

Families First Parenting Programs

Proposal to Framingham State University Nonprofit Giving Course

March 17, 2019

Families First's Mission & Vision

Parents have the power to shape their children's futures. Families First brings parents of young children together in their communities to strengthen their parenting knowledge, skills, and support systems.

Our vision is that...

Every parent is strong and supported.

Every child is thriving and resilient.

Every community benefits from the power of parents.

Use of Funds

Families First is requesting a general operating grant of \$10,000 to support activities related to the goals and objectives outlined in our FY18-20 Business Plan. This plan was developed in partnership with Social Venture Partners, and it has guided the organization through the transition to a new, innovative program model called the *Power of Parenting*TM.

Offering 12 weekly sessions of interactive, evidence-informed parenting education, the program was designed around the incredible potential—and *high return on investment*—of interventions targeted to parents during the first 8 years of their child's life. In the past, we used funding to design, develop, and launch this program.

Today, the program has a track record of success in Boston, and it was designed to be replicated: Its streamlined structure ensures consistent high quality, fiscal efficiency, and deep, sustainable outcomes. A grant would support the growth and continuous improvement of the program across the Greater Boston area.

Supporting Parents Leads to Stronger Families & Communities

The *Power of Parenting* program addresses a pressing community need. During the early childhood years—*when 90% of brain development occurs*—the quality and stability of a child's caregiver relationships is the most important factor in determining whether that child will thrive. But today, parents face a multitude of challenges and stressors that impact their ability to carry out this vital role.

Studies show that the transition to parenthood comes with increases in parents' vulnerability,ⁱ often coupled with decreases in emotional well-being.ⁱⁱ In Massachusetts, 28.7% of mothers report less than optimal mental health.ⁱⁱⁱ

For families facing poverty, additional stresses like social isolation and housing- or food-insecurity make raising children even more challenging. If children lack consistent, supportive relationships to help them cope, the stress caused by adverse childhood experiences becomes "*toxic*," having severe implications for their health and development.

Poverty, stress, and isolation also contribute to an *achievement gap*, which prevents children from entering school ready to learn: 75% of children from families with moderate-to-high incomes were prepared for kindergarten, compared to 48% of children in poverty. And the gap widens over time: When a child is not reading at grade level by the end of 3rd grade, they are three times more likely to drop out of high school.

Without adequate support on the policy or community levels, parents struggle immensely during the early childhood years—and this has a direct impact on children’s success.

In order to turn these challenges into opportunities, research and best practices point to an extensive need for programs that help parents build *parenting knowledge, skills, and support systems*. These types of interventions support parents’ ability to maintain nurturing parent-child relationships and support their children’s healthy development starting at birth.

The Power of Parenting™ Program

Families First developed the *Power of Parenting* program as an evidence-informed response to these demonstrated problems. Through the program, parents engage in:

- **Seven parenting workshops** that follow our original, research-based curriculum to help parents build knowledge and skills
- **Three Parent Café discussion sessions**, where parents can take the lead and share their experiences (using a model developed by Strengthening Families™)
- **Parent leadership** and professional development opportunities
- **The Families First mobile app**, with information and videos related to each week’s topics
- **A collaborative two-generation approach**, which connects parents and children to community resources that advance their economic mobility, including:
 - Experiential course credits at Urban College of Boston
 - Jumpstart literacy programming for children at select program sites
 - Program graduation attire and interview guidance from Dress for Success
 - College and career guidance from Duet
- **A graduation** where parents can celebrate accomplishments with their community

Parenting Educators: The program is facilitated by Families First’s Parenting Educators, each of whom is trained and has expertise in fields like psychology, social work, or education.

Action Teams: Several months before each program begins, Families First’s Partner Relationship Managers assemble an Action Team (including partner staff and Parent Leaders) to recruit and retain parents. This strategy creates a system for utilizing individualized approaches to ensure that each program runs smoothly.

Parent Leaders: Two parents from each program receive a stipend to assist our staff during program sessions and remind peers of upcoming sessions. They can also participate in trainings (on topics like home-buying, meeting facilitation, or budgeting) and community projects. This work helps them achieve professional goals while ensuring that their voices are integrated into the program and organization. This year, we also welcomed our first Parent Leaders onto our Board of Directors.

Program Leadership Team

Sue Covitz MSW, Executive Director

Sue Covitz has held leadership positions with the organization since 2006 and has more than 25 years of experience in nonprofit management, coalition building, and community organizing. Since taking on the role of Executive Director in 2016, she has overseen all program and financial development work and leads the development of key relationships with a variety of organizations and stakeholders. She was a driving force

behind the development of Families First’s new business plan, and she is now working closely with the organization’s leadership team to guide the plan’s successful execution.

