deal with him begging for his phone back after she takes it.

Of 10 participants in one of the “PS: It Works” classes offered on Zoom, this parent is one of the four who are on track to earn a Gold Seal on their certificate of completion with perfect attendance. She is the only one who’s Zooming over the phone only. She doesn’t have a data plan big enough to zoom for an hour and half each week, and with everything that’s going on, she doesn’t have enough supports to join the call from the library or anywhere else. It doesn’t help that she had moved right before the pandemic closed schools in March and she still doesn’t really know any of her neighbors.

Since our Parenting Education program switched to virtual delivery due to the pandemic, Family & Community Development staff members have been challenged to find meaningful ways to engage participants while facilitating parenting skills workshops. While there is a growing list of platforms and features to use for presentations, many of the family participants struggle, having limited technology skills.

Using simplified programs like Google Meet may make it easier to get everyone active and involved, but that change would sacrifice features like break out rooms and polling which help many participants share and stay engaged. Using anything beyond the most basic features of Zoom often leaves participants struggling and may require additional side training to get them up to speed.

This parent knew that Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins County was offering parenting classes from when she lived in Ithaca, so she signed up. During the weekly sessions, after initially being skipped over a few times as a “non-video” participant, she started speaking up and her voice has become instrumental to the class. She always has situations to share, with palpable frustration, exhaustion, and love.

With the support of the group, and the lens of “PS: It Works”, her ‘tween aged son now has a container of approved objects and a

designated location for his “experiments.” Sometimes this mother sends him outside to dig or smash stuff with rocks. She’s opened a new dialog with him about school attendance and the solution that he came up with, which is actually working, involves fewer inputs from Mom.

On the facilitation side, it is still challenging to facilitate organic conversation and participation, while ensuring everyone has a chance to speak. This parent experience is a good example of how it may be difficult to engage with a “phone only” caller in the first few weeks of a zoom workshop series. After several repetitions of the opening circle, the situation sharing, role plays, and closing circle, all of the participants -- whether joining by Zoom or phone only -- understand and are used to the expectation of contributing to the conversation. Still, there may be lulls after facilitators ask for comments when no one speaks. Being on the phone, this parent seemed to start to listen for these pauses in conversation and is now able to time her comments for the moment when a facilitator is leaving space for someone to speak up. It has become apparent that phone-only participants and out-of-county participants can make valuable contributions to virtual classes and should be included



Photo by Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

when and where possible.

Role plays with a partner, which are an integral part of “PS: It Works,” are easier and less intense over Zoom than when done in a live group. It’s more like watching TV, and just doesn’t hold the same social charge that performance

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PARENTING EDUCATION

PARENTING SKILLS WORKSHOP SERIES

Effective communication can completely change the dynamics of a family discussion, turning a heated conflict into a positive and productive conversation. For more than 30 years, parenting educators at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County (CCE-Tompkins) have offered a free

role-playing and feedback, participants become comfortable with each skill, learn to recognize the family interactions where it may be useful, and are empowered to put what they've learned in the classroom into practice in their daily lives.

This hands-on teaching method and emphasis on skill building are central to the *PS: It Works!* (formerly *Parenting Skills Workshop Series*® or PSWS) curriculum on which the workshops are based. Developed in Tompkins County and published by Cornell Cooperative Extension in 1988, *PS: It Works!* / PSWS has been rigorously evaluated since 2005 and has been shown to improve parenting behaviors in a sample of more than 500 parents and caregivers. Participants report statistically significant improvements in their ability to use the five foundational parenting skills, in their confidence in parenting, and in their satisfaction with their families. They also report increased ability to try different approaches to deal with challenging situations.¹

To share the successful *PS: It Works!* curriculum as widely as possible, CCE-Tompkins parenting educators regularly offer a professional development training that covers the skills, teaching techniques and empowerment philosophy used to facilitate these workshops.

Offered over two full days, the *PS: It Works!* / *Strength-based Communication Skills* training is designed for parenting educators and other professionals who work with individuals and families across the age spectrum and prepares them to reinforce use of the five communication skills with clients and to use them daily in their own lives.

Since 1988, the training has prepared hundreds of facilitators to teach the five communication skills to families in a variety of settings in our community and

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Facilitators Judy Burrell (left) and Anna Steinkraus (right) observe participants as they practice communication skills through role playing in a PSWS group training.

parenting workshop series that emphasizes five basic skills adults can use to improve communication with their children from the time they are expecting through the teenage years.

Known locally as “*Parenting: The Hardest Job in the World*”, the 8-week series is offered in locations across Tompkins County at least five times each year and is open to all who want to attend.

In each class, two trained parenting educators support participants as they learn and practice five basic communication skills: *Encouragement*, *Can Do*, *Shared Decision Making*, *Self-Control* and *Respecting Feelings*. Through guided discussion,

The focus on communication skills makes the training relevant to people working in a wide range of professions.

1. See: F&CD Evaluation Report, PS:It Works! Parenting Skills Workshop Series®, 2005-2016 at <http://ccetompkins.org/resources/parenting-skills-workshop-series-evaluation-2005-2016>.

PARENTING & OPIOID RESEARCH

F&DC PARTNERS WITH HUMAN ECOLOGY ON GRANT

A research partnership between CCE-Tompkins Family & Community Development (F&CD) Program and Cornell's College of Human Ecology has been awarded the William T. Grant Foundation's first Institutional Challenge Grant to respond to increasing rates of opioid abuse and child maltreatment in low income, rural communities in upstate New York.

The College of Human Ecology will receive \$650,000 over three years, with the opportunity to apply for a two-year continuation grant to solidify the partnership and institutional change.

The funded project, "Protecting Vulnerable Families and Children in the Crosshairs of the Opioid Epidemic: A Research-Practice Partnership", takes an existing relationship between Cornell and CCE-Tompkins to a new level, with a 3-year committed research partnership that will enable both partners to build capacity to produce relevant research, and to use that research in their practice. If successful, the prevention and treatment programs studied may be used as models that could be scaled up throughout the Cornell Cooperative Extension system and beyond.

"Expanding capacity with limited local resources is a constant challenge in our work," says Anna Steinkraus, F&CD Program Coordinator at CCE-Tompkins, who has been building professional connections with campus colleagues for many years. Steinkraus is an active member and current co-chair of two CCE program work teams: Parenting Education, and Opioids. Her efforts to ensure that CCE-Tompkins provides high quality parenting education programs have led her to recruit graduate and undergraduate student interns from Cornell and other colleges, to support and help expand work – particularly in the area of data analysis – that is difficult to undertake at the county association level.

These relationships and the mutual respect that grew over the years through short term, limited focus projects, helped provide a strong basis for the longer term, more involved working relationship required for the Institutional Challenge Grant. "We are both pleased and grateful to be part of this mutually beneficial collaboration that will yield new insights and approaches to one of the most serious

issues affecting families today," Steinkraus added.

