



Free To Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities

An RWJF national program

SUMMARY

Free To Grow—a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)—supported efforts by Head Start agencies and their community partners to strengthen the families and neighborhood environments of high-risk preschool children living in low-income communities. The goal was to reduce the children's vulnerability to substance abuse and related problems in later life.

The program ran from 1992 to 2005 and included a pilot phase with five geographically diverse Head Start sites and a demonstration and evaluation phase involving 15 Head Start agencies. Researchers from Wake Forest University School of Medicine conducted an independent evaluation, tracking changes in family and community risk and protective factors at 14 demonstration sites and 14 matched communities selected for comparison.

The Head Start agencies partnered with local police departments, school systems and other organizations to implement an integrated mix of family and neighborhood strategies to address substance abuse, child abuse and other risky behaviors.

Key Results

The following were among the results of *Free To Grow* reported to RWJF by the national program office in December 2005 at the conclusion of the demonstration phase:

- *Free To Grow* enhanced the organizational capacity of participating Head Start agencies to identify and assist vulnerable families, especially those with substance abuse and mental health problems.
- *Free To Grow* demonstrated that Head Start agencies are capable of building diverse partnerships to strengthen families and communities. The agencies partnered with police, schools, other local government agencies and various private organizations, including substance abuse treatment providers.
- The participating Head Start agencies expanded the reach of their interventions to include other vulnerable families residing in the same neighborhoods whose children were not enrolled in the Head Start educational program. More than 50 percent of the

agencies' community encounters were with non-Head Start families, according to program records.

- *Free To Grow* developed models of family- and community-focused prevention intervention that could be disseminated more broadly to other Head Start agencies within Head Start and the larger early childhood community.
- *Free To Grow* increased the opportunity for parents, other primary caregivers and residents of the target areas to develop leadership skills and participate in community activities and advocacy around local policy initiatives.
- *Free To Grow* enabled Head Start parents and other primary caregivers and residents to strengthen their relationships with local police.

Key Findings

The following were among findings that the Wake Forest University evaluators reported in 2008 in a written summary submitted to RWJF and in a report, *Evaluation of Free To Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities*. (The national program office staff disagreed with some findings, contending the evaluation failed to fully identify the program's impact on families and communities.):

- As a group, the *Free To Grow* sites were generally successful in building staff and organizational capacity to design and implement best or promising programs, policies and practices to address substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and other risk behaviors.
- *Free To Grow* sites were more likely than comparison sites to implement family- and community-strengthening strategies consistent with the *Free To Grow* model and were more likely than comparison sites to offer various services to non-Head Start families.
- There was substantial variation in the degree to which the different *Free To Grow* sites implemented the recommended components of the *Free To Grow* model. By the final year, only three of the 14 demonstration sites were judged by expert raters as having both a "strong" family-strengthening approach and a "strong" community-strengthening approach.
- *Free To Grow* Head Start agencies were more likely to have built partnerships with local law enforcement agencies and public schools than were the comparison Head Start agencies.
- Community partners at *Free To Grow* sites were significantly more likely to work on behalf of Head Start than were partners at comparison sites—for example, speaking in public on behalf of the Head Start program and serving as a Head Start representative to other groups.

- There was no consistent evidence of change in family functioning or neighborhood conditions when the 14 *Free To Grow* sites were compared to the 14 matched sites at the three-year follow-up.
- Analyses that controlled for the risk status of parents/caregivers in the *Free To Grow* and comparison communities also produced little evidence of impact at the three-year follow-up.
- There was some evidence that the three *Free To Grow* sites that implemented the program model most fully had a positive impact on caregivers of young children not enrolled in Head Start. For example, community participants in *Free To Grow* high-implementing sites reported higher levels of *Neighborhood Organization and Family Norms Against Substance Use* in 2006 than in 2003 compared to the low-implementing and comparison sites.

Conclusion

In the final 2009 report, after extensive analyses, the evaluation team concluded: "The results provide limited support for the concept that family and neighborhood conditions that are likely to affect child development and well-being can be attained through organized change efforts implemented by local Head Start programs."

No longer-term follow-up assessment was planned or conducted to examine the extent to which *Free To Grow* models were sustained after RWJF funding ended.

Program Management

The Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University served as the national program office for *Free To Grow*. Judith E. Jones, M.Sc. directed the program; Lori Devine, M.A. was the deputy director.

Funding

The RWJF Board of Trustees authorized up to \$13.4 million to fund *Free To Grow*—\$5.4 million in 1992 for the pilot phase and an additional \$8 million in 2000 for the demonstration and evaluation phase. The demonstration phase was structured as a dollar-for-dollar matching grants program, which resulted in the sites raising \$4 million in additional funding from local foundations, public agencies and other entities over four years.

