

# From Theory to Outcomes: NCFL's Two-Generation Movement for Families

Spring 2016



Joshua Cramer

## Overview

For more than a decade, the number of adults who cannot read has plateaued at around 32 million (HuffPost Books, 2014). According to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 67% of children are not proficient readers by the end of third grade (Smith, 2015).

*Given the high stakes attached to acquiring multiple literacies in order to access basic societal functions in the 21st Century, a two-generation approach to build stronger communities is more necessary now than ever before.*

This brief describes the theory of change for the National Center for Families Learning's (NCFL) signature Family Learning model and links this theory to program outcomes. With generous seed funding from Toyota, 15 community partners are supported by the Toyota Family Learning initiative. The initiative was created by NCFL to address educational needs and provide opportunities for families—particularly low-income, ethnically diverse families—to learn in the context of their own communities, using technology and when on the go. The foundation for this movement is 27 years of experience engaging families through comprehensive two-generation programming.

Outcomes in the 2014-2015 Toyota Family Learning independent evaluation report indicate that when children and families address community issues together, they are simultaneously learning and applying 21st century college and career readiness skills. This contextualized learning has the power to convert hands-on experiences

into academic and life success. To date, NCFL's Family Learning model has attracted funding for expansion from Toyota, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Skillman Foundation, PNC Grow Up Great, and the Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation.

## Families and Communities

Communities are places where individuals work together to achieve mutually beneficial ends or common goods (e.g., safety and security, environmental stewardship, effective educational systems, transportation, healthy activities, positive human interactions). Increasingly, communities are both online and offline—and sometimes in both simultaneously. Within the diversity of communities, families are essential pieces or building blocks.

In the United States, society's primary strategy for passing on the knowledge needed to create stronger communities is formal education. When education engages the entire family, learning outcomes increase exponentially because knowledge and skills are passed from generation to generation. Families that have realized the benefits of two-generation learning are empowered to work with other families for change, diminishing barriers to positive community development and maximizing community benefits. Families that have become disenchanted by formal educational institutions may be more likely to trust their extended family, friends, and neighbors—both online and offline—rather than individuals representing traditional education or community service agencies. NCFL's Family Learning model leverages the power of the family and family networks as catalysts to create stronger communities that meet the demands of the 21st century.

## Building Capacity

Individual family units vary in their capacity to drive positive community development. In order to maximize



the growth of communities focused on common goods and personal goods, capacity among vulnerable members of society (i.e., disenfranchised poor and/or minority

populations who could benefit from additional knowledge, skills, and/or social capital to reach their full potential) must be enhanced to meet today's needs.

*Capacity building for families should not be viewed through a deficit lens, but rather from a more optimistic vista that recognizes unrealized potential.*

This positive view of families is widely supported as a necessary and fundamental attitude needed for effective family engagement (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Epstein, 2001; PTA, 2007). With NCFL Family Learning, the capacity necessary to move families and communities forward is fostered through online and offline family learning. NCFL's efforts to improve family learning capacity include the formal transmission of intergenerational learning strategies and positive parenting approaches directly to adults and efforts to empower families to work with other families to improve educational and community outcomes. NCFL has created several digital resources that help to facilitate online family learning: [www.familytrails.com](http://www.familytrails.com), [www.familytimemachine.com](http://www.familytimemachine.com), and [www.wonderopolis.org](http://www.wonderopolis.org).

## Theory

The broad vision of NCFL Family Learning is to build capacity for the nation's most vulnerable families. This vision depends on best practices developed and/or recognized by NCFL in collaboration with project partners and communities chosen to receive grant funding. This theory of change is dependent upon:

1) Effective family-centered learning implemented through Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time® based in parent-focused capacity-building strategies;

- 2) The empowerment of families to build family-to-family social networks through formal and informal mentoring; and,
- 3) The development and implementation of Family Service Learning projects that leverage family networks to create positive community change. Deliberate and interrelated online and offline networks are necessary for the achievement of this ambitious theory of change. Connections made between families help them spread intergenerational literacy activities and the ethic of civic engagement across neighborhoods, communities, and the nation.

## Social Capital

One important product of building family networks is the creation of social capital. As adults increasingly desire to move towards their full potential, newly developed social capital yielded by the growth of the family social network can be leveraged to achieve a myriad of benefits. In his book, *Foundations of Social Theory*, sociologist James Coleman (1990) defined social capital as a resource that comes from relationships that can be leveraged as a capital asset. The ability to translate social capital into economic capital through the direct engagement of newly empowered parents is a major focus of Parent Time activities.

*As adults and families move through the NCFL Family Learning program, they gain new opportunities to leverage their online and offline networks to reach their personal academic and economic goals.*

When parents pursue academic goals that result in the improvement of a mother's reading level, NCFL Family Learning is addressing one of the most important factors contributing to a child's academic success (Sastry & Pebley, 2010; Hernandez & Napierala, 2014). Furthermore, when parents are involved in their child's education, the gap in literacy performance between children of more and less educated mothers can be diminished (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006). Finally, when goals to improve the economic situation of the family are realized, overall family well-being is positively influenced and student achievement rises (Swick, 2009). The probability of achieving a confluence of these powerful outcomes is increased when social capital is exchanged for personal gain.