CCE-Tompkins parenting educators bring strong local experience with the target population to this project. For more than 25 years, they have provided parenting skills education to families referred by the Tompkins County Department of Social Services



F&CD staff meet to discuss an upcoming grant application. From left: Jennifer Gray, Elizabeth Bly Wolff, Anna Steinkraus, and Juliana Garcia

(DSS) and Tompkins County Family Treatment Court. This working relationship was developed at the request of a family court judge who saw a need for programs that could help parents build skills so that they would not need to reappear in court, and served as the impetus for parenting educators at CCE-Tompkins to develop the *PS: It Works! / Parenting Skills Workshop Series* curriculum. Known locally as "*Parenting the Hardest Job in the World*", this research-based curriculum is still used today in workshops and as the foundation for home visits.¹ Within Tompkins County, CCE-Tompkins is seen as the "go-to" provider of parenting education. This reputation extends beyond our county, with staff receiving calls from across NY State and beyond asking for support, guidance, training.

In 2014, as part of a Tompkins County *continued on page 16*

1. Data analysis of *PS: It Works!* continues to yield positive outcomes, with a 2005-2017 evaluation, posted on the Cornell Parenting Project website at: <https://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/engagement/parenting/faculty-students/workshops>

2. The *Strengthening Families Program* has been found to significantly improve parenting skills and family relationships, reduce problem behaviors, delinquency and alcohol and drug abuse in children and to improve social competencies and school performance. For more about the curriculum, visit: <https://www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org/index.html>

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

REACHING OUT TO INCARCERATED PARENTS

‘Strengthening Youth, Families and Communities’ is a central part of Cooperative Extension’s mission. While many people know about 4-H clubs and programs that help youth acquire life skills, less familiar are Extension’s parenting skills classes which have achieved dramatic, documented results for families across Tompkins County for almost 40 years.

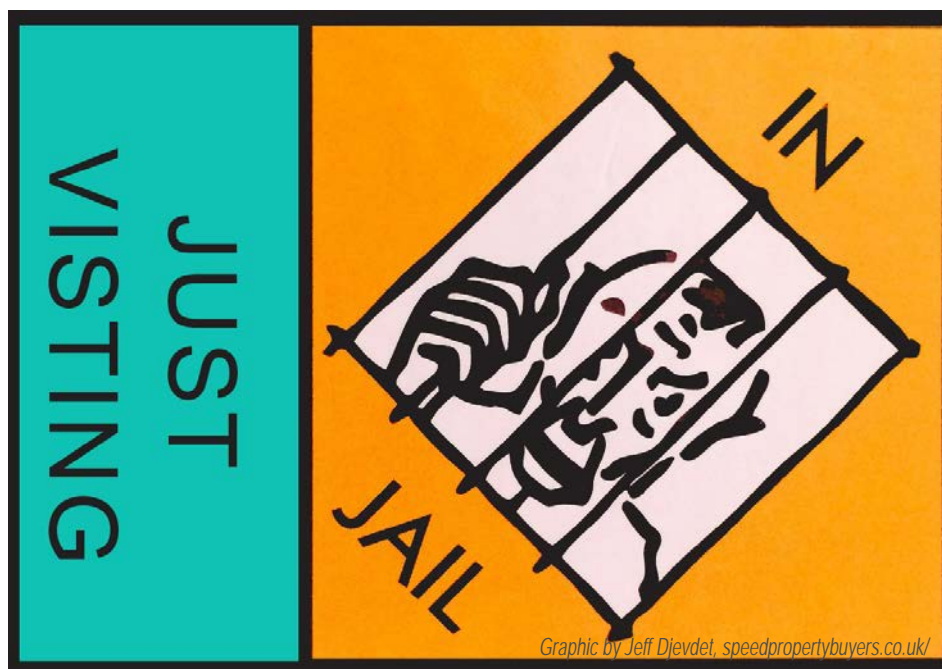
CCE-Tompkins’ Family and Community Development (F&CD) program offers free or reasonably-priced workshops designed to help parents understand the reasons behind their current parenting behaviors, and learn new, more effective parenting and communication skills. One highly effective class is Parents Apart®, begun at the request of local court officials who saw a need for education and support for families experiencing separation or divorce.

Research overwhelmingly shows that reducing parental conflict creates better outcomes for children. Parents Apart® class topics include how to minimize tension between parents by using specific strategies and communication skills, and how to parent when couples are separated or are experiencing high conflict. Developed by the University of Massachusetts, the 6-hour Parents Apart® curriculum helps parents and caregivers better understand how children of different ages experience the separation/divorce process, and how to keep kids out of adult conflicts. Registration is confidential and parents of the same child(ren) attend different sessions. Classes are available each month, as two weeknight sessions or a full day on Saturday. Approximately 120 parents enroll each year.

To assist incarcerated parents and those in re-entry to their local communities who must deal with new and different parenting arrangements, CCE-Tompkins brought its parenting education programs to adults in the local justice system. A “Healthy Family Relationships” class series was started in 2007 for Tompkins County Probation Day Reporting participants. In 2017, Parents Apart® was piloted with separate groups of incarcerated men and women in the Tompkins County Jail.

Response to the Parents Apart® class at the Jail was immediate and positive. Cathy Kinder, MSW, who led the first group of 10 men, recalled how participants shared their struggles in relationships with their children’s mothers, and the pain of separation from their children caused by incarceration. “They quickly started to open up in a conversational way, seeking affirmation, information and support from me and from each other,” Kinder recalled. “I was constantly adapting the material to

include their reality because they wanted to talk about their kids, the mothers of their kids, the way they are perceived by others and society, how trapped they feel and how hard it is to do things differently. One guy said that this class went beyond the subject matter in that it stirred their own need to talk among themselves in a way they don’t



often do - about their kids, their hopes and dreams and how they can try out some of the course information.” Participants recognized their need for more coaching on communication, not just with their children but with the mothers because “if something doesn’t work, they tend to give up or not know what else to do,” Kinder concluded. CCE-Tompkins currently is seeking funds to extend this Parents Apart® pilot in 2018.

The idea behind this work is that “Strong individual families are the building blocks of strong communities, and family-supportive communities help build strong families,” says Anna Steinkraus, CCE-Tompkins’ F&CD leader. Other F&CD offerings include professional training for human service providers who work with families; hosting a monthly Coalition for Families group that meets to discuss issues relevant to families; special opportunities (such as recent Community Café Host trainings offered to teach individuals to facilitate groups to advocate for community improvements) and parenting skills classes.

For more about CCE-Tompkins’ F&CD programs, visit ccetompkins.org/family or ccetompkins.org/events, or call (607) 272-2292. ☀

NEIGHBORHOOD MINI-GRANTS

RURAL RESIDENTS DESIGN LOCAL PROJECTS

A modest investment in community building projects can have a big impact on the people who are involved, as demonstrated by a 2016 Neighborhood Improvement Mini-Grant program created through the efforts of parenting educators from CCE-Tompkins' Family & Community Development (F&CD) program.

designed to be a learning experience for the applicants rather than a traditional funding competition. Five applications were received, approved, and funds were distributed to community groups, for projects that were as interesting and diverse as the neighborhood groups that submitted them.



