



First 5 Monterey County Early Learning Opportunities

Vision II: Access to High Quality Early Care and Education

*Year 4 Evaluation:
Findings from the Family, Friend,
and Neighbor Caregiver Technical
Assistance Program*

January 2014

Prepared for



Prepared by

harder+company
community research

Table of contents

Key Findings	1
I. Introduction	4
II. Technical Assistance Approach	8
III. FFN Caregiver TA Outcomes.....	12
IV. Lessons Learned.....	19
V. Next Steps and Considerations	22
VI. Concluding Thoughts	23

Key Findings

Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) Caregiver TA has shown considerable success in improving the quality of care in home settings. Through playgroups, FFN caregivers are seeing the importance of play and activities in supporting a child's development. They are learning to understand children's behaviors and respond in positive ways, and are developing an understanding of the importance of their role in children's lives. This study has shown that Vision II FFN Caregiver TA has had a positive impact on early care providers.

FFN Caregiver TA has evolved significantly, with a greater emphasis on intentionally organized learning groups and reflective practices to individualize learning

- A registration process has been designed and implemented. The FFN caregivers register for a specific playgroup, creating a consistent group of caregivers that meet together throughout the year. This supports relationship-based learning among the caregivers. Furthermore, an orientation introduces caregivers to the goals and process of the playgroups at the beginning of the year.
- The project staff has infused greater intentionality in the playgroups' curriculum and approach.
- Reflection is a central practice that enables FFN caregivers to provide responsive care to children. Dedicated time is provided at each playgroup session for reflection and journaling.
- Staff support has been strengthened through staff debriefs that occur after each playgroup, as well as dedicated staff planning time during the summer months. These practices have enabled the project staff to infuse more intentionality into the playgroups.
- The playgroups are more responsive to the flow of the year. For example, playgroups are no longer provided in the summer, when older siblings are out of school and attendance is challenging. In the winter months, parents who are available during the day due to seasonal work are invited to participate in the playgroups with their provider.
- Playgroup staff and participants celebrate their achievements at an end-of-year ceremony, and share what they have learned with friends and family.

FFN Caregiver TA outcomes reflect quality programming

- **FFN caregivers have increased awareness of the importance of their role in children's lives.** Through relationships and reflection, playgroups helped FFN caregivers develop a deeper understanding of the critical role they play in children's lives and development. Participants also learned that relationships with caring adults are critical to a child's development.

- **FFN caregivers are more intentional about the safety and quality of care in their homes.** They value and respect the children in their care, and see the importance of a positive environment to their mental health.
- **FFN caregivers have increased understanding of the importance of play and interactions in supporting social-emotional development.** Through playgroup activities, FFN caregivers understand that children learn through play, and that play is a critical part of spending quality time with them.
- **FFN caregivers have increased understanding of child development and the meaning of children's behavior.** FFN caregivers respect children as individuals with their own desires, creativity, and talents. Playgroups have helped caregivers understand the needs behind a child's behavior, and learn to listen to what children have to say.
- **FFN caregivers are using new activities and materials in their homes.** Through playgroups, FFN caregivers have learned a number of developmentally appropriate activities that are easy to implement in the home environment with low-cost materials. In focus groups, nearly all caregivers noted that they were able to implement these activities with ease in their homes.
- **FFN caregivers have a reduced sense of isolation due to participation in playgroups.** Playgroups have connected FFN caregivers with others who share similar challenges and concerns. In focus groups, a number of caregivers noted that the playgroups have been an important support to them and have reduced their sense of isolation. However, only a few caregivers have met outside of playgroups.
- **FFN caregivers share information with parents of the children in their care.** While parents are not the primary audience, FFN Caregiver TA has the potential to touch parents as well. During focus groups, some caregivers, particularly grandparents, noted that they have shared what they learned in playgroups with the children's parents. A few of the grandparent caregivers noticed that parents are spending more time interacting with their children and playing with them and attribute this to the sharing of information from the playgroup. One FFN caregiver noted that she has started making more of an effort to discuss the children's progress with their parents.

FFN caregivers describe outcomes for the children in their care

- **Children are communicating more and expressing how they feel.** Through playgroups, caregivers learned to engage children in dialogue more often and encourage them to talk about how they feel. In the focus group survey, nearly all respondents reported that children were better at expressing how they feel (96 percent), had better interactions with adults (96 percent), and were more comfortable asking for help (92 percent) after participating in playgroup.
- **Children have more positive peer interactions.** Through playgroups, children are learning to interact with other children, and are more comfortable in social situations. The vast majority (91 percent) of focus group participants reported that the children have better interactions with each other as a result of their participation in playgroups.

- **Children are more confident.** FFN caregivers note that they have learned how to help children develop a sense of confidence. Children are exhibiting greater self-esteem and carry themselves with greater confidence.
- **Children are better prepared for the routine of school.** By attending a structured playgroup, FFN caregivers feel that children are more prepared for the routine and structure of a school environment.

FFN caregiver playgroup lessons learned

From their years of experience with FFN caregiver playgroups, project staff has identified a number of key lessons learned:

- *Creating defined groups with a registration process* supports the development of strong relationships, peer connection, and learning.
- *Orientation process and materials* provide clarity around playgroup purpose and expectations.
- *Reflection time* extends caregivers' learning and fosters peer connections.
- *A highly individualized and dynamic approach* meets FFN caregivers where they are, and enables playgroup facilitators to be responsive to the needs of individual participants.
- *Staff debriefs* provide critical support to playgroup facilitators.
- The *three-visit structure* provides *home visits* with greater focus, enabling staff to achieve more through these visits.
- *Playgroup locations* need to be convenient for FFN caregivers and have environmental features that support group discussion and a variety of activities.
- *A focus on relationships* enables successful outreach to a hard to reach population and supports continued participation over time.
- The *Year End Gathering* celebrates FFN caregivers' hard work and successes, and reinforces the practice of reflection.

