

agog dinner & discussion | **Creating Strong Foundations**



On June 23, agog host Holly Schoenbeck welcomed 23 guests to her home to discuss how healthy parenting, strong families and a healthy environment support child development. Guests in attendance were grandparents and/or parents of young kids or adoptive children. What follows is a synopsis of the dinner discussion.

While many parents are familiar with young children’s cognitive development such as the importance of talking with and reading to them, a recent survey showed that parents are largely unaware of socio-emotional development that takes place in children aged 0-3 years. Yet researchers are learning that normal brain development and social-emotional health depends on lots of consistent sensitive and nurturing parental support during these early years. But too many children may not receive this kind of supportive parenting, particularly when parents face stressors such as poverty, substance addiction, domestic violence, social isolation and other family challenges.

Parenting is not always natural and automatic. Babies don’t come with instruction manuals. People learn parenting skills in a variety of ways and often from sources other than their own parents. Some guests shared that they learned how to parent from other relatives, observing friends, raising siblings, and reading parenting books. Several guests have consciously chosen not to parent as their parents did. Members of the Moreland Presbyterian Church mom’s group commented how important a peer network can be to parents. Many guests spoke of the value of meeting regularly with fellow parents of young children, or of the support of more experienced “mentor” parents in the group.

As a society, we don’t do a very good job of teaching and preparing parents for the challenging journey ahead. It seems as though parents are expected to just know what to do and as one guest put it, “be perfect parents.”

Access to parenting education and support groups can help. Most parents, including those facing multiple stressors, deeply love their children and want to be the best parents they can be. But for many parents, there exists a stigma around receiving parenting education, as if they are ‘bad’ parents. **What are some ways to attract parents to parenting classes?**

- Make food available
- Provide quality childcare
- Create an environment of ongoing support and lasting connection for parents, both moms and dads.
- Feature classes for couples, moms, and dads.
- Provide regular home visits.



Where’s the instruction manual?!

agog dinner & discussion | **Creating Strong Foundations**

- Provide two steady mentors for parents: one in the same age range who have similarly aged children, and a parent who has grown children. These mentors can share what worked for them and are available to support the parent.
- Provide ONE place where parents can get many of their needs met, such as a community school or medical clinic. Ensuring access to these locations is paramount. When services cannot be provided at one common location, it would be helpful to have a list of referrals handy (for example, Multnomah County has a pocket size list of services).

The group identified ways to help individual families and influence social policy

- Let go of fantasies of parental perfection
- Find and get involved in programs that support parenting education and community cohesion. SUN Schools can become hubs for multiple organizing services, such as food, childcare, and parenting groups and gathering places.
- Mentor a child, a parent, a family. Help parents set goals for themselves and their families.
- Eat lunch with a disadvantaged child each week and become a solid support in a child's life.
- Volunteer in your child's classroom - or at a low-income school.
- Recommend parenting education classes be taught in high school.
- Co-advocate with pediatricians and health care providers to market parenting education as important as Lamaze classes; provide new mom packets at hospitals with lists of class locations.
- Join with advocacy organizations to increase community awareness of issues facing families and children and develop holistic community supports

Ways Metropolitan Family Service supports children, parents and families

- [Parenting education](#) offered by Metropolitan Family Service helps 350 parents every year develop positive parenting skills. MFS realizes that parents have the most impact on their kids, and supports them in their desire to be good parents. Our programs, ***Make Parenting a Pleasure*** (birth to 8) and ***Guiding Good Choices*** (ages 9-14) help to reduce the risk of child abuse, teach parents positive discipline skills and how to motivate & support their children, as well as self-care strategies and how to build a family support system.
- [Intergenerational mentoring](#) meets two important health goals: it helps children succeed in school – a huge predictor of long-term health – and also improves the health and well-being of our age 55+ volunteers, reducing their social isolation and susceptibility to depression.
- **We promote physical activity and provide healthy snacks** to all students in after school programs in 24 schools. Often, the low-income children we serve are eating breakfast, lunch, snack, *and* dinner at school. Four of our school sites have developed community gardens to help provide nutritious food to local families.

agog dinner & discussion | **Creating Strong Foundations**

The mission of Metropolitan Family Service is to strengthen families and individuals while enhancing their participation in community life. Organized by MFS, **A Gathering of Good (agog)** is a series of community events promoting discussion, civic engagement and social change. In addition to exploring important social issues as a community, **agog dinners & discussions** raise public awareness of MFS's effective programming for children, families, and older adults. MFS is celebrating 60 years of community service in 2010.



Metropolitan
Family Service

Because together, we can do more.