Young residents of the Congers Mobile Home Park in Freeville enjoying activities at the mini-grant funded community picnic.

For many years, F&CD educators have offered free parenting skills classes, Community Café trainings, and other workshops and educational events for families in the rural communities of Groton, Dryden and Newfield in Tompkins County. Since each of these towns has high numbers of students who qualify for federal free-and-reduced lunch programs, the educators could apply for funds to support projects in limited-income rural communities. A grant of \$2500 from the Children & Youth Fund of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County enabled F&CD to distribute mini-grants of \$500 each to five community-identified projects that would create community engagement and enhance healthy neighborhoods for youth and their families.¹

With the assistance of Binghamton University MSW intern Danielle Bannister, F&CD educators developed a mini-grant application process and provided guidance, mentoring and support to the applicants as needed. The process was

One mini-grant was awarded to "Newfield Library Science Saturdays" which proposed "to provide Newfield families an opportunity to interact with their children and each other in a casual setting in the community but outside of school." Judy Burrill, a parenting educator with the Family Resource Center Tompkins program, supported the collaborators as they developed the proposal, which focused on bringing the Sciencenter's Physics Bus to Newfield for four visits, occurring one Saturday per month. This project was very popular and reaffirmed that families are looking for and excited about opportunities to engage in activities close to home in Newfield instead of having to travel to Ithaca. The proposal was submitted by the Newfield Public Library and Newfield Recreation Program, in collaboration with Newfield Central School, teacher Wendy Wright, The Cornell Center for Materials Research and the Finger Lakes Library system.

In Groton, a \$500 mini-grant supported "GrotonCon," a kick-off party for the Groton Public Library's Summer Reading Program. The event, which featured a balloon artist, face painting, a costume station, games, music, and refreshments, was described as a huge success with over 126 children signing up for the Summer Reading program on that one day. According to the Groton librarian, the "...excitement continued all summer with record attendance at our programs. We were filled with children all summer long and gave away more books than ever." The mini-grant proposal was submitted by Groton Public Library with Groton Business Association, Groton Youth Commission, Groton Cub Scouts, Groton Girl Scouts, Friends of the Groton Public Library and Heroes and Villains Comic Store (Cortland).

An isolated rural mobile home park in Freeville was the site of a third mini-grant funded project. Residents at the Congers mobile home park wanted to create new social connections in their small community that would result in it becoming *continued on page 14*

1. Additional grant funding was leveraged from the Park Foundation-Community Needs/Health and Human Services, and the Office of Children & Families and the NYS OCFS Children & Family Trust Fund.

PARENTING EDUCATION

REACHING COMMUNITIES IN MANY WAYS

Tompkins County Coalition for Families (CFF) is a monthly gathering that offers families and service providers an opportunity to exchange information and to focus on creating family-centered services, enhance collaborations, and explore policy issues that affect local families. Each meeting features a presenter and dialogue on current issues. Over 100 people attended CFF meetings in 2016, to hear the following presenters/topics: an overview of the Community Cafe conversation program; Southern Tier Aids Program (STAP); Heroin in Tompkins County; Ways to be a Mindful Family; Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study; Self-Care; Enough Abuse Campaign (EAC); Tompkins County Learning Partners; The Advocacy Center; Welcoming Refugees; It's Not Just Jenna (film); and the Ultimate Reentry Opportunity (URO)-Barriers to Reentry program.

CFF experienced a service gap when its coordinator retired in 2015. It now is coordinated by graduate and undergraduate interns in CCE-Tompkins' Family & Community Development issue area. CFF meetings are free and open to the public, meeting every 3rd Thursday



Family & Community Development staff and interns decorate the gardens and walkways around the CCE-Tompkins Education Center with pinwheels in April 2016 as part of the national Pinwheels for Prevention® campaign designed to raise awareness of child abuse prevention.

at 8:30am at CCE-Tompkins Education Center. Visit cctompkins.org for information on upcoming topics. ☀

CLASSES FOR CJC DAY REPORTING PARTICIPANTS

As part of CCE-Tompkins' mission to help strengthen and support families and communities, a staff member from the Family & Community Development (F&CD) program offers weekly classes on "Healthy Families & Relationships" at the Tompkins County Community Justice Center (CJC). Class participants are members of the Tompkins County Probation Department's "Alternatives to Incarceration" day reporting program, an at-risk population within our community.

F&CD's strength-based approach works well with individuals dealing with the legal system and the complications it creates in their lives. Protective factors addressed through these classes include increased connections to concrete community supports, increased social connections between participants, strengthened resilience, and increased knowledge of parenting and child development.

CCE-Tompkins Parenting Educator Jennifer Gray informs

participants of additional supports and resources, and has been linking Day Reporting program participants to CCE-Tompkins' parenting classes, facilitated visits, and other educational opportunities. She often has been told by participants that "Healthy Families &

"You are giving people a chance to do things that really make a difference to them."

Relationships" is one of their favorite classes and that they acquire information, insights, and tools that help them to make positive changes in their lives. Participants enjoy this class and spontaneously share feedback: "I really look forward to your class. I always get something valuable out of it." When talking about choosing positive relationships, one participant remarked, "Boy, I wish I'd had this discussion a few years ago, it would

have saved me a lot of grief." Another participant recently told Gray, "I'm really impressed by what you are doing. This is what I want to do. You are giving people a chance to do things that really make a difference to them." ☀

FAMILY DEVELOPMENT CREDENTIAL

EMPOWERING FAMILIES TO SET THEIR OWN GOALS

A group of nutrition educators is meeting around a table and

Heather Ward shares a picture of a home in disarray – the sink is filled with dirty dishes, clothes are everywhere, groceries are not put away, the cat box needs changing. In short, the place looks like a disaster area.

But Ward takes a different approach. “Look closely and see what you can find that is *positive*,” she suggests, and in fact many strengths are apparent. Those grocery bags show that the family has food. They also have heat, electricity, a phone, and a washer. A bowl filled with fresh fruit offers a ready snack. Framed photos suggest a family support network.

A small child climbs up on a man carrying a lunch box, showing that this two-parent family is trying to save money by taking lunch to work. The list goes on.

“The first thing you or I might want to do is get in there, roll up our sleeves, and wash those dishes,” says Ward’s colleague, Stacy Nembhard, “but what would that accomplish except to embarrass

the family and make them feel like they’re being judged? When we work with families, we acknowledge our differences and we meet people where they’re at. Then we build upon the strengths that family already has,” she continued.

