



A Qualitative Evaluation of Circle of Parents, a Program of Minnesota Communities Caring for Children

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Program Description

Minnesota Communities Caring for Children (MCCC), home of Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota and the Minnesota Circle of Parents works to build healthy environments where all children thrive. MCCC uses a prevention model that promotes individual- and community- led action to prevent child maltreatment and build resilience of children, parents, and community members throughout Minnesota. Their mission is to empower parents and communities to build supportive relationships, nurture children, and prevent child abuse and neglect. Their vision is a state where all children are given the opportunity for a healthy future.

Circle of Parents® is a national network of mutual support and self-help programs for parents and caregivers, administered in MCCC in partnership with communities throughout the state. During group sessions, parents support each other and develop leadership skills that transfer to their families and communities.

Participants meet in a supportive environment to share their concerns and frustrations, and to identify and commit to their own personal parenting goals.

Participants are guided by volunteer facilitators that are trained by MCCC staff. In a 2019 survey of participants, nearly all respondents (99%) reported that they have gained additional supportive contacts as a result of participating in the program. The vast majority also reported that they have become more aware of local family resources, better understand childhood development, and interact more positively with their children (85%-94%) as a result of Circle of Parents.

Circle of Parents Minnesota Snapshot (FY 2019)

42 Parent Groups Statewide

900+ Parents Served

500+ Children Served in Children's Programs

200+ referrals made to resources*

**Including community education, mental health, job training, health care, crisis nursery, social services, WIC, ECFE/Head Start, mentoring programs, and food shelves*

Evaluation Focus

The primary goals of this evaluation are to a) demonstrate the impact of Circle of Parents on families, communities, and partners, b) evaluate MCCC's progress on strategic planning goals, c) amplify the voices of

parents, families, and program participants, and d) build MCCC’s internal evaluation capacity to promote sustainability.

The focus group protocol aimed to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. How and to what extent does Circle of Parents lead to safer, healthier, more resilient families?
2. What features of the program and context contribute to the success and sustainability of Circle of Parents groups?
3. How did the program produce or contribute to the intended outcomes in the short, intermediate, and long term?

Data Sources and Methods

Over several months, MCCC worked with evaluation consultants at the Improve Group to develop a protocol for focus groups. Qualitative data provides important information related to personal experiences, so it is a valuable tool for this project. A total of 21 parents participated in three qualitative focus groups. The participating groups represent diversity in geography, group leadership, funding, and other features. The full list of questions asked during the focus group can be found in the appendix of this report. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative analysis methods in Microsoft Excel. Themes were generated for each focus group and then grouped into larger categories to develop general findings. Other data included in this report are from a Circle of Parents statistics database that are managed by MCCC.

Circle of Parents Groups in Study

	Geography	Founded	Supports Provided	Attendance	Demographics	Other features
Group # 1	Suburban, Minneapolis -St. Paul Metro area	2016	Childcare, food, meeting space, transportation support, interpreter services	Fluid attendance between three local groups, with both new and long term participants.	64% women, 36% men, 61% white, 14% Somali or other African, 12% Black or African American, 8% Asian, 5% Hispanic	Supported by county social services agency. Childcare provided by Early Childhood and Family Education at school.
Group #2	Urban, Northern MN	2014	Meeting space. Previously dinner and childcare, but funding is in flux.	Group has been meeting irregularly, but previously consistent attendance by 5-8 long term participants.	All women. Other demographics unavailable.	Previously funded by neighborhood nonprofit that provides space, but is now unfunded and meeting irregularly.
Group #3	Small city, Central MN	1989-2010; 2011	Childcare, dinner, meeting space	Fairly consistent attendance from both short and long term participants.	52% women, 48% men. 73% white, 8% Hispanic, 6% Black or African American, 4% Asian, 10% other.	Long-term volunteer-driven. Once a month there are breakouts between men and women.

Results

For this report, findings are organized by overall themes that show strengths, areas for improvement, and impact of participating in Circle of Parents. Overall findings show themes that emerged through analyzing all three focus groups. Overall findings are followed by individual summaries of each focus group.

Overall Findings

Overall Strengths of Circle of Parents

- Sense of community and building relationships with other parents—combats isolation.
- Being able to share experiences, getting advice and learning from other parents and not feeling judged. Peer support, rather than expert to student support.
- Child care, location and food contribute to ability to participate.
- Children benefit from socialization during childcare.
- Facilitator feels like a friend, shares experiences and is trusting. Important to have a relationship with facilitator.
- Activities and presentations are useful and informative.