I. Introduction

Vision II: Families have quality, affordable early care and education of choice

First 5 Monterey County (F5MC) is committed to strengthening the system of services for children ages 0-5 and their families. Through a participatory strategic planning process involving more than one thousand community voices, the community identified three vision areas that comprise *F5MC's* strategic plan:

- I. Parents feel competent, well-informed and capable of supporting their child.
- II. Families have quality, affordable early care and education of choice.
- III. Children are mentally and physically healthy.

The purpose of this report is to examine the *Family, Friend, and Neighbor Project* as one of *F5MC's* strategies in actively supporting quality, affordable early care and education of choice for families (Vision II). Families in Monterey County use and have preferences for different types of child care ranging from informal care by family members, friends or neighbors (“FFN caregivers”) to child care centers and family child care. Quality learning and development opportunities should be available to each child regardless of where they receive care, and training and support for caregivers is critical to achieving this goal (Exhibit 1). Vision II’s strategies comprise technical assistance for child care centers, technical assistance for informal caregivers (family, friends, and neighbors), support for educational attainment through the CARES program, as well as professional development seminars and leadership opportunities for educators.

Exhibit 1: Vision II Early Care and Education Workforce Development Theory of Change Model



F5MC FFN Project Outcomes

- Increased availability of *educational opportunities* for FFN providers related to high quality care and child development.
- Increased *availability of materials* to help FFN providers incorporate use of high quality child development information into care.
- Increased *use of high quality child development information*.
- Increased *networking* among FFN providers.

The focus of this year’s Vision II evaluation is the technical assistance for family, friend, and neighbor caregivers (“FFN Caregiver TA”). In FFN Caregiver TA, *F5MC* aims to support FFN caregivers by combining promising best practice research with local expertise and resources. In 2010, *F5MC* selected GoKids to provide technical assistance to FFN caregivers through an RFQ process. GoKids also brought the expertise of subcontractor Choices for Children (CFC) in training FFN caregivers based on their work in San Jose through the Knight Foundation. GoKids provided overall management of the project and local support in organizing the playgroups and recruiting participants. The joint efforts of the two agencies resulted in strong connections to the local community and relationships with local schools and community centers. Playgroups provide a much-needed service since most families in Monterey County rely on license-exempt child care providers.¹

Playgroups of FFN caregivers and the children they care for are facilitated by three project staff, and are designed to offer comprehensive support, guidance, and child development information to FFN caregivers. They meet twice a week for two hours at each of eight different sites, allowing participants to choose a site that makes them feel most comfortable—in their own communities and informal settings. The use of readily available materials for child development activities helps FFN caregivers build upon everyday routines and learning opportunities in their home. Caregivers may also receive technical assistance home visits, which provide customized information relevant to their children and child care environment. The TA approach puts significant value on adult learning theory, and places emphasis on relationship-building, collaboration, and flexibility in addressing each participant’s unique needs and cultural considerations.

A continued conversation

The 2011 Vision II evaluation revealed strong successes in the project’s pilot year. Outcomes for FFN caregivers identified in the pilot year include:

- Learning practical activities to use in the home
- Understanding that activities can support child development and school readiness
- Supporting FFN caregivers’ ability to handle stress and strengthen caregiver-child relationships
- Helping children develop socially
- Connecting FFN caregivers with resources and referrals
- Networking with other FFN caregivers

For this year’s Vision II evaluation, the evaluation team reconnected with project staff and playgroup participants as they were completing their third year of the FFN Caregiver TA program. The evaluation seeks

¹ License-exempt care includes home care (providers caring for children from only one other family besides their own), in-home care (a friend, relative, babysitter, or nanny cares for a child in the child’s home, full-time or part-time), and some school-age centers or military programs regulated by non-state agencies. (<http://www.rrnetwork.org/rr-in-every-county/providers/child-care-glossary.html>)

to understand how the FFN Caregiver TA model has evolved, characteristics of the playgroup participants, outcomes of this work, as well as lessons learned from the past three years.

The primary evaluation questions are as follows:

1. **Technical assistance approach.** What types of activities, child development information, and resources does the FFN Caregiver TA entail? How has the program evolved since it began in 2010?
2. **FFN participation and use.** Who is participating in the playgroups and how useful are various elements? What recommendations for improvement or change do they have?
3. **Technical assistance outcomes.** What are some emerging trends that speak to the promise and success of FFN caregiver playgroups?
4. **Challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned.** What are some of the key challenges and opportunities in providing TA to FFN caregivers?

Evaluation methods

To answer the above questions, the evaluation team conducted observations of playgroups and spoke with staff from GoKids and CFC, as well as FFN caregivers who have been participating in the playgroups. Between the focus groups and the structured observations, the evaluation team visited six of the eight playgroup sites. The methods of data collection are outlined below:

- Interviews with GoKids staff (n=2)
- Interviews with CFC playgroup facilitators (n=3)
- Focus groups with FFN caregivers, with a supplemental survey conducted on site (n=4 of the 6 sites)
- Structured observations of playgroups (n=2 sites)
- Observation of the FFN Caregiver Year End Gathering, which includes highlights from FFN caregivers' reflections from their journals

The use of mixed methods allows for a triangulation of findings to provide a more complete picture of the impact of *F5MC's* strategies to support quality early care and education. As with any evaluation, certain study limitations must be considered when interpreting findings.

- **Findings have limited generalizability.** The qualitative nature of the study, the small sample size, and the varying baselines of child care providers prevent the generalization of findings to the larger population of FFN caregivers.
- **Possibility of social desirability bias.** Many of the evaluation methods rely upon self-reported data from respondents, which can introduce a “social desirability” bias to the analysis. Social desirability bias refers to respondents reporting answers they think they should say, rather than disclosing their true opinions. In which case, researchers are more likely to receive a skewed picture of the outcome.
- **Data reflects a snapshot in time.** FFN Caregiver TA is a year-long intervention. The data collected reflect a snapshot in time, specifically June 2013.