This strength-based approach comes not only from the nutrition educators’ personal experiences – most are parents who have relied upon public assistance in the past – but also from Empowerment Skills for Family Workers -- commonly referred to as the Family Development Credential or FDC training -- that all nutrition educators at CCE-Tompkins receive.

Depending upon where a person starts, FDC can result in a huge shift in thinking...

The Family Development Credential training was designed in 1996 to provide front-line human service workers with “the knowledge, skills and values needed to coach families to set and reach their own goals.”¹ To

earn the FDC, workers attend 80 class hours based on “Empowerment Skills for Family Workers” curriculum (Forest 2003), take part in 10 hours of portfolio advisement, complete a portfolio documenting

their personal growth in the understanding and use of concepts and skills, and pass a standardized test. Since 1997, more than 7,000 front-line workers in New York State have earned the FDC credential. The curriculum is endorsed by New York State and is nationally recognized.

The ten chapters in the training cover family development: a sustainable route to healthy self-reliance; communicating with skill and heart; taking good care of yourself; diversity; strengths-based assessment; helping families set and reach goals and access special services; home visiting; facilitation skills for family conferences/support groups/community meetings; and how to collaborate with other agencies.

But beyond offering new skill sets, it is the overall approach to working with families that sets the FDC apart. “FDC training offers a very different way to work with families that many find to be extremely effective,” says Anna Steinkraus, Parenting Education Coordinator at *continued on page 16*



From left, Tina Snyder, Nancy Potter, Stacy Nembhard, Anna Steinkraus, Heather Ward and Jeannie Freese-Popowitch are enthusiastic supporters of the Family Development Credential.

1. The Family Development Credential emerged in 1994 from a research-policy collaborative between the Cornell University College of Human Ecology's Department of Human Development, New York State's Council on Children and Families, NYS Department of State, and the New York City Dept. of Youth & Community Development. See: <http://www.familydevelopmentcredential.org/>

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

'BETTER TOGETHER' PROJECT HOSTS RURAL CAFÉS

Social media and cell phones help us stay in touch with and family all over the world, but we often don't know our nearest neighbors. Families in Brooktondale and Groton recently bridged this divide by creating real-life social networks in their communities, with support from "*Better Together! Community Conversations for Parents and Others.*"

This new grant-funded effort helps interested community members organize and host informal community cafés where parents and their young children can gather to get acquainted and talk about ways to make their towns or neighborhoods more family friendly. "*Better Together!*" provides guidance on how to coordinate the event and assists with childcare, supplies, refreshments and hosts' expenses. The ultimate goal is to nurture new networks that will create a supportive community for the youngest residents.

"Sometimes getting just a few people together to connect and to share ideas is all it takes to spark a really creative project that benefits the community," says Nancy Potter, Family & Community Development Issue Leader at CCE-Tompkins, who has been involved with this effort since its inception.

"*Better Together!*" evolved from discussions in 2010 among various human service agency staff on how to improve local supports for our area's youngest children and those who love them.¹ Seeking a new approach that could be done with minimal funding, the group identified "Strengthening Families™"-- a research-based strategy developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (www.cssp.org) that focuses on building protective factors -- such as parent social networks and connections to community resources -- to help families thrive. The community café model, used by The Community Café Collaborative of Washington, provided the structure for the parent conversations.²

The cafés create a safe and respectful environment

where people can talk about things that are important to them. In this model, parents discuss three open-ended questions on the theme of early childhood development, and then share their thoughts on the unique challenges they have experienced as parents of young children. They then explore how they can use their strengths to advocate for their families. The events typically are hosted by parent volunteers who live in the community, and are offered in partnership with at least

one community group or organization. The most important component of the model is that parents drive the discussion topics and develop the activities for both the adults and the children.

The "*Better Together! Community Conversations*" are designed for parents of young children, who sometimes feel overwhelmed by the many challenges of parenting and isolated from meaningful contact with other adults. While their children participate in a free kid's café program, *continued on page 17*

Parents explore how they
can use their strengths to
advocate for their families.



Janelle Alvstad-Mattson, baby Vanessa Downey and mom Christa Downey. Photo by Patricia Bhrel, used with permission from the June 11-17, 2012 issue of Tompkins Weekly newspaper.

1. The Early Childhood Development Collaboration includes representatives from Catholic Charities, Child Development Council, local childcare centers, CCE-Tompkins, Caroline Food Pantry, Family Reading Partnership, Franziska Racker Centers, T-S-T Even Start Family Literacy Partnership (ended due to lack of funding), Tompkins Community Action, Tompkins County Health Department, Tompkins County Department of Social Services, and parents and grandparents from the community.

2. For more information on the community café approach and how it is used both nationally and internationally, visit www.thecommunitycafe.com and www.theworldcafe.org.

PARENTS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

NEW SUPPORT GROUP FORMS IN GROTON

Parents of children with special needs face challenges

that can be both difficult and isolating, such as navigating the maze of regulations that govern educational services, identifying appropriate resources, and advocating for their child's educational

Clarke engaged guest speakers for each meeting, scheduled the space (at TCA's Head Start site in Groton) and coordinated refreshments and child care services. *Groton's Families!* provided all childcare and some food, and all project partners collaborated on promoting the events. TC

Action served as the fiscal agent, handling and disbursing grant funds.

Since its first meeting in June 2009, approximately 90 people have attended POSNC monthly meetings, including a core group of 10-to-25 regular participants. Topics and guest speakers change each month, and time is allowed for a question-and-answer period, and for parents to interact, share skills and network after each meeting.

Guest speakers have included Groton Elementary School psychologist Cindy VanEtten; Jeff Boles, a peer advocate from the Finger Lakes Independence Center; social worker and parenting educator Edna Brown who spoke on siblings and autism; JoAnn Horton, Family Outreach Worker with the Tompkins County Health Department unit for Children with Special Health Care Needs; Patty Tvaroha from the Advocacy Center discussing the increased risk for sexual abuse that kids with special needs face; and staff from the Smith School at TST-BOCES who spoke about program

offerings. Additional programs were offered in 2010 in collaboration with the Family Resource Network (www.familyrn.org).

During the summer of 2010, the POSNC Group met for a picnic at the Groton Memorial Park to thank Heather for her work as parent leader, and to celebrate group's one year anniversary. Parents at the picnic were asked for their feedback on the POSNC Group. Many shared that the thing that they liked best was the extra support the group provided. One mother noted, "I learned things, but the most important thing was getting to talk to other parents and learning that they are going through the same things I am." Another parent shared, "I like knowing that there are resources out there that can help."

Clark served as parent leader of the POSNC group until August 2010 when the increasing demands of her work and family required more of her time, however she attends monthly meetings whenever she can. Responsibility for coordinating the POSNC Group has been taken on by *Groton's Families!*, a project of CCE-Tompkins that is funded through 2011 by a grant from the NYS Children & Family Trust Fund. ☼



Heather Clark (left), parent founder of the Parents of Special Needs Children Support Group (POSNC) with Elizabeth Wolff of CCE-Tompkins' Groton's Families!

success. Thanks to the efforts of one Groton mother, a new support group was created to help parents of special needs children connect with local services, meet other parents who share their concerns, and learn to be more effective advocates for their children.