Community. Participants in each focus group emphasized that the group gave them a sense of community that

“It takes a village [to raise kids] and we’ve all given each other tools, tips, ways to survive and ideas to try. I know that I can send my kids out and if they run into any one of these parents they would have another helper or role model to keep them in line and it’s nice to have that.”

they did not have before. Several participants had stated that they were isolated with limited support, and that attending the group gave them a way to get out of the house, connect with peers, and get support. Participants also identified their interaction with other parents as a key strength. They not only learned strategies from other parents, they developed deep relationships that made it easier to share in group, as well as participate in more activities outside of the group.

Peer to peer support. The value of receiving peer to peer support without judgment was identified as a strength in each focus group. In Group 3, two participants had previously attended parent education through the school district where they described it as teachers giving you information, “people thinking they were higher up”, contrasting it to Circle of Parents’ “friendlier” approach. Being able to get advice and relate to other parents from a variety of backgrounds and situations gave them greater confidence, made them more comfortable sharing, and made them feel less isolated.

Skilled facilitators. Participants identified skilled facilitators as instrumental to the success of their groups. They described a good facilitator as relatable, and able to establish trust and get others to open up. While the facilitator may bring specific content or parenting strategies to the group, their approach is more like a peer.

Childcare, food, and location. Each focus group stressed the importance of their Circle group’s provision of quality childcare, food, and a convenient location in contributing to their ability to attend.

“[Our facilitator] is real. She always talks about how she handles things and she uses real examples and just makes it easier to share because she’s a parent and is one of us.”

Participants in Groups 1 and 3 spoke particularly highly of the childcare offered. The fact that their kids enjoyed coming to the children’s program, were making friends and improving their social skills, allowed

parents to more easily continue coming to the group. Participants in Group 2, however, said that while the provision of childcare and dinner was a plus, they were motivated to come to the group and would make other arrangements were they not provided.

Overall Areas for Improvement of Circle of Parents

- Childcare not providing activities for older kids or special needs kids.
- Wanting to expand group while balancing difficulty sharing with new people or bigger groups.
- Being more inclusive of dads and male partners.
- Group feeling insufficiently supported by host agency.
- Group sustainability with uncertain funding or facilitator to take ownership.

Childcare responsiveness to older/special needs kids. While participants generally spoke highly of the childcare offered, some participants in Groups 1 and 2 expressed concerns that childcare was not providing appropriate activities for children older than eight. Some with older kids felt that they were bored, and others with younger kids were concerned about what would happen when their own kids were older. Additionally, at least two participants in Group 1 felt that the childcare staff was not equipped to address their special needs children's behavior.

Recruiting and controlling group size. Participants in Groups 2 and 3 expressed the desire for more parents to join their group and continue coming. One participant said he saw parents around his children's school or in the community that he thought would benefit from Circle of Parents, but he didn't know how to invite them. Other participants said that some people may not feel comfortable coming to group and sharing with others, or they may be unwilling to change. Each focus group acknowledged the tension in both welcoming new people and maintaining the trust required to share personal information. Group 1 participants specifically said that they were more reluctant to share when the group size was too large.

Inclusion of dads/male partners. Participants in Group 1 said that groups should be more intentionally inclusive of dads and male partners, and fight the perception that it's a "mom's group." They acknowledged, however, that separating by gender for certain topics may be beneficial. Group 3, on the other hand, provides a model of a group that is inclusive of dads. Nearly half of the participants over the past year were men, and they hold monthly breakout sessions between men and women where advice might veer in different directions. Participants seemed to appreciate the dynamic, and dads said that having a decent male presence contributed to their comfort in sharing with the group.

"[My partner] could use support. We talk about a lot of things but there is a lot of stuff that he doesn't talk to me about with [our son] driving him crazy. I think that it would be helpful for him [to have a place to talk] but he thinks this is a mom's group."

Sustainability and support. The three focus groups demonstrated that necessary features for sustainability include either the backing of a host agency that is able to provide supports (as in Group 1), or multiple strong, motivated volunteers and facilitators who share leadership and initiative (as in Group 3). Group 2 previously had funding and supports from a host agency as well as a strong facilitator, but when funding was cut from the agency and the facilitator transitioned, the group lacked the support and leadership to continue meeting regularly.

