



Two-Generation Programming for Family Economic Success: Lessons and Recommendations from SparkPoint®

OVERVIEW

Two-generation programming builds family well-being by simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together¹. By pairing services for children with services for the adults in their lives, two-generation programming yields greater benefits in child educational attainment and parent income than can be achieved through separate programs². This report will provide a brief overview of United Way Bay Area's efforts to provide two-generation programming at their flagship economic success program, SparkPoint, and will offer a collection of recommendations for any economic success program for adults seeking to shift towards a two-generation strategy that supports entire families.

ABOUT SPARKPOINT

Established in 2009, the SparkPoint model is the cornerstone of United Way Bay Area's (UWBA) impact strategy. SparkPoint centers are one-stop sites where low-income individuals and families seeking to improve their financial situation can access a range of integrated services. Centers work with families to meet their basic needs, increase income, build credit, increase savings, and reduce debt. Financial coaches work on-on-one with clients to recognize behavioral outcomes, set goals, brainstorm strategies, and set realistic action plans. They value strengths, build motivation, and provide monitoring and accountability. SparkPoint is based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families model.

Two-generation services have been offered at SparkPoint principally through the SparkPoint Community Schools program (SPCS). SPCS was a partnership with several community schools in the San Francisco Bay Area in which SparkPoint services were provided at school sites so that parents of school aged children could more easily participate in program activities. The SPCS vision was to build the financial capability of adults in order to support the academic success of their children. Over time, SparkPoint has shifted focus away from SPCS and towards serving community college students, but two-generation services have continued to be a central part of SparkPoint, as a large percentage of community college students we currently serve are parents.

In 2020, UWBA adopted Family Centered Coaching, an explicitly two-generation coaching model from the Prosperity Agenda as the system-wide SparkPoint coaching model. UWBA's vision in adopting Family Centered Coaching has been to apply an intentional and explicit

family focus across all SparkPoint centers and formalize our commitment to serving parents. As Family Centered Coaching is implemented across centers and two-generation programming becomes the norm at SparkPoint, UWBA has sought to distill the lessons we have learned from our past experiences providing two-generational services at SparkPoint with the hope that our experiences aid other economic success models in adopting a two-generation approach.

To that end, we conducted a series of interviews between September 2020 and January 2021 with SparkPoint directors, coaches, and parent clients who worked on or participated in two-generation programming at SparkPoint. The findings of these interviews, as well as information collected in previous assessments of the SparkPoint Community Schools model, inform the key findings and accompanying recommendations for two-generation programming listed below.



¹ <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/two-generation/what-is-2gen/>

² <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/host-initiative-action/designing-housing-platform-services/two-generation-approach>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Time Services to Fit Parents' Schedules

In our interviews, both clients and program directors underlined the importance of setting the times services are offered around parents' already busy schedules. In our interviews with parents, we encountered several examples where they either could not or found it difficult to access a service because it was only offered at a time when the parent had to pick up their kids from school. They typically were able to work with center staff to find workarounds, but we feel that an economic success program seeking to accommodate the needs of parents should anticipate and avoid these conflicts when possible. Clients we interviewed also appreciated center staff flexibility when they ran late for appointments due to parental obligations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Adjust the timing of services to accommodate clients' and parents' needs. For example, avoid scheduling services and appointments that overlap with pickup times from local schools.
- Continually gather feedback from clients regarding service schedules to identify potential conflicts. Additionally, coaches should be aware of and accommodating towards client parental obligations.

2. Offer Services at a Convenient Location

We found that when parent clients had a difficult time finding a SparkPoint center or else faced great logistical burden in reaching the center, they were less able to participate in program activities. The best-case scenario was when SparkPoint was collocated at either the parent client's children's school, or else at the parent's community college site that they regularly attended. In our interviews with clients, it was clear that those who had to commute far out of their way or else experienced difficulties in finding their site participated less in SparkPoint.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Service centers should have clear signage that is visible from the street or else a central location near the site that clients will be able to see.
- Make sure the location is easy to get to using public or other forms of transportation.
- When selecting a location, assess where the service location is within the community. Is it a place parents gather (i.e., a local school, higher education institution, or other community gathering place)? Is it in a location/ neighborhood that is easy to get to? Ideally the answers to both of these questions would be yes, but, if not, consider how you will mitigate any inconveniences your clients may experience due to location.