In spite of these limitations, the evaluation team believes this study provides valuable insights regarding the potential of technical assistance as a strategy to improve quality of care, lessons learned for the technical assistance model, and factors that facilitate or impede implementation success.

Organization of the report

This report is organized as follows:

- + Chapter II outlines the FFN Caregiver TA *approach and evolution* and presents data on *characteristics of playgroup participants*.
- + Chapter III describes *technical assistance outcomes* experienced by FFN caregivers.
- + Chapter IV presents the *challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned* from the evaluation.
- + Chapter V presents *next steps and considerations* based on evaluation findings.
- + Chapter VI offers *concluding thoughts* regarding the findings of this report.

II. Technical Assistance Approach



A *F5MC* review of FFN research showed that FFN caregivers are best served through assistance that is connected to their everyday experiences and that is both practical and concrete. FFN caregivers did not want theoretical classes, but something practical that they could replicate at home. They also emphasized the importance of creating opportunities to connect with other FFN caregivers in their neighborhood.

Launched in June 2010, FFN Caregiver TA offers comprehensive support, guidance, child development information, and materials and resources to FFN caregivers. Facilitated playgroup experiences bring caregivers and children together in easily accessible community locations. The TA approach puts significant value on adult learning theory, which places emphasis on relationship-building, collaboration, and flexibility in addressing each participant's unique needs and cultural considerations. Staff designs experiences to support FFN caregivers in identifying learning opportunities that are available at home and build upon everyday routines. Reflection and journaling are used to help caregivers connect learning to their own context and personal experiences.

In Fiscal Year 2011-2012, playgroups were held twice a month across eight sites, focusing on a range of topics including building relationships, playing as learning, temperament and behavior, health and safety, transitions, sensory exploration, and social-emotional, gross motor, and prenatal development.

Playgroups are held for two hours, and have evolved to incorporate exploration activities and materials for the first hour and caregiver journaling and reflection time with the facilitator in the second hour. In the hour of exploration, children and their caregivers move freely across five stations, each with a different focus. For example, there might be stations for different sensory skills such as textures (clay, oats), smells (fruits), or sounds (musical instruments) (*see photos*). At each station, playgroup facilitators invite caregivers and children to explore the activity stations. They then observe and facilitate interactions that respond to and extend children's interests (such as by asking open-ended questions or verbalizing what they see happening). For example, facilitators might comment "I notice that..." or "I wonder how...". In the second hour, FFN caregivers are invited to gather and reflect with a facilitator about their play and exploration time. They often reflect back on their childhood experiences as a way to see through the eyes of children. This reflection time provides an opportunity for caregivers to process what they experienced, connect with other caregivers, and support each other. It is where they are able to internalize their learning with the support and facilitation of playgroup staff. FFN caregivers are encouraged to document their thoughts and reflections in the provided journals.



Staff identified the following goals as a focus for their current work with FFN caregivers:

- Understand the *importance of their role* in children's lives

- See the *importance of play and interactions* in supporting social-emotional development
- Learn about *children's developmental needs* and how *they can impact children's development and learning*
- Receive information and supports for *developmentally-appropriate activities that can be replicated at home* with low-cost and recyclable materials
- Connect with other FFN caregivers to *reduce the sense of isolation*

Evolution of FFN Caregiver TA

Since its launch in 2010, FFN Caregiver TA has evolved, developing greater intentionality and structure. In collaboration with *F5MC* staff, GoKids and CFC have incorporated a number of distinct strategies:

- + **Registration process for FFN caregivers and children.** In August, FFN caregivers registered for a specific playgroup at a specific location. The registration process documents the names and contact information for all the participating FFN caregivers and children. This process also verifies their eligibility to participate as FFN caregivers.
- + **Maintenance of defined groups during the year.** As a result of registration for a specific playgroup for the year, caregivers meet in a consistent group every month to support continuity and relationship-building.
- + **Orientation at the start of the year.** The orientation helps all FFN caregivers understand that the playgroups are designed for their active participation in order to help them learn more about caregiving. At the orientation, participants are given a binder containing: a welcome letter for the FFN caregivers, a letter for the parents of the children they care for, playgroup schedule, playgroup policies, proposed dialogue topics for the year, and child development materials.
- + **Informing parents about their children's participation in playgroup.** Parents receive information about their children's participation in the playgroups, as well as the playgroups' purpose.
- + **Greater intentionality in curriculum and approach.** With the support of *F5MC* staff, playgroups have adopted a more intentional curriculum and structured approach. For example, there is now dedicated time for reflection and journaling, as well as topics to be covered during dialogue.
- + **Time for reflection and integrating new ideas into practice.** Reflection is a central practice that enables FFN caregivers to provide responsive care to children. During the reflection time, FFN caregivers think back to the playgroup, citing favorite experiences and areas where they would like more guidance. In the pilot year, reflection time occurred up to four times in the year in meetings that were held separately from the playgroups. Now, the second hour of each playgroup is dedicated to reflection and journaling.
- + **Debriefs for staff after each playgroup.** In parallel, project staff reflects after each playgroup in an effort to create a responsive learning experience for caregivers. This is a critical support to a highly dynamic and individualized approach to providing technical assistance.
- + **Responding to the flow of the year.** FFN caregiver availability and responsibilities vary with the school year. For example, playgroups are no longer provided in the summer, when the older siblings are out of school and it is more difficult for caregivers to attend. In the winter months, parents are more available and have been invited to join.

- + **Staff planning time.** During the summer months, project staff takes the time to plan out playgroups for the next year and build greater intentionality in the curriculum.
- + **Closing ceremony at the end of the year.** Together with project staff, the playgroup participants all meet together at an end-of-year ceremony that celebrates their accomplishments for the year. At the ceremony, FFN caregivers share reflections about what they've learned and also have the chance to connect with caregivers from other playgroup sites.