Groton resident Heather Clark had personal experience working with the local school district to ensure that her children's special education needs were met. Clark had been active in her community on many fronts, and was accustomed to sharing the useful resources she found with other parents at CCE-Tompkins' *Groton's Families!* project and TCAction's Primary School Family Support Program Parent Group. Clark knew that -- with 18% of district school children receiving Special Education services and a 42% free/reduced lunch rate -- Groton was home to many families with limited resources as well as many children with special needs. She believed that a free monthly parent support group for Groton area families would be welcomed by other parents like herself.

Clark enlisted Elizabeth Wolff of *Groton's Families!* and Donna Veninsky of TC Action, as partners on a proposal to establish a *Parents of Special Needs Children* (POSNC) support group, and in 2008 they applied for a Robert S. Smith Award for Community Progress & Innovation.¹ An award of \$1750 enabled Clark to get the group up and running, and covered project costs from May 2009 to May 2010.

1. A student partner is required on the team by the Robert Smith Awards; Cornell student Hailey Love was matched with the project as a student intern after funding was awarded. Paula Poteat, Family Advocate with the Primary School Family Support Program at TCAction also worked extensively on the POSNC project.

OCF GRANT FOR LITERACY & PARENTING

SUPPORTS GROTON'S FAMILIES! PROGRAM

Rural families in Groton now have year round, universal access to an expanded range of family strengthening programs and services, thanks to *Groton's Families!*, a grant-funded project of CCE-Tompkins and the TST-BOCES Even Start Family Literacy Project.



Shania VanOrder (left) and her mother Ann Marie VanOrder in the "Cooking Together For Family Meals" class offered through the *Groton's Families!* Program.

"The Even Start Family Literacy Program encourages parents to become their children's first teachers and to nurture their early reading skills," says Ruth Katz, Even Start Director. Katz is a passionate advocate for early literacy education and cites the multiple benefits that can result. "The [Even Start] program and its curricula impact not only reading acquisition and parental literacy, but also have been shown to improve parenting behaviors and parent/child interactions."

Since 1993, Even Start has offered Groton families early childhood, parent-child literacy, and parent GED programs in classroom space provided by Groton Elementary School. These free programs were open to families with children aged 8 and younger, who met the federal poverty guidelines, and who had at least one participating parent with low literacy or who lacked a high school diploma or GED. Eligible families could access individualized in-home instruction and 12-to-15 hours of center based programs each week, but staff limits (and strict eligibility requirements) meant that only 11 families per year could take advantage of these offerings.

Katz and Nancy Potter, Family & Community Development Issue Leader at CCE-Tompkins, knew that past surveys of program

participants and Groton residents had identified a need for more educational and social supports in the community, and that many families who did not meet the Even Start eligibility requirements also would benefit from enhanced programming. They conceived of the *Groton's Families!* project as a multi-faceted family resource center – created around the existing Even Start program -- that could strengthen local families while simultaneously helping to address multiple social stressors (such as poverty, unemployment, and rural isolation) that can contribute to family violence and child maltreatment. Their project was funded by a 4-year grant from the New York State Children & Family Trust Fund and was launched in April 2008.

Grant funds have enabled *Groton's Families!* to offer year-round, universal access to existing Even Start parent/child programs and home visits, and to add workshops in parenting, nutrition education, home energy savings, and home financial management that can help families gain skills, improve parent/child interactions, increase social supports, and improve family self-sufficiency. Child care, family enrichment activities, transportation, and a light meal are offered at the workshops to support family attendance. The grant also made it possible to add staff members Elizabeth Wolff as .5 FTE Parenting Educator, and Ryan Harriott as a part-time childcare provider.

Community response to the new offerings has been very enthusiastic. Since April 2008, 119 families (including 150 adults and 61 children) have attended *Groton's Families!* activities. Sixteen to twenty families have taken part in two or more activities, and families enrolled in the Even Start program have attended six to seven events each.

These offerings have included a collaborative "Lunch-and-Learn" series for Even Start Nursery families; "Story Time" and "Tiny Tales" workshops (with The Family Reading Partnership); a CCE-Tompkins' "Save Energy, Save Dollars" workshop; and a parent Resource Fair. CCE-Tompkins' nutrition staff have offered the 8-session "Cooking Together for Family Meals" series in which youth and adults learn to make family meals together, and "Color Me Healthy", a 4-part, hands-on series that encourages youngsters to eat more fresh vegetables and fruits. Workshop attendance has been high. In the Fall, for example, 24 adults and 26 children (17 families) enrolled children (17 families) enrolled in the 8-session "Parenting Skills for Literacy" workshop, with 15 adults earning certificates of participation or completion.

Groton's Families! has no income or eligibility requirements; programs are open to all. By welcoming

continued on page 17

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH BUILDS STRONG FAMILIES AND STRONG COMMUNITIES

People don't often talk of "community development" and "family development" in the same breath. But at CCE-Tompkins, that link has driven the work of the Family and Community Development (F&CD) issue area for the past two decades. In large measure,

"I became aware of this way of looking at community, and at families in communities, early in my CCE career," she says. "It made sense in terms of the experiences I had as a VISTA volunteer working in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and growing up in upstate New York. It also

connected to research on adult education that has a multi-level, systemic view. And I had mentors like Ann Matthews (then CCE's executive director) who were well-practiced in this kind of approach."

These ideas lead Potter and her F&CD colleagues to analyze systemically what it takes to have strong families, what kind of actions need to be taken at each level to build on the strengths of families who seek support, and what CCE-Tompkins' role in that work can be. The result is a wide range of programs, most of them developed collaboratively with others in the community.

CCE's "strengthening families" approach to community development is not as visible as other "big ticket" community development initiatives. "It's not the story that will hit the front pages of the newspaper," says Potter. Yet "there's a great economic benefit to this work," says CCE-Tompkins Executive Director Ken Schlather, "but it doesn't get counted because many people don't think of 'family' in this way." He points to the money currently spent on workforce development. "In strong families, people pick up basic life and work skills at home, so much of that expenditure wouldn't be needed," he says. "And that's just one example. With strong families, education goes better. Neighborhoods are better. So many other things are better."