Sue received a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from Haverford College and a Master of Social Work from Boston College. She is the parent of two college-age daughters and participated as a parent in Families First workshops when her children were toddlers.

Magda Rodriguez, Director of Programming

Magda Rodriguez moved to the United States after receiving her law degree in Colombia, and she worked in the immigration field for several years. She also gained experience as a family engagement leader at a nonprofit that offers services in the Boston Public Schools.

Magda joined Families First in 2013 as a Parenting Educator. As Director of Programming, she has played a major role in developing and launching the new *Power of Parenting* program, including the implementation of an innovative parent recruitment and retention strategy. She is now focused on guiding the program’s regional expansion.

Maureen O’Brien PhD, Director of Curriculum and Training

Maureen is a developmental psychologist whose passions include child development, parenting education, and family support. Before joining Families First, Maureen co-directed the Brazelton Touchpoints Center at Boston Children’s Hospital. She has consulted with numerous juvenile product companies and is the author of four parenting books.

At Families First, Maureen oversees the development and continuous improvement of our parenting curricula, as well as training and ongoing support for our corps of Parenting Educators. She holds degrees in Psychology/Child Development from Brown University (BA, 1983), Temple University (MA, 1985), and the University of Minnesota (PhD, 1991).

Vetting Process for New Employees

Families First currently employs 14 administrative and program staff members. Hiring for each position involves a multi-stage vetting process including multiple rounds of interviews.

The *Power of Parenting* program is facilitated by a corps of seven *Parenting Educators*. Our staffing structure is unique because—rather than using a train-the-trainer model—Parenting Educators are part-time employees and they are offered ongoing support and trainings. This structure ensures high quality and fidelity to our evidence-informed curricula.

At the same time, Parenting Educators have deep roots in the communities that we serve, and their cultural competency and understanding of the challenges faced by parents creates an open and supportive learning environment. We utilize an extensive vetting process when hiring Parenting Educators, including:

- 1. Posting and initial vetting phase:** Post job description, collect resumes and review for experience, availability, and fit for mission. Director of Curriculum and Training interviews by phone and checks two references.
- 2. Teach-back phase:** Teach-backs are an opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate knowledge and skills with a select piece of the curriculum that they receive via Dropbox prior to coming in. Families First staff members participate as if they were parents. Using a rubric, the team decides whether to move candidate to next phase.

3. **Field observation & co-facilitation phase:** Candidate observes a program session and meets with the Parenting Educator who is running that session. Candidate then co-facilitates at least one session (observed by Director).
4. **Hiring phase:** New Parenting Educator attends orientation session, receives manual/guide, receives access to curriculum documents, is added to the scheduling system, and attends regular trainings.

Short-term and Long-term Goals

Families First is requesting a general operating grant of \$10,000 in FY19 to support the high-level strategic priorities outlined in our FY18-20 Business Plan. Information about the program outcomes, including long-term impact on families, is included under “Evidence of Success.”

Strategic Priority 1: Deepen and expand delivery of services

- Over the past year, we have deepened our services by moving away from our “traditional workshop model” (varied formats, but typically included a short series of 4 workshops) to focus exclusively on the in-depth, comprehensive *Power of Parenting* program model.
- We ran 8 *Power of Parenting* programs in FY18. In FY19, we are on track to:
 - Run **16-18 programs, serving 200+ parents, and benefiting 400+ children** (each program includes 24 hours of programming)

Strategic Priority 2: Deepen and expand partnerships with mission-aligned organizations

- The shift to a singular, cohesive program model means that we can spend more time developing and cultivating deeper partnerships. Further, with a smaller number of more robust partnerships, our staff is able to devote more time to making sure each program is successful. (See “Partnerships & Collaboration” for more information on our partnership model.)
- In FY19, we will:
 - Cultivate 11+ partnerships
 - Use a new recruitment and retention strategy to ensure that at least 65% of parents graduate from the program

Strategic Priority 3: Grow Families First into a sustainable, regional-based leading parenting organization

- Last year, we completed several infrastructure projects in preparation for growth, including overhauling our website, improving our evaluation methods and database, and building a 3-year development plan.
- In FY19, we will:
 - Conduct Brand Refresh project:
 - Align mission, vision, and tagline with new program model and outcomes
 - Work with Artists for Humanity to develop new logo and visual identity
 - Develop key messaging across the organization
 - Develop a Growth Plan for replication in a new region in FY20
 - Continue to improve program evaluation and build systems for data-sharing
 - Follow 3-year Development Plan to meet fundraising goals
 - Review technology systems, develop plan for upgrade

Partnerships & Collaboration

Families First's *Power of Parenting* program is delivered in tight collaboration with partner organizations that share our mission of strengthening families and have strong connections to parents. The program is offered in either English or Spanish at partner sites—like childcare centers, health centers, housing developments, and schools. This approach enables us to reach parents in a location that is familiar and convenient—while promoting long-term social connections by bringing together parents who have other things in common (e.g. their children go to the same daycare). There are many benefits for partners, as our program:

- **Improves outcomes** for the families they serve
- **Addresses challenges** around family engagement
- **Increases our collective impact** by sharing evaluation data

Families First offers each partner up to *six months* of parent engagement and outreach support per program—ensuring that each and every program is a success. Our relationships with partners are deep and long-lasting.