Together, these strategies have greatly contributed to the playgroup experience and its value to FFN caregivers. In just three years, playgroups have become more focused and intentional through improvements to their structure and an emphasis on the importance of reflection.

FFN caregiver characteristics

In June 2013, Harder+Company conducted focus groups with FFN caregivers from four playgroups: Firehouse (7 participants), CHISPA II (5 participants), Breadbox Recreation Center (4 participants), and San Jerardo Community Hall (5 participants).

The focus groups included a supplemental survey which solicited information regarding characteristics of the participants and the children in their care. Though it is not comprehensive, these data provide useful insight into the participants of FFN Caregiver TA.

A summary of the results is presented in Exhibit 2 and below:

- Nearly half of respondents have participated in FFN Caregiver TA for two years or more.
- For 77 percent of respondents, the children under care include their own.
- Majority of respondents (84 percent) are monolingual Spanish speakers.
- Most respondents (62 percent) have three or more years of experience caring for children.
- Most respondents (62 percent) are caring for three or more children.
- Respondents are caring for children of neighbors, their own children, relatives, and friends. In some cases, they are caring for children of families that they are not related to or who they do not know very well.

Exhibit 2. Caregiver Characteristics

Playgroup location (n=25)	
Firehouse	28%
CHISPA II	20%
San Jerardo Community Hall	20%
Breadbox Recreation Center	16%
Length of participation in program (n=25)	
Under 1 year	24%
1 to 2 years	28%
2 years or more	48%
Caring for one's own child as well (n=22)	
Yes	77%
No	23%
Speaks language other than Spanish (n=25)	
No	84%
Yes (English)	16%
Years providing care for children (n=24)	
0-3 years	38%
3-5 years	21%
5-10 years	25%
10 or more years	17%
Number of children under care* (n=24)	
1-2 children	38%
3-5 children	42%
6-8 children	21%
Relationship to children under care** (n=25)	
Neighbor	40%
Grandparent	36%
Relative (aunt, uncle, sibling, etc.)	32%
Friend	32%
Not related, just take care of child	28%

* Includes the FFN caregiver's own children.

** Percentages do not add up to 100% since respondents selected all that apply. Categories are mutually exclusive.

III. FFN Caregiver TA Outcomes

FFN Caregiver TA is a complex intervention that has had an impact on both caregivers and children. At the caregiver level, playgroups support deeper interactions with children and provide peer-to-peer support among caregivers. By supporting FFN caregivers, **F5MC** hopes to improve the quality of care for children in informal care settings. This chapter identifies outcomes for FFN Caregivers as well as caregiver-identified outcomes for the children in their care.

FFN caregivers have increased awareness of the importance of their role in children’s lives

Through relationships and reflection, playgroups help FFN caregivers develop a deeper understanding of the critical role they play in children’s lives and development. As one staff member shared, “I would hope that participants would have a greater understanding of the children’s needs, their development, the importance of their role in these children’s lives, a better appreciation of the work they do, and just to be able to have a greater understanding of the importance of play and their social-emotional interactions with the child.”



Understanding that relationships matter to a child’s development. Through FFN Caregiver TA, participants learned that relationships with caring adults are critical to a child’s development. As one FFN caregiver journaled, “I learned that it is very important to consider the children’s feelings, so they can be aware that we feel they’re important and that we care about how they feel.” FFN caregivers saw that the way they interact with the children influences how children see themselves. Another shared, “All children deserve to be respected. If we, as adults, criticize them, then they grow up with resentment. We need to be more affectionate so they can be positive children and live a healthy life and with a lot of respect.”

For some FFN caregivers, these practices depart from the way they themselves were raised as children. “We should show love to the children. A lot of times we don’t show it because we are not used to it because our parents did not raise us to express our feelings,” explained one FFN caregiver. For others, this discussion helped open their eyes to the importance of avoiding favoritism: “[I learned] that the children I care for and my own are the same, and I have to give them the same treatment while I have them.”

FFN Caregivers are more intentional about the safety and quality of care in their homes. Many FFN caregivers took on their roles informally, offering to care for other children in addition to their own or caring

“I liked learning how a child learns to respect and have confidence in himself, how to feel safe.”

-FFN Caregiver

for the children of relatives (see Exhibit 2). When asked about the challenges faced by FFN caregivers, one staff member responded, “Primarily, some don’t know how important their job is...giving [children] the high quality care that they need.” Specifically, they may not realize the importance of going beyond basic necessities: “It’s not just about feeding them, changing their diapers, and putting them to sleep. It’s that every child needs your attention, and there are some that aren’t aware of that.”

As caregivers see their importance in the lives of children, they start to become more intentional in approaching safety and quality in their home. In the registration process, staff found that many providers did not have basic information on the children, including their ages, their parents' names, and parent contact information. Some caregivers simply knew the parents by face but not by name. Parent contact information is highly important in the event that anything happens while a child is in their care. The provision of quality care requires a partnership between the caregiver and the parent, and knowing their contact information is a first step.

FFN caregivers have increased understanding of the importance of play and interactions in supporting social-emotional development



Through playgroups, FFN caregivers see the importance of spending time with children. As one caregiver shared, “We learn different ways children can be active. They learn from all that they do, and although the activities are very simple, they are learning a lot. There is a noticeable difference between a child that receives attention and one who does not.” Another caregiver added, “Before I started attending the group, playing with the ball and toy cars and watching television was our routine. Since I started coming here, I’ve learned about activities that have been very helpful and feasible.” In their journals, caregivers shared an understanding of how children learn and develop through play. As one grandparent explained, “I think that these activities are very productive and interesting because my granddaughter becomes very engaged. She learns and I do too. She’s amazed with each thing she sees and I feel very happy because she asks me why and what each thing is for.”

