



Strengthening Two-Generation Approaches through Family Engagement

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UNITED WAY
OF THE BAY AREA



INTRODUCTION

The fight against poverty is such a long one that we run the risk of becoming desensitized and ceasing to look for new solutions. The problem is so complex and dynamic, no matter our determination, that new means and paradigms are vital. United Way of the Bay Area’s (UWBA) SparkPoint Community Schools program (SPCS) contributes to the continued evolution of practical, proactive, and necessarily multifaceted poverty cutting approaches.

The two-generation approach used in our SPCS program is a vital component of our core poverty-cutting programs. Our vision is an innovative one that builds the financial assets of families while supporting the academic success of their children. This approach helps vulnerable parents and children together in communities throughout our seven Bay Area counties.

A two-generation approach doesn’t focus solely on the finances of the adults in a family; it helps whole families find better opportunities by building skills, economic supports and educational advancement. UWBA’s SPCS framework has three key components to that end: education, economic supports, and rigorous data that tracks family household finances and student achievement metrics.

Our approach evolved from our streams of work with community schools and with our SparkPoint Centers, a local replication of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Center for Working Families model.

We think about it in the following way:

- Community Schools create opportunities to break the cycle of poverty by bringing community resources and supports to the school and integrating them into the core educational strategy. This is proven to have positive effects on student attendance and academic success. Community School supports may include services in the areas of health, mental health, family engagement, and after-school programs. This model focuses primarily on the child but often includes a component of parent engagement.
- SparkPoint Centers are one-stop financial, career support and education centers where families have access to a full range of services. SparkPoint clients are paired with a financial coach who helps create a step-by-step plan to achieve financial goals that include securing a good job, getting out of debt, going back to school, and saving money. SparkPoint commits to working with clients for up to three years to achieve financial success. This model focuses primarily on the parent.
- SparkPoint Community Schools (SPCS) combines our expertise in education and financial economic success. This model integrates our SparkPoint Centers with Community Schools to help families gain a stable financial footing while supporting students’ well-being and academic success. This is an explicit whole-family approach that focuses equally on services and opportunities for the parent and the child.

SPCS presents the potential to demonstrate a correlation between the improvement of a household’s economic situation and greater academic success and health outcomes for children. A Bay Area scan of community schools conducted in 2011 confirmed a gap in family economic success services. Prior research emphasizes a correlation between a family’s socioeconomic status and student achievement, and that parental income is one of the strongest predictors of a child’s academic success.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} SparkPoint Community Schools expands on this research by testing whether improving household economic success improves children’s academic success.

With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we selected schools through a competitive process to rigorously tie student academic success data to household economic success metrics. The goal for the Kellogg project is to close the income-achievement gap by helping families build household economic success and reinvest these gains to their children’s academic success, overall health, and well-being.

In addition, in partnership with the Siemer Institute for Family Stability, our sites also provide families with case management and wraparound services that include household budgeting assistance, connection to resources and other supports to prevent future crises. This program helps families with children who are at imminent risk of homelessness to remain in their homes and reduces school mobility for children. By doing so, it furthers United Way of the Bay Area’s mission of battling poverty dynamically and responsively.



SPARKPOINT PARENT UNIVERSITY

This year, our SPCS sites tested a workshop series for parents, often nicknamed “SparkPoint University” or “Parent University.” The process evaluation conducted by Public Profit, a third party evaluator, during our first year of implementation revealed that the biggest challenge facing the SPCS program was engaging parents and overcoming cultural taboos against publicly discussing finances with strangers. Moreover, each of the centers expressed a desire to further integrate the SPCS model into their community school’s family engagement plan.

Often, parents from marginalized communities do not know how to get involved in schools or community-based programs, nor do they completely understand the significance it has for their children’s academic success. When UWBA first launched SparkPoint at Community Schools, we found that only a few parents were engaged in the program. While needs assessments revealed a hunger for SparkPoint services at the school, SPCS sites were not seeing the number of parents seen at other SparkPoint centers, where waiting lists are common and the demand far outweighs the centers’ capacities. This led to a focus on family engagement as a key component of the SPCS approach.