Overall Impact of Circle of Parents

- Building community and friendships with other parents.
- Parents are getting out, being a part of the community and participating in events more.
- Participants feel more patient and confident as parents.
- Parents are getting useful ideas and advice from a variety of people and applying them at home.
- Kids are interacting and socializing with others.

Connection to parents, the community at large. Participants in each group identified the importance of the sense of community and connections with other parents they gained as a result of Circle of Parents as positively impacting their well-being and families.

They expressed a greater willingness to ask for help when they needed support, and a network to turn to. Participants also stated that participating in the group led to them engaging more in the broader community—

“It’s given me hope that I’m not alone, that I actually do have somebody to call even if I just call another Circle member.... Just that one little piece is huge, it’s a community.”

leaving the house more, attending community events, and outings with other parents. Two participants who were English language learners described how the group helped them practice their English and feel less isolated. In each group, several participants reported feeling less isolated and more empowered as a result of Circle of Parents.

Parenting Strategies. Participants described a great impact on their parenting as a result of attending the group. Several participants stressed the value of being able to learn strategies from peers from different backgrounds and situations, with different ages of children. They described using specific strategies they learned in the group, and being able to try out multiple strategies to find something that was successful.

“This is my go-to place for raising kids.”

Greater confidence in parenting. Participants reported greater confidence in their parenting as well as patience with their children as a result of Circle of Parents. The educational pieces as well as being able to

“I think [Circle of Parents] has boosted my confidence as a parent. You kind of get into this mindset sometimes like, ‘Am I good mom? Am I the best I can be?’ And when you are around other relatable parents, you think yeah, I am a good mom, we do have a good life.”

connect with peers made them feel less alone in their struggles. Additionally, one parent said that as a result of the group, he was proactive when his child’s school brought up behavioral concerns about his daughter, and took her to be evaluated rather than “waiting and seeing.”

Overall Recommendations for Circle of Parents

- Increase outreach and recruiting for Circle of Parents, while maintaining trust and relationships required to share in group.
- Childcare providing more activities geared towards older kids and special needs kids.
- Being more inclusive of men while also having time for men and women to be separated during sensitive topics.
- Providing resources such as childcare, transportation, food and a convenient location (that’s private and away from kids) is key.
- A strong facilitator can support group sustainability and cohesiveness, but for long term success, groups either need support from multiple volunteers, or a sponsoring agency.

Individual Focus Group Breakdown

Circle of Parents Focus Group #1

Summary of Circle of Parents Group

There are three groups, first established in 2016, with fluid attendance between them in a suburban county in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, affiliated with a county social services agency. Each group meets on a consistent schedule with locations at family education centers. One group meets weekly during the day, and the other groups meet twice a month, one during the evening and the other during the day. None of the groups meet over the summer but the county social services agency provides monthly events for parents to get together at local area parks and farmers markets. Over the last year, sixty-four percent of those attending meetings were women, and 36% were men. Sixty-one percent were White, 14% Somali or of other African descent, 12% Black/African American, 8% Asian and 5% Hispanic. The majority of participants have children between the ages of 3-11 years of age. The county social services agency provides many resources to support and encourage participation in Circle of Parents, including transportation to and from meetings, childcare, interpreter services, and meals.

About Focus Group

A total of 8 parents from all three of the Circle of Parent groups in the county participated in the focus group, facilitated by MCCC evaluation staff members. The focus group was held at a community center for its convenient location, transit accessibility, and room availability. Seven participants were women, and one was a man. Two participants were English Language Learners, one of whom utilized an interpreter during the focus group. Transportation support was offered to all participants, and childcare was provided. Participants had been a part of Circle of Parents for a range of a few weeks to two years. Participants heard about Circle of Parents through social services, from Circle of Parents facilitators or through family and friends.

Strengths of Circle of Parents Group

- Sense of community and support from others.
- Sharing experiences and not feeling judged or alone.
- Providing child care and feeling comfortable leaving child with care takers.
- Facilitators sharing their own experiences and asking parents what they need help with.
- Convenient and friendly location.
- Variety of activities and presentations.

“We don’t have any friends or family in the area and this group has given us a community where we now have birthday parties, swim dates and play dates outside of the group.”

Areas for Improvement of Circle of Parents Group

- Not providing activities for older kids and kids with special needs.
- Variable group sizes – parents are less likely to share with a larger group.
- Lack of inclusivity of dads.
- Transportation can be challenging.
- Implementing feedback and enforcing rules.