Several FFN caregivers highlighted the importance of supporting children’s social-emotional development. One caregiver shared how social-emotional development starts at an early age, and the importance of supporting this development through activities: “Babies develop many movements at an early age, from making noise with objects inside a bottle, to taking objects in and out from boxes or containers. They move their hands, and they learn to develop strength in their fingers and concentrate on what they do. They also learn to express themselves and interact using their fingers and shapes. They also lose their fear of getting dirty.”

FFN Caregivers have increased understanding of child development and the meaning of children's behavior

Through playgroups, FFN caregivers learn to engage children, talk to them, and listen to what they are saying. “I have learned, since coming to the program, to spend more time with children. I now understand them better, and I talk and play with them more often. I know nobody is perfect, but in this program, if one puts the suggestions that are given into practice, they do work,” asserted one

“I learned not to compare the children because we can make them feel bad and how to talk to each of them to try to better understand them.”

-FFN Caregiver

caregiver. As a result, they learn to respect children as individuals and also understand the underlying developmental needs.

FFN caregivers came to *respect children as individuals* with their own desires, creativity, and talents. For one caregiver, listening to children meant respecting their wishes about what they did not want to do: “We shouldn’t make children do things that they do not want to do. They should only do what they feel comfortable doing.” For another, it meant respecting each child’s individuality and being flexible and open with them: “I learned that each kid is different and some may need more attention than others, so it’s important to learn to be flexible and to also have a dialogue with them.”

A primary concern voiced by FFN caregivers is that the children are often fighting. Through playgroups, caregivers began to *understand the developmental needs underlying the fighting*. One caregiver shared in her journal: “The most interesting thing I learned today is that we need to break the chains and not treat our children the way our parents treated us when we were children [with regard to discipline].” Some of the key lessons learned that FFN caregivers shared are listed below:

“I liked learning how a child learns to respect and have confidence in himself, how to feel safe. Also, how to instill values and principles without rejecting or mistreating them [due to their behavior].”

-FFN Caregiver

- **Finding positive ways for children to direct their energy.** “I like the dialogue. It has helped me understand children’s behavior and their temperament including how to help them if they are timid or if they are very active. [How to] balance them.”
- **Learning to listen to and understand the children.** “We have to be more tolerant with our children, learn how to listen and be understanding with them.”
- **Setting rules and expectations for the children.** “Today I had learned that children learn better by setting rules and not hitting them.”
- **Taking the time to breathe and think calmly before reacting.** “Today we discussed how to be patient and calm ourselves down in order to understand our children and the children we care for.”

FFN Caregivers are using new activities and materials in their homes



By building their child development knowledge, FFN caregivers start to understand child behavior and how to best support each developmental stage. In focus groups, caregivers reported reading more with children, doing playgroup activities at home, playing outside, and spending less time watching television. Nearly all respondents (96 percent) reported receiving more information about child development through playgroups. One caregiver shared, “I loved the dialogue of how the children’s brain develops and how they learn through reading and talking to them. A number of FFN caregivers appreciated the support on activities to do

with infants and how to support their development. For example, they learned that responding to a baby’s cries can help the baby build a healthy attachment and relationship with the caregiver. Furthermore, they

learned that babies start learning right away and benefit from activities, such as games that help them discover textures, early on. For others, child development knowledge helped them understand the types of child behavior to expect and what is typical at a given age. Young children learn through their creativity and imagination, and the caregivers have learned to respect that. As one FFN caregiver shared, “I learned that I shouldn’t be afraid when my daughter begins to speak alone with her dolls.” Another caregiver described, “I liked the dialogue today about child development and the different ages. But especially about three and four year olds...to know that sometimes some children have imaginary friends. That it is something that I did not know about and that I didn’t know was normal.”

Playgroup activities are designed to be easily replicated at home—they are relatively simple to set up, and could be done with low-cost or recyclable materials. One caregiver agreed, saying, “They teach activities that entertain the kids and prevent them from spending too much time watching television.” Another added, “I am interacting with them more through activities. I like reading to them, posing questions, and engaging them.” Favorite activities shared by focus group participants include playing with molding clay, reading books, playing dress up and make-believe games, crafts, singing and dancing, and more (Exhibit 3). In the survey, nearly all focus group participants (96 percent) reported learning new activities and skills to use at home.

Providing additional assistance to caregivers through home visits. Home visits are usually conducted over three visits with one session of observation, one session of recommendations, and a last session for follow-up and individual support. Through home visits, FFN caregivers receive individualized assistance in their home environment. “During the visits, we support them a lot,” said one facilitator. “We look at where they have the kids, the environment, where the toys are, if there is anything dangerous.” Added another, “We give advice on how to have a routine...and we bring recommendations – a list of everything they could do – and also any materials that they need [and have not been able to afford].”

All participating caregivers are invited to sign up for home visits. In the past year, playgroup staff conducted 15 home visits across six caregivers, a significant increase from the handful that was conducted in the pilot year. From the experience of playgroup staff, the growing uptake of home visits reflects the level of trust that they have built with the FFN caregivers. To feel comfortable with home visits, the caregivers need to feel confident about inviting playgroup staff to assess their home as a care environment and have a desire to bring their quality of care to the next level.

FFN caregivers have a reduced sense of isolation due to participation in playgroups

FFN Caregiver TA is designed to not only equip caregivers with the knowledge and understanding needed to provide quality care, but also support them in this challenging work. Playgroups serve as a venue for FFN caregivers to connect with others who are similarly situated and understand their everyday challenges. Additionally, home visits are also offered to caregivers who are ready for deeper assistance.