Therefore, although the content and naming of the workshop series varied by center, all of these workshops started with the goal of successfully engaging parents. We also re-centered the workshops to focus on their children—the best entry point for engaging and reaching families. The workshops started with the same goal in mind for parents: How can I send my child to college? Workshops covered such topics as visioning for your child, saving for college, supporting your child in school, advocating for your child in school, and managing household finances to prepare for college expenses.

Working with High Expectations, an educational consulting firm specializing in family engagement, the West Contra Costa Unified School District, the Vallejo City Unified School District, our school partners at Westlake Middle School, Dover Elementary School, Solano Middle School, Elsa Widenmann Elementary School, and Vallejo High School, along with SparkPoint Centers in Oakland, Contra Costa and Solano, approximately 65 parents participated in 25 workshops during the fall 2015 school year.



¹ James S. Coleman, “Equality of Educational Opportunity.” (1966).
² Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg J. Duncan. 1997. “The Effects of Poverty on Children.” The Future of Children 7, no. 2 (1997): 55–71.
³ Judith R. Smith, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Pamela K Klebanov. “Consequences of Living in Poverty for Young Children’s Cognitive and Verbal Ability and Early School Achievement.” in Consequences of Growing Up Poor. ed. by Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997), 132- 189
⁴ Bonnie L. Halpern-Felscher, James P. Connell, Margaret Beale Spencer, J. Lawrence Aber, Greg J. Duncan, Elizabeth Clifford, Warren E. Crichlow, Peter A. Usinger, Steven P. Cole, LaRue Allen, and Edward Seidman. “Neighborhood and Family Factors Predicting Educational Risk and Attainment in African American and White Children and Adolescents.” in Neighborhood Poverty. ed. by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg J. Duncan, and J Lawrence Aber (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997), 146-173.
⁵ Susan E. Mayer What Money Can’t Buy: Family income and children’s life chances. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997)
⁶ Misty Lacour and Laura D. Tislington. “The Effects of Poverty on Academic Achievement.” Educational Research and Reviews 6, no. 7 (2011): 522-527.
⁷ Sean F. Reardon. “The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New evidence and possible explanations.” in Whither Opportunity? ed. by Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 91-116.
⁸ Helen Westmoreland, Heidi M. Rosenberg, M. Elena Lopez, and Heather Weiss. “Seeing is Believing: Promising practices for how school districts promote family engagement.” Issue Brief. Harvard Family Research Project. (2009)

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

Family engagement has often been associated with positive outcomes for student academic achievement. Researchers and educators have recognized that all parents have valuable resources to contribute to improving their children's education. The terms used to describe parents' efforts to promote their children's development have changed over time and across fields of study (e.g., parent involvement, family involvement, family engagement, parent engagement), but parents have consistently been considered essential to a child's overall well-being. Successfully engaging families extends beyond increasing parent and family school participation. Instead, family engagement should empower parents as partners in student academic success and develop sustainable and trusting school-family partnerships.

Through participant observations, we sought to ascertain whether SPCS could use family engagement strategies to overcome the obstacles encountered in year one and effectively develop empowering partnerships with school families to promote student academic success, parent financial health, and overall family well-being. The themes that emerged from the participant observations reflect that the SPCS workshop series did implement best practices that bolster active family engagement and establish trusting and caring family partnerships.

1. Create a welcoming environment.

"We want you to know we appreciate you! And come again!"

Research shows that family engagement in programs among hard-to-serve populations is effective when parents feel welcomed, and their traditions and contributions are valued. Parents can feel discouraged when they feel inadequate or believe they do not understand how schools work. Welcoming school environments make parents and families feel that they belong to the school and the school belongs to them.¹⁴

One way in which parents are welcomed to the SPCS workshop and program is through the facilitators expressing continuous praise and gratitude for the parents' participation in and dedication to the workshop series. Personal gains, both large and small, were met with words of encouragement from facilitators, and as the workshops progressed, from parents as well.