Impact of Circle of Parents Group

- Providing friendships and people to go to for help.
- Connection to social network of other parents to participate in gatherings outside of group.
- Decreased isolation and greater engagement with broader community.
- Feeling more comfortable asking for help.
- Children's program has allowed for kids to interact with others and develop friendships.

"I started asking for help when I needed it or getting more comfortable with asking for help. Whereas before [Circle of Parents], I never said anything and would be in crisis after crisis."

Circle of Parents Focus Group #2

Summary of Circle of Parents Group

Established in 2014, this Circle of Parents Group is the only group in this Northern Minnesota city, operating out of a neighborhood family services collaborative. The group had been in transition and not been meeting consistently for a few months prior to the focus group, but had previously met weekly during the evenings. Most participants live in the neighborhood, therefore transportation was not a barrier. Childcare was provided by the collaborative and the group would sit down to eat dinner before the meetings began. Recently, the collaborative's strategic plan changed, and funding was cut for the group. Due to the funding cuts, the group is no longer able to pay the facilitator, and have limited ability to pay for childcare and meals. The group is still able to use the collaborative's space for free. All participants are women and the group size has six regular, long-term participants.

About Focus Group

A total of 5 parents participated in the focus group held during the evening at the collaborative where they usually meet. Dinner and childcare was provided. All participants were women. Most participants have been in the group for 2-5 years with one participant joining the group within the past year. Participants heard about the group in a variety of ways from family and friends, flyers, professors, and the facilitator.

Strengths of Circle of Parents Group

- Strong facilitator established trust, was welcoming and relatable.
- Getting advice and learning from other parents.
- Building relationships and doing activities together – parents don't feel isolated.
- Location of meetings and private space away from kids and agency staff.
- Comfort sharing with group without being judged.
- Food and childcare a bonus, but participants would have made arrangements without it.

Areas for Improvement of Circle of Parents Group

- Not much support anymore for group to continue. Trying to keep group going with little resources, transition in facilitator leadership, and funding which has resulted in fewer meetings.
- Hard to expand group and get new parents to join and stay.
- Continuing child care for older kids—as kids age, they move away from the collaborative's early childhood focus.

"It's not Circle of Parents itself that's failing, it's the overarching support to keep the group going and providing resources and funding to have meetings."

Impact of Circle of Parents Group

- Building deep relationships with other parents in the community.
- Having more confidence and patience as a parent.
- Gaining parenting strategies from peers.
- Better able to facilitate conversations with families in the workplace.

"It's like family, I love these women. I guess some people don't understand how important this group is to me, a loner, in solitude a lot other than with the kids... it's a lifesaver sometimes."

Circle of Parents Focus Group #3

Summary of Circle of Parents Group

This group in a small, Central Minnesota city was originally established in 1989. It briefly went on hiatus in 2010, only to reopen in 2011 in its current form. It meets weekly during the evening in a library, and has a long term facilitator that cooks dinner for the group before the children go to their children's program. The children's program also has a long term, experienced facilitator providing childcare during the group. Once a month the group is split up between men and women, and topics or advice are discussed between the groups separately. Over the last year, roughly 52% of parents attending meeting were women and 48% were men. Most participants have children between the ages of 3-8 years of age. Seventy-three percent of participants are White, 8% are Hispanic, 6% are Black or African American, 4% Asian, and 10% identified as "other."

About Focus Group

A total of 8 parents participated in the focus group, which was located at the same location and time as their regularly scheduled meeting. Notably, 6 out of the 8 participants were men. Dinner and childcare was provided. Participants had been a part of Circle of Parents from a range of 6 months to 3 years. They had heard about Circle of Parents through a variety of ways, such as social services, their public health nurse, WIC nurse, as well as friends and family.

Strengths of Circle of Parents Group

- Learning from other parents and feeling comfortable sharing and getting advice from others.
- Having breakout sessions for men and women once a month to get different advice.
- Providing childcare and dinner, convenient location, and timing are all important.
- Long-term, relatable facilitator.
- High quality children's program that kids are enthusiastic about attending.
- Resources provided during meetings are very helpful.

"The kids have fun and they are willing to come too, which is actually a really big deal. That would stop me from coming, because I would not feel comfortable leaving a child where they don't want to be."

Areas for Improvement of Circle of Parents Group

- Wishing more people could join the group, but others do not feel comfortable sharing with new people.
- More activities together outside of group meetings.