Exhibit 3. Favorite Activities

	Respondents (n=30)
Molding clay	7
Reading books	4
Hand puppets	3
Singing and dancing	3
Rice activity	2
Playing with blocks	2
Coloring	2
Kitchen make-believe	2
Blowing bubbles	1
Cardboard crafts	1
Dress up	1
Jumping rope	1
Shadow puppets	1

Source: Focus group responses

Playgroups provide an important social connection

"[There was] this lady who was referred through the Special Needs Initiative (SNI). She had 18-month old twins and a four year old, and then she took care of three other children. The mom had a very flat affect, [and was] a bit depressed. Through SNI, she was able to get counseling with a home visitor, who invited her to go to the playgroups [and] walked with her the first time. It was this transformation. We thought the older child was autistic, but it was just because he had nothing to do. She became more outgoing [and] had really transformed."

- Playgroup staff

Connecting FFN caregivers and reducing isolation.

One of the primary challenges faced by FFN caregivers is a sense of isolation. It can be a challenge to connect with other caregivers who face similar challenges and concerns. Of the focus group participants, nearly all caregivers (96 percent) reported feeling supported as a result of playgroups. Most felt connected with other caregivers in their area (87 percent), and made meaningful connections with other caregivers (84 percent).

This camaraderie allows FFN caregivers to support one another. As one caregiver noted, "I didn't know anybody in the group [at first], but now it gives me joy when I see them. I'm much more social now. I greet people and ask how they are. Being more social feels good." Another caregiver agreed, adding, "If you feel sad, you find somebody here that you can relate to and it feels good." However, while participants said they have connected with fellow caregivers in playgroup,

only a few have met outside of the sessions. "We've been acquainted, but we don't spend much time together [outside of playgroup]," reported one participant.

FFN Caregivers share information with parents of the children in their care.

Some parents are benefitting from their caregiver's new knowledge as well. While parents are not the primary audience, FFN Caregiver TA has the potential to touch the parents as well. During focus groups, some caregivers, particularly grandparents, noted that they shared what they learned in playgroup with the children's parents. One FFN caregiver shared, "I make sure that my kids are being patient with my grandkids. I also inform them about all of the things that I've learned here like what's the purpose or significance of having children playing with certain toys." Another caregiver shared, "I've told one of the parents to explain to their child why they shouldn't be doing something, which has been beneficial to both the parent and me." A few grandparent caregivers noticed that parents are spending more time interacting with their children and playing with them. One FFN caregiver noted that parents have started making more of an effort to discuss their children with the caregiver. During the winter months, when parents tend to be off from work for the holidays and playgroups are not as full, parents are invited to join FFN caregivers at playgroup. It provides an opportunity for parents to learn more about the program and participate alongside the caregivers. Nearly twenty families took advantage of this invitation in the past year.

Playgroup dialogue builds self-confidence

"[One participant] would follow what her husband said to the letter, and when we went to talk to her she told us she had had a difficult childhood... She was developing the confidence to talk and express herself. The way in which she was changing was incredible—she said she was no longer scared, and that talking in the group was like therapy. Her husband, who never before played with the kids, was now playing with them. Through those talks, she has been able to change her life."

- Playgroup staff

FFN caregivers describe outcomes for children



FFN Caregiver TA aims to inspire informal caregivers to make a difference in children's lives and equip them with resources and information to provide higher quality care. One FFN caregiver summed up the goal of FFN Caregiver TA quite well: *"[To see that] the child must be valued as a person who has feelings and can make decisions for herself. To understand childhood and the changes in their lives that lie ahead. To learn to appreciate the time we have with them."*

In the focus group survey, nearly all respondents (92 percent) felt that they improved their ability to provide quality care to children as a result of the playgroups. In focus groups and in their journals, FFN caregivers shared a number of outcomes that they have already seen in the children. Caregivers have seen improvements in the children's communication skills and confidence, and feel that the children are more prepared to transition into school in the future. Furthermore, caregivers are passing on what they have learned to parents.

Children are communicating and expressing how they feel. In focus group surveys, nearly all respondents reported that the children were better at expressing how they feel (96 percent), had better interactions with adults (96 percent), and were more comfortable asking for help (92 percent) after participating in playgroup. According to one focus group participant, "There is a noticeable change in how often the kids express themselves. They ask me to engage with them and interact with whatever they are doing. They ask me to dance and sing with them at home." Another caregiver noted that parents have noticed improvements as well: "The parents have expressed that they like that I bring their son here. The program has allowed him to progress from only communicating with gestures to communicating verbally."

FFN caregivers have learned to engage children in dialogue more often and encourage them to talk about how they feel. In particular, they found that dramatic play can create a safe space for children to express what they feel. "I like dramatic play because children imitate the people they want to be when they grow up. Also because they express their feelings and give us clues of how they feel or if they have problems," asserted one FFN caregiver. Some caregivers noticed that the children have become more vocal about how they feel and seem more willing to talk about their emotions. Shared one caregiver: "Last year, my son wouldn't express his feelings. He wouldn't say anything and he'd run away after he became angry. Now, he lets me know if he's mad and we have a dialogue now."



Children are becoming better at interacting with peers. The vast majority (91 percent) of focus group participants reported that the children have better interactions with each other since participating in the playgroups. Children are learning to interact with peers, and are more comfortable in social situations. "Before, the boy whose parents didn't take him to the park was afraid to play and participate in activities with

other kids,” noted one caregiver. “Now he is more involved with the other kids.” Another caregiver shared, “I felt that my kids weren’t very sociable when I took them out, so bringing them here gives them plenty of opportunity to develop friendships and be more social.”

Children are becoming more confident. FFN caregivers have also noted that they’ve learned how to help children develop a sense of confidence. As one caregiver explained, “It’s good to trust in the children, and to help them feel more self-confident and capable of reaching their goals...and for them to learn to respect and get along with other people. That is a job for us—to raise secure children with high self-esteem so they can be human beings capable of reaching their goals.” Another parent-caregiver observed, “Today, I felt my daughter was more confident in herself while throwing the ball. She also climbed the stairs with more confidence and even runs more than before. Overall, the program has helped her because she feels more confident.”