Parents were applauded for completing homework assignments, taking family trips to the library, and for initiating steps towards their financial goals. At one school site before Thanksgiving break, the principal stopped by the workshop to personally thank the parents for participating in SPCS. The appreciation expressed to the parents at each of the school sites engendered an environment of reciprocal gratitude and the parents often expressed their thanks for the facilitators' contributions and those of other parents.

Parents were also welcomed to the SPCS program through the message of family. They were encouraged to build community within their cohorts and establish kindred bonds with their schools, hearing phrases like "we want you to see [School Name] as home." The facilitators also worked to build a sense of trust by establishing open lines of communication between themselves and parents by sharing their personal phone numbers with parents and encouraging parents to call without restraint with any questions and concerns.

An open door policy made parents feel welcome in simple ways; for instance, the facilitators invited parents to sit together in small group clusters and made parents feel comfortable and included regardless of their position in the room, encouraging them not to sit outside the group.

Two out of three school sites had a significant proportion of Spanish speaking parents. Translation was provided to make parents with English as a second language feel supported and facilitators actively checked in with the Spanish-speaking parents to gauge comprehension and gain their insights and opinions.

Finally, parents were told that SparkPoint has reentry specialists to help find jobs and other opportunities for families with criminal histories and that no one would be turned away for having a criminal record.

These practices confirmed the concept that creating a welcoming environment is an essential aspect of family engagement, particularly for hard-to-reach families who traditionally have had negative experiences with the education system.

2. Connect with parents through their children.

Prior research demonstrates that the greatest barrier to family engagement for hard-to-reach families is a perceived disconnect between the parents' values and the school's.^{15, 16, 17, 18} Often, parents from marginalized communities do not know how to get involved in schools or community-based programs, nor do they completely understand the significance it has on their child's academic success. A consequence of this value misalignment is that well-intentioned programming aimed at supporting families, such as parenting classes, ESL tutoring, and nutrition courses go underutilized.

Particularly for hard-to-reach families, effective family engagement extends beyond offering programs to aligning programs and school values with those of their families.^{19, 20} Since every family wants their children to succeed in school, connecting with families by "[placing] children at the center" and "[improving] learning opportunities for children" has proven to be the most effective strategy.^{21, 22, 23} Thus, a message centered on children became essential to the SPCS workshop curriculum. This new messaging links family financial stability and academic success. Accordingly, SparkPoint's financial services became integral to supporting families toward sending their children to college.

Essential to connecting with families through their children was the inclusion of High Expectation's family visioning curriculum. The family engagement curriculum at two out of the three school sites asked families to create and document a vision for their child's future that embodied the family's standard of excellence. As the facilitators stated throughout the process, "our children will live up to the expectations we set for them."

Vision letters (the documents created by parents) were meant to be a visible presence in each graduating family's home, and were typed, framed and presented to each family as a tool to "steer [their] children towards the 'vision' [they] have for them." The letters were also meant to reinforce the idea that family engagement takes place as much at home as at school. As a result, the importance of parents as role models emerged in the workshops.

Parents were also given tangible examples of how their actions model academic success for their children. At one workshop, parents noted that one parent's enrollment in college was an example for her children. Another school site reserved a bulletin board at the school to display the parents' coursework, and the facilitator shared with parents that their children would see their parents' work on display and be motivated to do their own school work.

What is notable about the SPCS workshops' shift to a child-centered message is that it offers parents autonomy over their students' achievement. Family engagement aims to empower parents to partner with and engage with school administration and staff for children's success. In centering the parents' role in setting the standards for achievement at home, and in positioning parents as role models, the workshops series reaffirms a parent's agency and control over their child's learning and builds a parent's confidence in making proactive partnerships with schools.

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¹⁴ Mapp, "Having Their Say", 56

¹⁵ Concha Delgado-Gaitan. "Involving parents in the schools: A process of empowerment." American Journal of Education. (1991): 20-46.

¹⁶ Patricia Marks Greenfield, Blanca Quiroz, and Catherine Raeff. "Cross-Cultural Conflict and Harmony in the Social Construction of the Child." New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development 2000, no. 87 (2000): 93-108.