## From Theory to Outcomes

NCFL's independent evaluator for Toyota Family Learning is Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State University. Results from the 2014-2015 program represented the second year of NCFL's independent, formative evaluation of Toyota Family Learning. The evaluation system includes a series of data collection tools, including: interviews, surveys, logs, site visits, artifacts, and focus groups (Cramer & Toso, 2015). Results from the 2014-2015 program that served 296 predominately low-income families at 10 sites, including 860 children, included:

- 90% increase in family engagement in education
- 20% increase in family literacy activities in the home and community
- 13% of families are using technology for educational purposes every day
- Families gained knowledge in 29 out of 42 important employability skills (U.S. Department of Education)
- Parents increased their self-efficacy
- Families increased their leadership skills
- Families increased their social capital

### In terms of parent goal attainment:

- 96% became a better parent
- 75% improved English skills
- 47% upgraded skills to keep their current job
- 46% earned more money
- 34% got a better job
- 25% obtained the knowledge necessary to pass the U.S. citizenship test
- 21% earned a GED certificate or high school diploma

(Goodling Institute, 2015)



These program outcomes link NCFL's theory of change to practice and hold promise for schools and community-based organizations seeking to effectively engage families in two-generation change. The 90% increase in family engagement in education prepares families to reap benefits such as increased academic achievement and higher graduation rates (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Chappell, O'Connor, Withington, & Stegelin, 2015). Increased family literacy activities in the home are strongly correlated with increased student literacy rates (Hattie, 2009; Senéchal & Young, 2008). Practicing employability skills through relevant, hands-on learning experiences increases the likelihood that adults will reach career goals and in turn improve their economic well-being (Cramer & Toso, 2015). Improved parental self-efficacy has been shown to promote literacy performance and increase graduation rates (Dearing et al., 2006). Growth in family leadership and social capital can be exchanged for increased economic security. Indeed, parent reports of achieving goals such as becoming a better parent and improving English skills are also powerful indicators of future success.

## Highlighted Outcomes 2014-2015



Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time<sup>®</sup> and Parent Time support learning and goal setting



Family-to-family networks foster learning and help build social capital



Family Service Learning helps solve community problems and build workplace skills



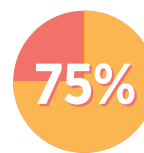
increase in parent engagement in their children's education



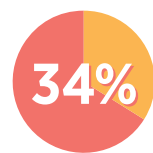
of parents became a better teacher to their child



increase in all literacy activities at home



of parents increased their English language skills



of parents got a better job

## Compounding Change

NCFL's theory of change has led to positive social-emotional relationships between parents and children. Families working with families pass on intergenerational literacy activities and direct community service applied to a wide range of pressing issues. The broad view of this theory is the potential for increased student achievement in the long term and, ultimately, the generational transmission of these values. The comprehensive nature of these family-centered services distinguishes NCFL's Family Learning initiative from other efforts that focus singularly on the PK-12 student or the disenfranchised adult. Another mark of distinction is the focus of this model on bringing parents and children together through PACT Time, thus uniquely leveraging the power of the family as opposed to providing adult education and child education in a vacuum. The inherent sustainability of two-generation change has been built into the infrastructure of this initiative since its inception.

*For an individual family that benefits from intergenerational literacy activities, shares these benefits with another family, and puts them to work on behalf of the community, the change is exponential.*

The entire family learns from these experiences, and even the youngest family members pass them on. As this exchange becomes common and deliberate, family legacies will benefit from compounding returns, the NCFL Family Learning network will become larger, and the fabric of American society will become stronger.

## References

- Chappell, S. L., O'Connor, P., Withington, C., & Stegelin, D. A. (2015, April). A meta-analysis of dropout prevention outcomes and strategies (A technical report in collaboration with the Center for Educational Partnerships at Old Dominion University). Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University. Retrieved from <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/meta-analysis-dropout-prevention-outcome-strategies>
- Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cramer, J., Toso, B. W. (2015). Family Service Learning brief. National Center for Families Learning and Goodling
- Institute for Research in Family Literacy. Retrieved from [http://familieslearning.org/pdf/NCFL-FSL-brief\\_F3.pdf](http://familieslearning.org/pdf/NCFL-FSL-brief_F3.pdf)
- Dearing, E., Kreider, H., Simpkins, S., & Weiss, H. (2006). Family involvement in school and low income children's literacy: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98 (4), 653-664.
- Epstein, J.L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy. (2015). *Toyota Family Learning: Final report year 2 (2014-2015)*.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York: Routledge.
- Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: The New Press.
- Hernandez, D. J., & Napierala, J. S. (2014). *Mother's education and children's outcomes: How dual-generation programs offer increased opportunities for America's families*. Foundation for Child Development.
- HuffPost Books. (Sept. 6, 2013, updated Dec. 12, 2014). The U.S. illiteracy rate hasn't changed in 10 years. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/illiteracyrate\\_n\\_3880355.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/illiteracyrate_n_3880355.html)
- PTA (2007). *National standards for family-school partnerships: An implementation guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.pta.org/programs/content.cfm?itemnumber=1804>
- Sastry, N., & Pebley, A. R. (2010). Family and neighborhood sources of socioeconomic inequality in children's achievement. *Demography*, 47(3), 777-800.
- Sénéchal, M., & Young, L. (2008). The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from kindergarten to grade 3: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 880-907.
- Smith, R. (2015). From the managing director. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Retrieved from <http://gradelevelreading.net/about-us/from-the-managing-director>.
- Swick, K. J. (2009). Promoting school and life success through early childhood family literacy. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36(5), 403-406.