3. Create an Adequately Private Environment for Parents

In several of our interviews, clients highlighted how having privacy during coaching sessions was important to them or to other clients they knew. Ideally centers should ensure that coaching spaces are in a sufficiently private location so that clients feel comfortable discussing their finances. When that is not possible, mitigating techniques, such as staggering services, was suggested by clients. Some clients also mentioned that they especially valued privacy while accessing some basic needs services, such as the food pantry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide private spaces for financial coaching whenever possible.
- Consider staggering (spacing out) basic needs service appointments or appointments for other services where clients state they value privacy.

4. Welcome Families with Childcare and Other Relevant Amenities

Throughout our interview process, providing childcare for clients emerged as a major opportunity for making SparkPoint more family-friendly and accessible to parents. Several SparkPoint centers paired workshops like Parent University with childcare. In these settings, childcare was often provided by a school district, highlighting the importance of cultivating strong relationships with local schools or districts. SparkPoint staff also suggested that it would be helpful for SparkPoint centers to build partnerships with childcare providers and preschools in order to expand capacity.

In cases where childcare was unavailable, clients appreciated when staff made them feel comfortable bringing children into the center. As one client put it, "I've been to places that you bring your child with you, you can tell that the intake person is annoyed. At SparkPoint I didn't feel that. [They] brought out coloring paper [for my son]. I felt really accommodated."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Explicitly name that children are welcome at your program and provide snacks and activities for children.
- Provide parents with childcare opportunities that are co-located at the service location for logistical ease.

5. Provide Incentives for Parent Participation

Providing incentives for parent participation arose throughout our interviews as a practice that strengthened parent recruitment and was identified as a suggestion for how to improve recruitment. Clients that we interviewed universally appreciated receiving incentives for their participation in SparkPoint. These incentives were especially powerful when they involved benefits for children, such as child savings accounts, free meals and food for families, or gift cards that allowed parents to make purchases for their children. Center directors sought out partnerships that could provide family-focused financial incentives to parents, such as banks that would offer cash incentives to open savings accounts for their children, or school districts that could offer food for families in exchange for parent participation in activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide parents with family-focused financial incentives, such as free meals, match child savings accounts, gift cards relevant to family needs, etc. for participation in the program.
- Establish partnerships with institutions that can help build out family-focused incentive offerings, such as food banks, banking institutions, school districts, etc.



6. Build Parents' Social Capital

Social capital broadly refers to the connections, networks, or relationships that can help individuals succeed in life. Social capital yields benefits in the form of emotional support, information access, and various forms of economic support, particularly in seeking employment. Over 50% of jobs in the U.S. are found through social connections, and candidates who are directly referred by a social tie are more likely to be hired and remain in their position longer.

At SparkPoint, all of our sites have offered some form of group services that yielded social capital benefits. These benefits were typically in the form of “bonding” social capital, which is the product of peer networking, as opposed to “bridging” social capital, which refers to networking with higher status individuals and organizations³. Services included networking activities held among parents, group graduation ceremonies for program participants, group dinners, and offering leadership and/or employment opportunities to parents. One of the main social capital building program that parent clients participated in was Parent University, a series of financial and family engagement workshops. Parent University offered a chance both to bring together a diverse group of parents to build community and to give them access to training and information from a variety of partner education and financial training organizations.

In our interviews, parent clients were consistently interested in seeing more activities oriented towards building social capital and peer networks with other parents. Services they requested included parenting skills workshops, childcare groups, or financial coaching group workshops with other parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be intentional about building social capital or peer networks and inform clients that it is a goal of the program.
- Incorporate more peer-learning opportunities, like group classes, workshops, parent groups, etc. into service offerings. This will build “bonding” social capital and help parents build up valuable peer networks.

For more information about SparkPoint and other lessons we're learning, visit <https://uwba.org/sparkpoint>

³ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/aspe-files/261791/socialcapitalsupportingeconomicmobility.pdf>



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