For example, Families First has partnered with Bethany Hill Place in Framingham for more than 20 years. Bethany Hill Place is a “living and learning community” that provides housing with educational opportunities for those in need. The *Power of Parenting* program is a strong fit with their mission: it addresses an important need for residents, and we help their staff engage families in a new way, leading to more success across all of their services.

Evidence of Success

Research shows that parents are best prepared to support their children when a set of widely accepted protective factors are in place. All of Families First's programming is rooted in the Strengthening Families™ Approach, centered on the Five Protective Factors. After each 12-week *Power of Parenting* program, we aim for more than 80% of parents to report significant increases in the following areas related to each Protective Factor (1-5).

(1) Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

(2) Social & Emotional Competence of Children

- Parents increased knowledge about topics such as a child's temperament, developmental stage, and discipline.
- Parents gained age appropriate parenting skills and learned how to support their children's social-emotional development by exploring topics like:
 - ✓ Positive discipline
 - ✓ Confidence building
 - ✓ Language building
 - ✓ Using play as learning

(3) Parental Resilience

- Parents gained awareness of the impact of stressors on their children's lives.
- Parents gained strategies for managing stressors.
- Parents felt confident and supported.

(4) Social Connections

- Parents became more willing to share strategies and ideas with other parents.
- Parents expanded their social networks for both giving and receiving support.

(5) Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Parents' needs for additional resources were identified.
- Parents connected with additional resources.

93%
of parents
increased their
knowledge of parenting

89%
of parents
increased their
resilience

93%
of parents
increased their
social connections

100%
of parents
were offered resources
through partners

Families First’s partnership model enables us to connect with parents after the program ends. In the summer of 2018, Families First’s evaluation team followed up with a group of 22 parent participants between 3 and 6 months after they completed a program:

- ✓ **86%** still use parenting skills they learned multiple times per week
- ✓ **72%** noticed a positive change in their child's behavior
- ✓ **76%** keep in touch with parents from the program multiple times per month

The *Power of Parenting* program was designed to have sustainable impact. In addition to building partner organizations’ capacity for family engagement, Parent Leaders are cultivated as part of each program. Their work as advocates for parenting education ensures that impact grows exponentially in each community. Also, two of the program’s key benefits are that parents build strong social support systems and gain connections to other community resources; these aspects of the program continue to benefit parents long after they graduate from the program.

The following are some recent quotes from parents as they reflected on their transformations after the *Power of Parenting* program:

“I’m in love with the program. It was my time to express myself and I was able to get a lot of feedback and ideas from other parents.”

“Now we read books, make silly faces, name colors... My son is very happy.”

“Before, I felt like a ticking bomb. I learned to manage my stress and to be patient. Now I don't hover over my girls and I let them explore without worrying so much.”

“I’ve learned to be more patient and not go crazy when I get bombarded with multiple kids and multiple problems at once. I’m not perfect, but I have the tools to get better every day.”

Key Challenge: Recruitment and Retention

Families First has not experienced any significant setbacks in the process of executing our Business Plan. However, we have identified and are addressing certain challenges while pursuing new opportunities as they arise.

Ensuring high and consistent program attendance is a pervasive challenge faced by many similar organizations. In response to the needs associated with the *Power of Parenting* program’s longer-term format, Families First rolled out a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy in FY18. Our new strategy is centered on the following elements:

- An interactive curriculum—including Parent Café sessions—that engages parents deeply
- Mobile app content and text reminders to reinforce learning and boost attendance
- More staff support for recruitment and retention on the ground at program sites
- Parent leadership training for peer-to-peer outreach
- Offering resources to help parents achieve personal and professional goals

Our recruitment and retention efforts have already begun to show positive results, and 65% of all of our attendees graduated (attended 75% or more sessions) during FY18.

When we first launched these efforts last year, we were selected to write an article for the Disruptive Innovations issue of the Social Innovations Journal. You can read the article and learn more about Families First [on our website](#).

ⁱ Ascend at the Aspen Institute: “Two Open Windows: Infant and Parent Neurobiologic Change” (2015)

ⁱⁱ MA Van Scheppingen et al. “Self-Esteem and Relationship Satisfaction during the Transition to Motherhood” (2018)

ⁱⁱⁱ Zero to Three: “State of Babies Yearbook” (2019)