Putting this kind of systemic approach into practice takes concerted effort, diligence, patience, professional judgment and a long-term perspective. "It takes intentionality to say 'let's look at our community this way,'" Potter observes. "And most of the time, you can't see success day-to-day or even year-to-year. If you looked at some of these programs after a few months or even a year, you might say 'stop; nothing's changing' To see what's happening, you need to take a three, five or even ten-year perspective." For this reason, she's quick to add, this work owes a great deal to the support and creativity of CCE-Tompkins' many Board and Program Committee members through the years. "This is an Association that nurtures this kind

of visionary, creative programming," Potter concludes. *Contributed by Margo Hittleman* ☀



Parenting educator Anna Steinkraus (standing) listens as participants discuss behavior changing strategies in the CHANCE parenting/nutrition pilot program.

that stems from F&CD issue leader Nancy Potter's conviction that strong families are an essential pillar of strong communities and, to adapt a phrase, it takes a strong community to support a family.

To understand the F&CD team's work through the years, one must think at many levels at once. Imagine a set of concentric circles. At the center, there is the family. Surrounding that core are those in the community who work with families: teachers, human service workers, child care providers, doctors, librarians, et al. And finally, in the outer circle, there are the policy makers whose decisions create the context in which families will struggle or thrive, and community members as a whole, with their tremendous grassroots power for change. The F&CD team pays attention to all of these groups, seeking to strengthen the capacity at each level.

It's a mind-set that Potter credits to the late Cornell professor Urie Bronfenbrenner and his "ecological model" of human development.

**With
strong families,
education
goes better.
Neighborhoods
are better.
So many other
things are better.**

A Sampling of Programs to Strengthen Families and Communities

Level 1—Parenting Education

CCE-Tompkin's *Parenting Skills Workshop Series*®, *Culturally Sensitive Parenting, Strengthening Families Program*®, and *Parent Education Network* workshops, led by trained community educators and co-sponsored with other community organizations, help over 150 parents each year gain awareness and skills to build stronger family environments. The Even Start Family Literacy Partnership, in collaboration with TST BOCES, and four rural schools, hosts workshops for parents using CCE-Tompkins' parenting, financial management and nutrition education resources.

Parenting educators also coach families on how to use Parenting Skills and other resources to meet the goals they have for their families. Families who are referred for these are typically facing many challenges and find the one-to-one approach builds on their strengths and successes.

Level 2—Community Support for Families

Parents also seek help in the face of unexpected challenges and CCE-Tompkins initiates collaborations to address specific parenting needs. For example, the *Parents Apart*® workshops, developed and offered through a collaborative effort, help parents facing separation or divorce navigate to focus on their children's needs. The new *Parent Partner Program*™ developed through a collaboration in which CCE-Tompkins provided the community education expertise, helps families tap medical, nutrition and mental health knowledge about eating disorders. Most recently, the F&CD volunteer program committee and staff are tracking research and practice on relationship education with an eye on ways to strengthen adult relationships, reduce conflict, and improve outcomes for children.

The F&CD staff devotes itself to building the capacities of others who work with families, often using a "train-the-trainer" model. The most visible of these efforts is the New York State Family Development Credential training, developed by Cornell's Empowering Families Project and implemented locally with TC3 and many collaborators. Along with the Empowerment Skills for Leaders seminars launched in 2006, these trainings build front-line family workers and organizational leaders' understandings of a strength-based approach for working with families.

The F&CD staff also provide monthly informal professional development through the community-wide Coalition for Families. Community members, educators, and service providers make connections, learn about new research and innovative programming related to children and families, identify local gaps in family support, advocate on behalf of underrepresented families, problem-solve and explore possibilities for new collaborations.



A training session for parenting workshop facilitators with (from left) Tommy Miller, Chris Ion and Shannon Sprague.

Level 3—Informing Policymakers & Communities about Family Issues

Decision-makers need to know about families' issues and how the policies they develop affect families. The F&CD team seeks to heighten awareness of what the community can do to build support for all families through networks like the Coalition for Families, by engaging CCE-Tompkins participants and volunteers in being a voice for families, leadership development initiatives, and through their own networking with researchers and policy makers. They also work with particular communities on creating a community vision and implementing action plans, emphasizing the grassroots power people have to make a difference.

Parenting from p. 1

One of the primary parenting educators Mary Hicks and MSW interns Zach Simms and Nina Drake have been instrumental in adapting curriculum for effective and engaging virtual delivery. By shifting to virtual delivery, the team has worked through many challenges and now offer regular series of several parenting workshops: “Thriving with your Spirited Child,” “Parenting: The Hardest Job in the World” and “Parents Apart.” The team expects to continue offering these workshop series via Zoom into 2021 for as long as remote delivery is needed.

While one-on-one home visits were set back briefly, the F&CD Team did manage to get them up and running mostly via phone and once safety plans were approved they shifted to in-person outside meetings following protocols (screening, distancing, wearing masks, etc.)

Parenting Workshops and Home Visits have been supported for over 20 years by our local Department of Social Services. Collaborators on this effort include caseworkers and families associated with Tompkins County DSS; Francesca Vescia / W. T. Grant Institutional Challenge Grant; the Community Foundation of Tompkins County; Early Childhood Development Collaborative; Louisiana State University MSW intern Zach Sims; Binghamton University MSW intern Nina Drake; and Debbie Thomas, Tompkins County Health Department. Additional financial support was provided by the Community Foundation of Tompkins County’s COVID Response Fund, Legacy Foundation and the W. T. Grant Institutional Challenge Grant.

For more information, contact Anna Steinkraus, Family & Community Development Program Coordinator, at ams69@cornell.edu or (607) 272-2292 ext. 145. ☀



Participants role playing in the Dec. 2015 Family Development Credential training.

Zoom Call from p. 2

or public speaking triggers. Participants seem to sweat less, slip out of first-person and use more narration than they do in the role plays during in-person classes. With the ease of doing role plays comes the chance to practice situations multiple times but always with fewer of the genuine feelings involved.

In switching to virtual presentation, our educators have been able to retain much of the structure of how the in-person classes flow. We use the virtual best practice of 90 minute meetings and make time adjustments as needed. Since there is no set up, break down, break time, or side talk, there are minimal adjustments to programming.

Program funding was provided in part by the Tompkins County Department of Social Services. Story contributed by William Zachary Sims, MSW student intern from Louisiana State University.

For more information, contact Anna Steinkraus, Family & Community Development Program Coordinator, at ams69@cornell.edu or (607) 272-2292 ext. 145. ☀

Mini-Grants from p. 6

a more welcoming place for diverse individuals. Two community café events helped residents decide on a free community-wide picnic where all residents could interact and begin to build community. Feedback from parent leaders after the project was positive.

Other funded projects were “Gardening Festival & Game Nights” at the Poet’s Landing subsidized apartment complex in Dryden; and the “Our Children’s Future” program at West Village Apartments in Ithaca.

F&CD educators were very pleased with the results of all the projects and hope to offer additional community Cafés and Mini-Grants in 2017 with local and state grant support. ☀

PSWS from p. 3

across New York State. While the fundamental skills that are taught each highlight a key issue in parenting, they also can be applied to communication in any situation. Many participants in both the parent workshop and the professional training find the five basic skills helpful in their relationships with partners, neighbors, co-workers, and other adults and family members.