Children are preparing for the routine and structure of school. Through the regular schedule of attending playgroup (or, as some children refer to it, *escuelita*, or “little school”), caregivers feel that children are becoming prepared for the routine of school. “My daughter looks forward to coming here because she knows it’s her *escuelita* and these are her teachers.” One caregiver noticed, “They’ve learned how to manage their time at different activity stations. In addition, they’ve also adjusted to a schedule allotting play and snack time.”

IV. Lessons Learned

Now in its third year, FFN Caregiver TA has evolved significantly and developed a set of lessons learned for their work moving forward. This section highlights lessons learned that project staff have shared as part of this evaluation.

FFN caregiver playgroup best practices

Orientation process and materials provide clarity around playgroup purpose and expectations. In the pilot year, FFN caregivers saw playgroups as a “little school” for the children and were mostly observing on the side rather than actively participating during the exploration time. They did not fully understand the playgroups’ purpose and expectations. In the most recent year, there was more clarity around the expectations of the program through the orientation and through the materials they received. Playgroup facilitators have reported that all FFN caregivers are engaging in hands-on learning and almost everyone participates in the reflection time.

Reflection time extends caregivers’ learning and fosters peer connections. Project staff and participants alike have expressed how reflection time has become a core component of the program. It is integrated into each playgroup experience and has also become more structured over time with a planned list of topics for the year, notebooks for caregivers to document their reflections, and a defined group that meets throughout the year. Reflection time further reinforces that the primary focus of the playgroups is the caregiver rather than the children. “We wanted them to realize that it was a time for learning from the kids and from each other,” expressed one staff member.

Caregivers have enjoyed the opportunity to share their experiences and learn from each other through dialogue. As one caregiver explained, “Sharing experiences with the group helps me assess the different types of situations that lead to certain child behavior, and has also helped me improve how I resolve those situations.” The discussions provided a space for facilitators and caregivers to revisit experiences from the first hour of free play and extend their learning. “We can take things that are present in that moment,” said one facilitator, “and talk about it, or gather information and come back to it.”

Reflection time has also been an important venue for fostering peer connections. One playgroup facilitator observed, “Before, they didn’t communicate with one another during the free play time. When we began to have the discussions, they started to talk more.” Reflection time allowed caregivers an opportunity to discuss their experiences, get to know each other, and learn from one another. “In the program, I learned to share with all my peers what I am experiencing with my baby. They also share their experiences and we all learn,” explained one caregiver.

A highly individualized and dynamic approach meets FFN caregivers where they are. FFN caregivers come from a diversity of backgrounds and life experiences. Following adult learning theory, facilitators strive to build on the individual strengths, curiosities and knowledge of each caregiver. This core tenet is reflected in the individualized approach, activity design, and modes of outreach.

Facilitators design the curriculum to accommodate a variety of learning styles. “Every person learns differently,” explained a facilitator, “Observing them, I notice what they need, look for the best ways to help them understand the information, and find ways in which they learn best.” The approach is *highly individualized*, and facilitators are tasked with not only delivering the curriculum, but also assessing participant concerns in the moment. They identify, on an individual level, the caregivers’ questions or concerns and how

“I’ve learned a lot in all the dialogues. Everyone creates a sense of trust [so we feel comfortable asking] a question about something we don’t know.”

-FFN Caregiver

to take their learning to the next level. Some may be ready to actively participate in dialogue and activities, while others may be engaging quietly through observation. Playgroup facilitators connect and engage with caregivers outside of the playgroups to ensure that their needs are being met. “Some are too shy to talk...or don’t feel comfortable talking, so I have taken the time to call them by phone,” one facilitator shared.

The *curriculum is dynamic* according to the interests and concerns of FFN caregivers as well. Although there are focused topics for reflection, sometimes caregivers also bring up areas where they

would like more assistance. Other times, playgroup facilitators have observed important issues that need to be addressed. As one staff member shared, “Sometimes it’s in the spur of the moment... [A facilitator will] observe something in the classroom, bring the discussion around to it, and talk about what the intervention could look like... [They are doing that] without having anything prepared.”

Staff debriefs provide critical support to playgroup facilitators. The individual attention and dynamic curriculum are supported through staff debriefs with the program manager that occur after each playgroup. Together, the group identifies opportunities to deepen the learning experience for caregivers. As one staff member shared:

“It’s really helpful to have all the staff debriefs together. They saw that things were coming up, such as with the licensing, or talking about discipline. Sometimes it’s the participants who see the need, and other times it’s the facilitators, like noticing unhygienic practices. And then we think about how to address it, like have a health and safety person come and talk. So the things that the staff observed can become an overall topic that we haven’t talked about.”

Debriefs were highlighted as an important practice that facilitated collaboration among playgroup facilitators. “It has been a team collaboration and for that reason I feel that [debriefs] have worked...I feel that they gave us the opportunity to grow professionally and to support the [FFN caregivers]. We have had meetings about the curriculum and a lot of reflection,” shared one playgroup facilitator.

The three-visit structure of home visits made them more focused and useful to caregivers. Home visits are now conducted over three visits with one session of observation, one session of recommendations, and a last session for follow-up and individual support. One staff member shared, “The past home visits I felt like we didn’t have a focus. This year, instead of just coming in with a bunch of materials, [we implemented the three-visit structure]... We’ve received a lot of feedback about how beneficial they are.”

Playgroup locations need to be convenient for FFN caregivers and support the activities. Playgroup locations offer various strengths and challenges. Ideally, playgroups are provided in a neighborhood location that FFN caregivers can reach by foot. A large room that can accommodate five activity stations as well as a separate space for reflection time is also needed. Playgroup facilitators have noted that locations with an

outdoor play area are useful because the children can play outside, providing FFN caregivers with more quiet for focused reflection time. Each space has its challenges (such as dim lighting) and each group may have specific needs (for example, some children in attendance may have special needs), so it is important to find spaces that can support the needs of the group.