¹⁷ Guadalupe Valdés. Con Respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Elise Trumbull, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, and Elvia Hernandez. "Parent Involvement in Schooling-According to Whose Values?" School Community Journal 13, no. 2 (2003)

¹⁹ Trumbull, "Parent Involvement in Schooling"

²⁰ Mapp and Hong. "Debunking the Myth", 345-361.

²¹ Mapp, "Having Their Say", 57

²² Trumbull, "Parent Involvement in Schooling"

²³ Henderson and Mapp. "A New Wave of Evidence"

3. Honor the families’ voices.

“You have the answers, you are parents and manage your finances. You know what is best for [your] family.”

According to best practices for family engagement, valuing families’ voices is essential to creating a program or school environment that parents want to participate in. Successfully honoring parents encompasses validating their ideas and concerns, acknowledging their strengths and bolstering their efforts to support their children, and most importantly, developing true and collaborative partnerships with families. The SPCS honored families in three ways:

Establishing Family Autonomy

The workshops established autonomy by creating an environment that empowered parents and families to define their own academic and financial goals. Facilitators stressed that they could not prescribe generic financial or academic roadmaps for families. Instead, families were encouraged to think of the facilitators as guides. In one workshop on the differences between public, private, and charter schools, the facilitator was asked several times to share which type of school he preferred. The facilitator responded by encouraging parents to do their research and select schools that were best fits for their families and children.

In establishing family autonomy, the workshops actively reaffirmed each family’s agency. Families were not told by outsiders, particularly their schools, that their lifestyle choices were wrong. Instead, the SPCS program respected every participant’s competencies. By acknowledging each family’s autonomy, the workshops empowered families to use the workshop’s tools confidently in their lives. Parents were also granted ownership over workshop content—not just to tailor lessons to fit their lives, but also to reflect on and advocate for their individual learning needs and their expectations for the workshop.

Affirming Family Expertise

The workshops honored parents’ voices by recognizing the parents’ skills and existing knowledge. The family engagement classes also resolutely avoided the label of “parenting class,” emphasizing that the parents are, themselves, experts. By pushing for equal participation, the facilitators invested every parent with the power of self-advocacy. Parents were encouraged to share freely and often with the group, and the facilitators diligently constructed the workshops as judgement-free zones. At one school site, the facilitator established early that the workshop was a “nurturing and non-judgmental environment.”

Small words of encouragement and prompting also helped build an environment that valued parent input. Phrases like, “there are no right or wrong answers,” and “I want to hear what you have to say” were heard often. Quiet, disengaged, and ESL parents were also included in the workshops through careful prompting from facilitators meant to involve parents who otherwise would have been voiceless.

Parents were also reminded that they represent the voice of the school. One school site incorporated a principal coffee hour into a session so parents could speak directly with the school’s administration. These efforts encouraged parents to speak up and share their concerns not only in the workshop but with the larger school community. As a result, after graduation, parents have taken on leadership roles at their schools.



Empowering Every Voice

“My husband, when our daughter was born, opened a savings bond for her and she’s now 23 years old and it helped her pay for college.”

Lastly, the workshops emphasized the value of each parent’s contribution. Valuing parents’ voices and knowledge works in tandem with the idea of parents as autonomous experts. Parent leadership development and capacity-building are essential to successful partnerships between families and schools, and helps to dispel the misconception that hard-to-reach families are apathetic or unmotivated. Moreover, developing parent leaders and the partnerships they engender teaches schools and parents to work as partners for student success

Facilitators also positioned the parents as resources for one another, and relied on the wealth of parent knowledge to propel the workshop discussions forward. It was not uncommon to hear questions such as “do you want to answer her question?” or “what do you think?”