“There are a lot of people in this community that I'd like to share Circle of Parents with and I don't know how to get the word out better. There is a lot of people that could use this, learn a lot and support each other. There needs to be more of an outreach piece...”

Impact of Circle of Parents Group

- Sense of community and friendships with other parents.
- Getting useful ideas and advice from a variety of people and applying them at home.
- Being more pro-active as a parent and increased patience with children.
- Feeling like you're not alone as a parent in what you are going through.

“Before approaching a situation, I take a step back. If there is chaos in the house for instance, and the children are screaming, rather than, before knowing anything from Circle of Parents, go and yell at them to be quiet. Now, I would take a different approach, because their energy level is maybe high, from what I've learned. So, instead I would see what is going on, and then try to use skills I've learned here to calm them down such as seeing what the cause of the chaos is, and calm myself down first before reacting.”

Conclusion

Participating in Circle of Parents has dramatically made a positive impact on parent participants. Because of Circle of Parents, participants are more confident and patient parents and feel supported by members in their community. Participants have developed relationships with other parents through meetings and feel that they have others they can talk to if they are struggling. Not only have parents benefited, but so have their kids. Many of the participants children have developed friendships and skills to play and work with others. Circle of Parents helps MCCC achieve their mission to empower parents and communities to build supportive relationships, nurture children, and prevent child abuse and neglect. Circle of Parents has dramatically changed the lives of families and has created community where community is needed.

Appendix: Circle of Parents Focus Group Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. My name is [name] and I'm [position] with MCCC, which is an organization that supports Circle of Parents throughout the state of MN. I believe your facilitator or Melissa already talked to you a little bit about this, but as a refresher, we're holding this focus group to learn more about how you feel about Circle of Parents and what you're gaining from participating in it. You might all have very different answers, which is totally fine- there are no right or wrong responses, we just want to get everyone's input.

We want to capture what you're saying as accurately as possible, so we will be recording, but recordings will be deleted after we have them transcribed, and we won't attach any names to comments. You can also see our notetaker, who's here to capture anything the recording might miss. I hope you feel comfortable expressing yourself freely. Is everyone still okay with recording?

Our goal is to really have a conversation about Circle of Parents. As facilitator, my role is to help guide that conversation, so occasionally I might move us to another topic or stop to ask you to explain a little more about a comment you've made. We want to hear all voices in the room, so I might ask someone who's been more quiet if they have anything to share.

The information that we get from this focus group will be used to help show the impact of Circle of Parents, as well as to improve the experiences of participants like you. We'll be sharing the results with you and other circle groups, but again, we won't use names or information that may identify you.

Why don't we start by going around and saying our names, and how long you've been coming to Circle of Parents (this group or any others)?

1. How did you first hear about Circle of Parents?
 - a. Prompts: referred to the program by a service provider, referred by a friend or family member, word of mouth, etc.
2. What things were happening in your life that sparked your interest in joining the group?
3. What things in your life help make your participation in Circle of Parents possible?

Now we would like to talk about what parts of the group make you feel safe to share your personal experiences and the challenges you face as a parent.

4. On a scale 1 to 5, with five being completely comfortable sharing and one being not at all, how comfortable to you feel sharing your personal experiences in this group? (have people hold up the number of fingers that matches their answer.)

[Say numbers out loud for recording]. Thank you everyone for sharing! Now I want to hear more about what made you answer that way.

5. What about the group makes you feel comfortable sharing your personal experiences?
 - a. Prompts: Meeting space, facilitator, group rules and norms.
6. What would make you feel more comfortable?

Next, I want to talk about the program and how we can make it better for you.

7. What changes have you made since participating in Circle of Parents?
 - a. How has being a part of Circle of Parents affected your parenting/caregiving?
 - b. What in particular about the program made a difference for you?
8. What is the most valuable thing you've gained from being part of Circle of Parents?
9. What are some things you wish you were getting from Circle of Parents?
 - a. In what ways is the program failing to meet your needs?
10. In what ways has your engagement in the Circle of Parents extended outside the group sessions?
 - a. For example, relationships with other Circle of Parents members, support outside of the sessions, access to community resources etc.
11. Is there anything else about your experience with Circle of Parents that you wanted to share but didn't get the chance to?

Thank you so much for your time! If you think of anything else you want to share, I have my cards up here, please reach out to me.