

Supporting Families through Social Connections



CASE STUDY CAP TULSA

About CAP Tulsa

Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa) is a nonprofit organization formed in 1998 to “help young children in lower-income families grow up and achieve economic success.” Using a two-generation approach, CAP Tulsa provides high-quality early childhood education services (including home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, and before- and after-school care for children) alongside parenting skills classes, CareerAdvance® job training, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and other programming to engage and assist parents. With the exception of the CareerAdvance® health care training track, all adult participants must have a child enrolled in a CAP Tulsa program. Each year, CAP Tulsa serves over 3,000 young children and their families.

Program Overview

CAP Tulsa strongly values data-driven decision-making to achieve the best possible child and parent outcomes, routinely engaging in opportunities to assess the effectiveness of its programs. For example, in addition to formal evaluations, staff and leadership use strategies such as human-centered design and continuous improvement to iterate programming on the basis of lessons learned over time.

In nearly every aspect of its programming, CAP Tulsa intentionally integrates opportunities for families to build and use social capital by connecting with each other and developing a peer support network for navigating the challenges and opportunities families face each day. This focus on social capital helps families build both strong and weak ties with other families in the community; CAP Tulsa staff; and individuals at nonprofit, public, and private agencies in the community.



Social Capital: Components in Practice and Innovative Approaches

CAP Tulsa staff report that many families the organization serves are at least somewhat socially isolated, so the program promotes opportunities for them to get to know each other and leverage those connections for everything from emotional support to a ride to class. The organization particularly encourages families to build and then leverage social capital with other families of similar backgrounds and experiences (bonding social capital), though it also promotes opportunities to connect with families of different backgrounds (bridging) or people in positions of power (linking).

Bonding: Connections with People Like Me. CAP Tulsa's programs are often based on a peer-to-peer cohort model, encouraging individuals to form relationships with other participants in the cohort to leverage social capital. For example, participants in the CareerAdvance® program attend job training together and then meet at least biweekly for 15–30 minutes in a “Peer Huddle” to discuss issues of importance to participants. Many of the cohorts have about 6–8 members, though some are slightly larger. Participants lead the discussion and have a venue to offer each other both emotional support and concrete ideas for overcoming barriers to success.

CAP Tulsa's Early Head Start and Head Start schools are physically designed in such a way as to allow for group socialization so that social capital ties can begin to form. For example, a school might have a large entryway to allow parents to chat with each other during school pick-up and drop-off times, or it may offer coffee or comfortable seating (or both) to encourage parents to mingle on site.

Even CAP Tulsa's home visiting program, Learning@Home, which is not inherently group based, tries to include opportunities for peer social interaction. Some parents meet almost monthly during the school year. Events vary but include sharing food and conversation while playing with blocks with the children, celebrating children's “graduation,” or taking a field trip to a local park or library. One home visitor started a “Parent Café” for interested parents on her caseload to discuss topics of interest to them, such as budgeting or charter schools. Some of these parents have formed bonds that extend outside of the program, such as when several parents helped another whose house needed to be rehabilitated.

Bridging: Connections with People Different from Me.

CAP Tulsa also works to build relationships among individuals with different backgrounds. For example, many of its ESL classes include parents who come from Hispanic and Burmese backgrounds. While they speak different languages (Spanish and Zomi), these parents often bond over their shared goal of learning English to improve their ability to parent (e.g., to be able to interact with their children's doctors, help with their homework, participate in parent-teacher conferences) and integrate in the Tulsa community.

This “is not just a school, [you're] part of a family.”
— CAP Tulsa Head Start parent

Linking: Connections with People in Positions of Power in the Community.

CAP Tulsa develops partnerships with many other organizations in the community, including employers. Through the CareerAdvance® program, individuals receive job training in health care roles and are then often connected with employers who offer benefits (e.g., health insurance) and are able to provide participants with a career trajectory with increasing wages and other job opportunities over time.

CAP Tulsa programming has demonstrated effects on math test scores, chronic absence, and grade retention for children.