Respecting parents’ voices produced an environment where parents felt valued and comfortable expressing themselves, which led to greater participation. Families enthusiastically shared their strategies for setting their children up for success and financial advice, as well as their struggles and successes. This open communication transformed the workshops into something like a support group, as parents found everything from advice to allies, using their experience and knowledge to help one another with the daily challenges they experienced on the road to academic and financial success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This study has implications for community organizations attempting to partner with schools to use a two-generation approach with school-aged families, and offers a framework for how community organizations can successfully integrate established parent-serving programs into school communities. Our findings demonstrate that for two-generation programs to successfully integrate into school communities their messaging must align with the values of the school and its families.

SPCS, however, would not have accomplished value alignment without strong partnerships with its school sites. Essential to SPCS success are the strong working relationships SparkPoint has created at its school sites. However, these bonds were strategic, and were developed with schools that have established family engagement strategies, or with schools that were being supported in developing their capacity for family engagement. Schools are families’ gateways to the SPCS program, and without established histories of trusting family-school partnerships at each site, SPCS’s ability to attract participants and cultivate credibility with parents would have been severely limited.

Family engagement experts recommend that schools develop relationships with “cultural brokers” or outsider community organizations with established community trust. The opposite is true for parent-serving organizations entering schools that do not have pre-established relationships with school families. Therefore, integral to SPCS effectiveness, and the success of SPCS as a two-generation approach, is the program’s successful leveraging of each school site’s cultural capital.

The participant observations also highlighted that a seamless connection between the school and the community organization is the most effective approach. SPCS became intertwined with the school community and its values. The child-centered messaging, and efforts to honor and empower families echoed the larger message at each community school. As a result, SPCS staff should be viewed as members of the larger school community, particularly since the program aims to support academic success school wide. The SPCS sites integrated SPCS staff into the school community by creating an on-campus presence, with SparkPoint staff offices and on-site SparkPoint centers.



LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

The participant observations highlighted that community organizations seeking to successfully implement two-generation strategies in schools must adapt their programming to include family engagement strategies that strengthen existing school-family partnerships. However, successfully integrating family engagement into a community organization's programming requires schools and community organizations to have strong working partnerships. What do successful partnerships look like? The current structure of the SPCS program varies by school site, with district and school involvement differing across sites. In one location, heavy district involvement was essential to the program's entry into the school, while at others district involvement is more limited. Therefore, what combination of school and district leadership is most effective for program success? Or, must these partnerships remain flexible to adapt to each school's needs?

Through the observations, we also learned how community organizations seeking to integrate two-generation approaches for school-aged families should enter school sites. Community based organizations should align their services to fit the values of the school community, as well as utilize best practices that create trusting and sustainable school and family partnerships. However, how should schools approach these partnerships to effectively create programming that honors the needs of their communities, and supports each school's family engagement initiative? Two out of the three schools have used the SPCS series to develop parent leaders as an essential step towards empowering families, building capacity, and in creating sustainable school-family partnerships. However, more research is needed to explore how community schools wishing to expand into the two-generation field can create partnerships with community organizations that ensure program offerings effortlessly bolster the school's family engagement strategies.

Observing the workshop series gave valuable insight into how community organizations and programs can maintain and build trusting and honoring relationships with school families. However, the SPCS program extends beyond the workshop series. Once parents graduate to one-on-one financial coaching through SparkPoint, how are school and SparkPoint staff partnering together to maintain family involvement in the program and the school? Are efforts made to sustain the relationships families cultivated during the workshops? How are the strategies and resources for academic and financial success translated to impact the larger school community? It has already been mentioned that parent leaders are cultivated within the workshops, but what other strategies are used to sustain the parent-school partnerships that were strengthened in the workshops?

Lastly, the workshops were not representative samples of each school's community. With the exception of one school site, the parents who attended and participated in the workshops self-selected to join the program. Arguably, these families already had established, trusting relationships with their schools, and are not "hard-to-reach" families. One school site did start targeted recruitment for families at-risk of not graduating, and another will initiate this practice for their upcoming cohorts and it will be valuable to see the impact family engagement strategies have on these future cohorts.