“The focus on communication skills makes this training extremely relevant to people working in a wide range of professions,” says Anna Steinkraus, CCE-Tompkins’ Family & Community Development Program Coordinator. “Each day, every one of us encounters situations where positive, strength-based communication skills can help us work together more effectively and reach positive outcomes, so we’re now promoting the *PS: It Works!* training to a broader audience and have received a very positive response.”

Between 2001 and 2019, more than 300 people have attended the two-day professional development training including parenting educators, Department of Social Services personnel, social workers, teachers, childcare providers, mental health professionals, alcohol and drug rehabilitation counselors, human service workers, coaches and others who work with children/adults/families in people-facing professions.

The training can carry New York State MSW/LCSW contact hours for a fee, and it also qualifies participants to conduct or make referrals to the *Parenting Skills Workshops Series*® or conduct the *Parenting Skills for Literacy Series*; in this way it has helped create a sustainable pool of trained facilitators who are able to expand the local reach of these successful parenting workshops to new audiences.

One local provider, Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services (CARS) has been using *PS: It Works!* with residential and outpatient clients since 2007 when one of their social workers attended the professional development training. In January 2019, CARS funded CCE-Tompkins parenting educators to lead an in-house training for eight members of their staff, with the aim of expanding the use of the *PSWS program* in their facilities. CARS sent two additional social workers to a subsequent training in July 2019 that was held for the community at large.

Ethann Westmore, Primary Addiction Counselor at CARS sums up his experience with the *PS: It Works!* curriculum as follows: “I can’t overstate the value of this program, both for the benefits it offers clients, and the professional development opportunities it affords clinicians who wish to master group facilitation skills. Among research based, evidence informed curricula, this program is unmatched in its tight, scripted design, and in the way it engages clients in a very dynamic learning process that places most of the emphasis on doing (role-playing) not just talking. After attending this facilitator training in 2008, I was inspired to facilitate 31 workshops at CARS RARC/OP since, and continue to find this a very enlivening, meaningful group [program] that helps ambivalent clients begin to notice the discrepancy between substance use and becoming the parents they would like to be.” (1/3/19)

PS: It Works! / Strength-based Communication Skills is a highly interactive training that is facilitated by two experienced parenting educators. The training includes an overview of the empowerment approach and the adult learning methods used in the workshops; an introduction to the *PS: It Works!* curriculum; discussions of parenting styles and discipline, child development, cultural influences and environmental issues; discussion and practice of the five basic parenting skills; active participation and role play within small groups; and an introduction and overview of the *Parenting Skills for Literacy* curriculum.

A registration fee of \$200 covers the two-day training, lunch, snacks and a copy of the *Parenting Skills Workshop Series Manual*.² Some scholarship aid may be possible. New York State MSW/LCSW contact hours are available for an additional \$25 fee. Visit the *PS: It Works! / Strength-based Communication Skills* webpage at <http://ccetompkins.org/ps-it-works> for a full course description, and links to the *Parenting Skills Workshop Series Manual*³ and to Cornell University College of Human Ecology’s *PSWS Evaluation Report, 2005-2016*.

Please contact Anna Steinkraus, CCE-Tompkins’ Family & Community Development Program Coordinator, with additional questions or to find out the date of an upcoming training, at ams69@cornell.edu or (607) 272-2292 ext. 145. ☼

2. Parenting Skills Workshop Series: A Manual for Parent Educators by John Bailey, Susan Perkins & Sandra Wilkins (1999) Cornell Cooperative Extension, see: <https://www.human.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/PAM/Parenting/ParentingSkillstext.pdf>

3. Training co-sponsor Family & Children’s Service of Ithaca <http://www.fcsith.org/home/> is recognized by the NY State Education Department’s State Board for Social Work as an approved provider of continuing education for licensed social workers #0293.

Opioid Grant from p. 4

DSS and Tompkins County Family Treatment Court Prevention and Family Recovery Grant, DSS reached out to CCT-Tompkins' Anna Steinkraus, asking F&CD to take a lead on coordinating "Strengthening Families Program" (SFP)² workshops for Family Treatment Court families. This 14-week evidence based parenting skills curriculum was developed in Utah and is specifically designed for families that have been affected by substance abuse disorder. F&CD staff offered the workshop in 2014 and 2015, and have offered it twice per year in each year after that, for parents and youth 6-to-11 years of age.

Two years, later, in the summer of 2017, Steinkraus and the F&CD staff partnered with Laura Tach, Associate Professor of Policy Analysis, Management & Sociology on an Engaged Cornell project to analyze 2014-2017 data from *The Strengthening Families Program*.

The evaluation project resulted in increased awareness among campus researchers of the impacts the opioid epidemic has had on local families, and helped to inform their interest in submitting the challenge grant application. This existing, successful relationship with campus enabled CCE-Tompkins parenting educators to quickly agree to partnering on the joint proposal to the William T. Grant Foundation.

Partners on the new project will examine the role of family drug treatment courts in mitigating child maltreatment among families struggling with treatment, and also will evaluate evidence-based interventions that may reduce the risk of opioid abuse for low-income youth and families.

Researchers will elicit stakeholder views to understand their perspective on the nature of the problem and potential responses, and will leverage national data sets to examine external shocks to the opioid supply and how these track to the incidence of child abuse. They will use a quasi-experimental design and in-depth case studies to examine national trends in child maltreatment following the initiation of Family Treatment Courts. They will also test the local effectiveness of a community-based family support program with the potential to reduce substance abuse treatment needs. The partners will use findings from each study to increase understanding about the opioid epidemic and its consequences for families and to improve local practice and programs.

Collaborators on the grant include Rachel Dunifon, Cornell Dean of Human Ecology; Laura Tack, Cornell Policy Analysis and Management and Sociology; Elizabeth Day, Cornell Post Doctoral Researcher at the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research; Mary Beth Morrissey, Cornell PhD student; and Erin Mathios, Research Assistant.

Founded in 1936 and based in New York City, the William T. Grant Foundation funds research in the social sciences with a particular focus on reducing inequality in youth outcomes and improving the use of research evidence in public policy and practice settings.

For more information on this project, contact Anna Steinkraus at ams69@cornell.edu or at CCE-Tompkins (607) 272-2292. ✨

FDC Training from p. 8

CCE-Tompkins and an FDC instructor since 2001. "Historically, in a deficit-based approach, the family worker assesses 'what's wrong' and tells the family what they need to do to fix it. FDC can help both practitioners and agencies adjust their perspectives to be more empowerment oriented in working with families and with colleagues."