A focus on relationships enables successful outreach to a hard-to-reach population and support continued participation over time. When the program began three years ago, staff conducted outreach through schools and community centers, and built relationships for referrals to the program. This year, staff reported that only minimal outreach was necessary, as sessions were usually full. “Now [recruitment happens] by word of mouth,” said one staff member, “But sometimes the winter season is a little bit slower.” For sites where attendance fluctuates (such as Hebron or Firehouse) or where the local population is smaller or attendance is lower (such as San Jerardo), staff still conducts outreach near schools and, occasionally, goes door-to-door. The project staff emphasized the importance of maintaining relationships in the project’s success: “Especially this last year, there has been constant contact with them... [One of our staff members] calls

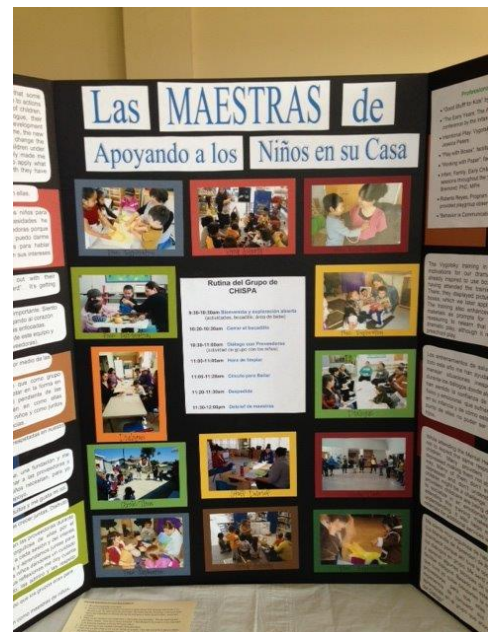


them before every playgroup...It’s a very personal relationship that has been formed with them. [This personal connection shows them that they] are a part of this group.”

The Year End Gathering celebrates FFN caregivers’ hard work and successes. The Year End Gathering displayed the work of staff and providers from the eight playgroups, providing an opportunity for caregivers to celebrate their hard work, reflect on their experiences, and share their successes. To prepare for their event, participants in each playgroup were asked to read and reflect on selected

anonymous excerpts from their journals as well as photos taken during the playgroups. The participants identified narratives and related photos that they felt best represented their learning. Each of the eight playgroups created a collaborative display board to share with other playgroups and their families.

Participants felt pride as they shared their reflections on what they had written, and the photos of their experiences. One provider shared that she now knew how the children felt when they were praised or acknowledged for their work because that’s what she was feeling. One facilitator observed, “At this end of the year, when we had the celebration, there was spectacular attendance. It was like a graduation, and I felt energized by them. They [providers] came with their husbands, and their husbands saw the discussions that they’d been having and saw the work that they had been doing. They presented that work in public and they felt very proud.” Through the reflection that took place throughout the year, FFN caregivers were able to highlight their lessons learned and also share the importance of their work with their family and friends.



V. Next Steps and Considerations

Next steps: evolution in progress

As project staff look to next year, they identified a number of next steps that are in the pipeline:

- **Defining the *promotora* role more clearly for veteran participants.** FFN caregivers have found the playgroups to be highly beneficial, and many of them come back year after year. There is a potential for some of the veteran playgroup participants to take on a leadership role by helping FFN caregivers walk with their children to playgroup, welcoming new participants, reaching out to other FFN caregivers who may be interested in joining, and setting up activity stations.
- **Deepening the role of reflective supervision.** The project staff has found staff debriefs to be critical to their work, and hope to find more opportunities to integrate reflective practice into their work.
- **Strengthening the curriculum to support social-emotional development.** In response to feedback from FFN caregivers, the activities and materials offered in playgroup will place a greater emphasis on social-emotional development. Currently, the curriculum includes fine and gross motor skills, sensory skills, etc. Moving forward, there will be a greater emphasis on materials (such as light, clay, or water) and seeing the world through the lens of a child's curiosity. This approach is consistent with the playgroups' goal of integrating the everyday practice of reflection – how caregivers see themselves and the world – into the playgroup curriculum.
- **Developing more activities for ages 0-3.** Playgroup facilitators found that most FFN caregivers were able to find activities for preschool-aged children, but had trouble finding activities for young children ages 0-3. Next year, they plan to offer more materials and activities for children ages 0-3.
- **Introducing a broader range of materials.** Project staff will be introducing new ways to use a broad range of materials such as dramatic play items, magnets, flashlights, scarves and even boxes. They also plan to supply caregivers with high quality children's books to use in their homes.

Considerations from the evaluation

- + **Support on how to share new ideas with parents.** Several FFN caregivers noted that they do not know how to communicate what they have learned to parents. Of those who participated in the focus groups, the grandparents seemed to have the most success in communicating back to parents. One FFN caregiver suggested that there could be a lecture or class that the parents could attend so that they would learn the same things that the FFN caregivers learn at playgroup.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

Strategies in Vision II recognize that, especially for working families, young children spend much of their day in child care. Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of early childhood education, underscoring the importance of development and capacity-building opportunities for parents and early care providers. *F5MC* believes that families should have access to quality, affordable early care and education no matter who they choose as their care provider—formal care through center or family care, or informal care through a family member, friend, or neighbor.

FFN Caregiver TA has shown considerable success in working with FFN caregivers and the children for whom they care. Through playgroups, FFN caregivers are seeing the importance of play and activities in supporting a child's development. They are learning positive ways to react to child behavior, and understanding the importance of their role in children's lives. This study has shown that the FFN Program has had a positive impact on early care providers. While the long-term sustainability of these successes cannot be determined at this point in time, providers exhibited an excitement about their achievements and the impact it will have on the children they serve.

© 2013 First 5 Monterey County
All Rights Reserved

harder+company
community research

harderco.com