CONCLUSION

As prior research confirms, the partnership between home and school permits greater collaboration and improved student outcomes. Family engagement strategies enrich the school's capacity to understand and appreciate the values and cultures of families and become more efficient in meeting student needs. Thus, family support is a vital component to student academic success. Parents are vital to the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of their children, and school success is associated with parents' involvement and engagement practices. Moreover, despite socioeconomic disparities, children whose parents are involved perform markedly better than those whose parents are not. Therefore, as the 21st century rapidly moves by, so increases the importance of a two-generation approach for school-aged families. The concept of SPCS is to work with parents and children simultaneously to build capacity and opportunities for parents to improve their family finances and develop new skills or training for a new job. At the same time, it provides their children with first class services through the community school. Keeping up with the changing face of poverty by means of responsive, context-sensitive models is the aim of the two-generation approach, and is in line with our mission of tirelessly fighting poverty in the Bay Area.

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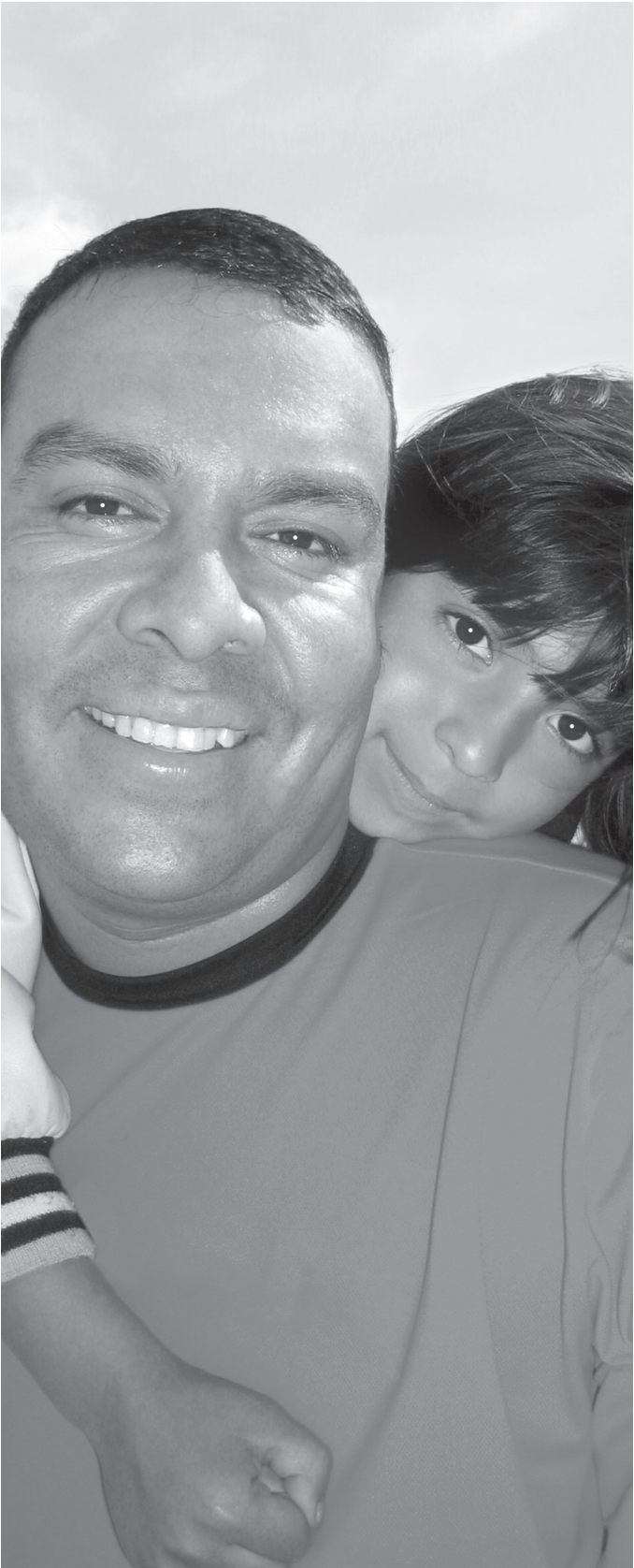
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