The picture of the messy house cited at the beginning of this article is an exercise in the FDC training that helps participants to recognize how they currently process what they see and begin to adopt this more strength-based approach. According to Steinkraus, it offers a striking illustration of the change in thinking that occurs when the focus is on looking for strengths. "FDC is as much a personal growth process --with each participant expanding, thinking about, increasing awareness and growing in their understanding of empowerment -- as it is about adding skills and tools," she says. "Depending upon where a person starts, FDC can result in a huge shift in thinking, particularly if someone is coming from deficit-based practice. We are reminded/learn that we cannot empower anyone else. However we can interact in ways that help others become empowered," Steinkraus concludes.

Jeannie Freese-Popowitch, another nutrition educator at CCE-Tompkins, enthusiastically concurs. "The FDC influenced the way I look at the world personally and in my work, from then until forever," she says. "In our culture, most of us are raised to see what's wrong. We go to social services and convince them how 'bad' we are so they'll help us. The FDC provides a way of looking at yourself, your neighbor, or your client and seeing what's already working, what's going right, and then asking them what *they* would like to improve. The client participates in setting their own goals and we help them to recognize the strengths they already have. It's all based on mutual respect," Freese-Popowitch says. "It was so beneficial for us to go through the training. It's just the greatest thing since sliced bread," she concludes.

Research supports this claim, with families, front-line workers and agencies all reporting positive outcomes from the FDC program.² Families better recognized their strengths, set goals and made plans to reach them, and were empowered to interact more with agencies, schools and organizations. Workers reported increased self-esteem, confidence, and assertiveness in helping families, and better communication and relationship skills in their personal and professional lives. The agencies where they work reported higher staff morale, lower turnover and increased interagency outreach and networking capacities among FDC recipients.

"It's a tremendously beneficial program for all who are involved", says Nancy Potter, Family & Community Development Issue Leader at CCE-Tompkins and an FDC instructor. CCE-Tompkins has offered the FDC training since 1997, with groups of 12 to 18 people taking the training in each of the past several years. Participants have included a wide range of people who work in human services, as well as Extension educators and others. Successful completion results in the *continued*

FDC credential issued by the University of Connecticut, and 9 CEUs through Tompkins-Cortland Community College and/or Excelsior College credits. The credential can be an alternative to a college degree or a supplement to formal education in social work, human development, and related fields.

The Family Development Credential training is offered annually in Tompkins County depending upon enrollment numbers. For more information, visit <http://cctompkins.org/family/training> or call Anna Steinkraus at (607) 272-2292 if you would like to add your name to a list and be contacted when the next FDC training is scheduled. ☼

Cafés from p. 9

parents can socialize, share their knowledge on topics such as parenting and local resources; and perhaps find ways to collaborate on projects of common interest to make their neighborhoods better.

A Rural Communities Grant to CCE-Tompkins from the Community Foundation of Tompkins County supported a pilot of an initial two community cafés in two towns. Municipal leaders and early childhood partners were asked to nominate rural communities to hold the parent conversations and to identify parents and others who could host the events. Several towns expressed interest, and two nominations – from Brooktondale and Groton – included teams that were ready to begin. Each team had two parent leaders, a town-specific orientation for the conversations, and supportive community members and organizations to help plan and promote the events. Local coordinators and other interested people in each town took part in an orientation on the community café approach before the first cafés were held in these two communities between May and July 2012.

In Brooktondale, cafés were hosted by Janelle Alvstad-Mattson and Elissa Wolfson with Brooktondale Community Center, Brooktondale Food Pantry and Caroline Youth Commission as community partners. Ten parents (including two expectant families) attended the first event and talked about the various local resources that are available to parents of young children. According to Alvstad-Mattson, “As a result of this project, we were able to meet other parents with young children, discover the needs in our community and together we were able to come up with ideas on how to strengthen our community. Several of us wanted to learn about family and child activities that were going on in or around our area and each of us knew about things that someone else didn’t.”

One result of the Brooktondale cafés was the creation of a new community listserve with more than 20 subscribers that will help the group stay in touch and learn about activities and resources. Several small groups also were formed after the event; one new mom who attended organized a twice-weekly playgroup at the Brooktondale Community Center, and another group of mothers who were interested in getting more exercise started walking together with their children in strollers. Several parents expressed a need for a parent’s night out, and learned about free child care at a local church that enables parents to have a ‘free night’ every month.

In Groton, eleven parents attended the first community café, hosted by “Parents of Special Needs Children” (POSNC), a parent run support group founded through CCE-Tompkins’ “Groton’s Families!” program.

Parents Dawn Loga and Lila Pierce facilitated the conversations, with TC Action’s Groton Head Start and Early Head Start programs and “Groton’s Families!” Program as partners. The conversations included sharing safe, free and fun places for families with young children. Participants also valued the time to have a frank conversation about community needs, and raised concerns about supports for families. Those who attended were grateful for a chance to listen to and be heard by other parents who understand the challenges and triumphs of raising special needs children. They agreed that having children with special needs is often isolating, but having the community café forum helped them feel less alone.

Organizers have found the community café model to be a successful one. The approach was well received by parent leaders and attendees who wanted to continue community cafés past their two pilot sessions. Additional cafés and other events are being held by the Groton and Brooktondale parent groups.

To build upon this pilot phase of *Better Together!*, CCE-Tompkins applied for and received additional funds from The Park Foundation to expand the project to five more Tompkins County neighborhoods in 2013. Look for community cafés in spring 2013 in Dryden, Jacksonville, Newfield, and at Southside/GIAC/West Village in Ithaca. Anyone who would like to host community conversations in their town or neighborhood can contact Elizabeth Wolff or Dacia Leggé at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, (607) 272-2292. Learn more about the Early Childhood Development Collaboration’s support for families with young children at www.frct.org, Family Resource Connection Tompkins.

Special thanks to: Ashley J. M. Jones (CCE summer intern, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University), Steve Byers of Olympia, WA (www.helpinghumansystems.com) for generously donating his expertise while on vacation. Generous support from the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, The Park Foundation and NYSPEP/Children & Family Trust Fund, helps with childcare, supplies, trainings, refreshments and hosts’ expenses for the events. ☼

Groton’s Families! from p. 11

all families, *Groton’s Families!* has been able to expand participation in programming. Families can take advantage of a wide variety of offerings, from one-time events or activities, to 8-week workshop series. This has expanded greatly the numbers of families able to participate in programming, and has helped to destigmatize participation in programming as well. Families have the opportunity to expand their informal social / networking connections, making new friends and expanding connections.

Several local organizations have come to make connections with *Groton’s Families!* participants, and to share information about their services and programs, including the Mothers and Babies Perinatal Network (on Child Health Plus), and Tompkins Community Action (on Head Start, HEAP, Weatherization, and Section 8). *Groton’s Families!* participants also took part in a number of one-time community events, including picnics, hikes, field trips to a blueberry farm and to the Cornell Plantations, and community events such as the Youth Commission Carnival, Groton Old Home Days and the Groton Elementary UPK open house.

For more information about *Groton’s Families!*, contact Elizabeth Wolff, Parenting Educator, at (607) 280-5224 or ebw52@cornell.edu. ☼