Key Outcomes

CAP Tulsa emphasizes the value of continuous learning and research to improve parent and child outcomes. As a result, the organization collects a variety of qualitative and quantitative data about families that the staff uses to make decisions¹ about how to best refine and improve the programming.

CAP Tulsa has participated in several formal evaluations, including a 2016 quasi-experimental study by Georgetown University researchers² on its Head Start program. Compared with middle school students who attended Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) kindergarten in 2006–2007 but had not attended either a CAP

¹ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/207846/TulsaCaseStudy.pdf>

² https://captulsa.org/uploaded_assets/pdf/Phillips-Gormley-Anderson-2016.pdf

Tulsa Head Start or a TPS pre-K program, those who had attended a CAP Head Start program had statistically significantly improved math test scores and were less likely to repeat a grade or be chronically absent.

A separate quasi-experimental study³ in 2019 of the CareerAdvance® program found that the 150 participants enrolled in the program were significantly more likely to attain career certificates after 1 year than were similar CAP Tulsa parents not enrolled in the program (61 percent vs. 3 percent). The program effects extended to participants' children: CAP Tulsa children whose parents were enrolled in CareerAdvance® had lower chronic absenteeism than those whose parents were not enrolled (14 percent vs. 34 percent).

61 percent of CAP Tulsa parents in the CareerAdvance® health care job training program attained career certificates, compared with 3 percent of CAP parents not enrolled in the program.

Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

Leadership, staff, and parents from CAP Tulsa have identified several considerations they have uncovered as they work to build and leverage social capital in their programming.

Keep Group Sizes Small. CAP Tulsa has found that peer-to-peer groups work best when they remain fairly small. CareerAdvance® Peer Huddles are often about 6–8 individuals and no more than about 15–16. These smaller groups allow participants to develop relationships with one another and to notice when someone is missing or not speaking up.

Effective Peer Facilitators Have Specialized Skills. Facilitating peer-to-peer interactions among a cohort requires special expertise. Facilitators must know when to talk and when to let participants talk. Sometimes individual parents dominate a group discussion or provide inaccurate information, and facilitators must understand how and when to redirect the conversation or correct mistaken information. Facilitators should also be relatable to participants, ideally through shared experiences but at least through similar language, dress, and so on.

³ https://www.captulsa.org/uploaded_assets/pdf/CAP-Tulsa-impact-analysis_Ascend_Brief-1_2019.pdf

Start Intentionally Building Social Capital, but Let Organic Connections Take Over. CAP Tulsa staff have found that they typically need to jump-start networking and relationship-building. This can take the form of peer cohorts, but it might also be simpler in some cases, such as providing coffee or food for parents to linger and begin to chat with each other or facilitating a group icebreaker. One interviewee noted that, at least initially, “It’s important to call out that you have to create the space” for socializing, rather than assume it will happen automatically at first. However, staff and leadership alike agreed that organic connections instigated or organized by families as they get to know each other over time are virtually always more meaningful and effective than anything CAP Tulsa could develop or organize.

“It’s important to call out that you have to [intentionally] create the space” for relationships to form.

— CAP Tulsa staff member

Help Families Navigate Cultural Differences That Might Conflict with Their Goals. Some families find that their existing social ties may have conflicting values and having a network of peers from CAP Tulsa who are coping with similar challenges can be helpful. For example, as parents’ incomes increase, they may worry that they are turning their backs on friends or family by not sharing their increased income. Similarly, there were times when Hispanic mothers described being shamed by their peers or family for enrolling their young children in school instead of keeping them at home. Offering an opportunity for parents to connect with other parents who may also feel trapped between two cultures can help these parents determine the best way to maintain strong relationships while not sacrificing their economic mobility and other goals.

Trust Is Difficult but a Precondition to Success. Many families who join CAP Tulsa have had negative experiences with systems or individuals in the past and may be distrustful of or unwilling to depend on others. CAP Tulsa has a reputation in the community as an organization that has families’ best interests at heart, which helps it to establish trusting relationships with families. Similarly, it can take time for cohort members in any of its programs to trust each other. However, without this trust, it is nearly impossible to take full advantage of the organizational and program resources. As one interviewee noted, “We have to create a relationship of trust with people to create opportunities for change.”