In addition, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation provided \$2.9 million in implementation funding beginning in 2000 for the *Free To Grow* sites to expand their family services and to support training and technical assistance to the sites with the goal of reducing risks for child maltreatment.

The U.S. Department of Justice (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services) provided \$1.4 million for program evaluation beginning in 1999.

BACKGROUND

Substance Abuse Prevention in Early Childhood

In the early 1990s, there was a growing consensus among researchers that substance abuse can have roots in early childhood. Studies indicated a number of family and community conditions that increase the risk for substance abuse, including:

- Use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs in the household, poor family relationships and family management practices, such as insufficient or inconsistent parental discipline
- Concentrated local poverty, high crime rates, drug dealing and alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse among adults in the community

Research also indicated that children who become substance abusers often fail academically and socially as early as kindergarten and first grade.

Not all of the findings were negative, however. Studies pointed to certain factors that can moderate these risks, even for children growing up in adverse conditions:

- Improved family functioning
- A positive relationship with a caring adult outside the family
- Clear standards against substance abuse in the family
- Willingness to seek treatment for family members who are abusing drugs

Two leading researchers in this field and authors of a number of the studies cited above—J. David Hawkins, Ph.D., and Richard F. Catalano Jr., Ph.D., both at the University of Washington—developed a theoretical framework for preventing substance abuse and other adolescent behavior problems by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors in the community. Their work became a major part of the theoretical basis for *Free To Grow*, the RWJF program that is the subject of this report.

(During 1993–1995, Hawkins was principal investigator for an RWJF-funded study of substance abuse among high-risk youth [Grant ID# 021548], and Catalano co-authored papers on the study. The two also co-authored *Communities That Care™: Action for Drug Abuse Prevention*, a book for educators and parents on communitywide prevention efforts published in 1992 by Jossey-Bass.)

Head Start: An Opportunity to Reach Families and Communities

[Head Start](#) also was a key component of *Free To Grow*. Established in 1965, the federal program promotes school readiness by providing educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to preschool-age children and their families, mainly those with limited income.

Administered by the Office of Head Start in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start provides grants to public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies to run Head Start programs at the local level.

In 1993, nationwide, some 16,000 school systems, government agencies and nonprofit organizations were administering Head Start services to about 700,000 preschool children. In 1994, the Head Start Bureau established a new program, Early Head Start, to serve children from birth to age three.

CONTEXT

RWJF has been involved in efforts to treat and prevent substance abuse since 1988, when the Foundation established *Fighting Back*[®]: *Community Initiatives to Reduce Demand for Illegal Drugs and Alcohol*, a community-based program to combat substance abuse. In 1991, RWJF officially amended its goals to include the reduction of harm caused by substance abuse.

RWJF approached substance abuse as a health issue involving a preventable and treatable chronic condition. Among its strategies to achieve reduction, the Foundation supported programs to prevent people, especially youth, from taking up alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. These prevention initiatives generally followed one of two basic approaches:

- An individually focused *behavioral* approach, which focused on engaging individuals and changing their behavior so they would be less likely to become substance abusers. See [Program Results Topic Summary](#) for more information on RWJF funding in this area.
- An *environmental* approach, which focused on changing the community and the broader social and physical environment that supports substance abuse behavior or behavior-change efforts. See [Program Results Topic Summary](#) for more information on RWJF funding in this area.

Environmental Prevention Programs

Fighting Back, which ran from 1988 to 2003, was an environmental prevention program. It helped communities address drug problems through a communitywide, collaborative

approach involving local businesses, health care organizations, schools, police, media and clergy. For more information, see [Program Results](#).

Other major environmental-based prevention efforts supported by RWJF in the 1990s included:

- *Healthy Nations: Reducing Substance Abuse Among Native Americans* (1991–2002), a \$13.5-million program that provided technical assistance and grants to Native American governmental and nonprofit organizations to develop culturally relevant prevention and treatment programs. See [Program Results](#).
- Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (1996–2005), which trained thousands of volunteer members of community coalitions to use the latest research findings on preventing drug and alcohol use among young people. See [Program Results](#).
- *A Matter of Degree: Reducing High-Risk Drinking Among College Students* (1995–2007), which mobilized college campuses and neighboring communities to work together to curb drinking on or near campus. See [Program Results](#).
- *Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions* (1995–2005), which funded state and community coalitions to reduce drinking among high school students. See [Program Results](#).

RWJF has since shifted its strategy from prevention to improving the quality of treatment for substance abuse.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Nancy Kaufman, Ph.D., R.N., then an RWJF vice president, and Marjorie Gutman, Ph.D., then a senior program officer, believed that improving the academic preparedness of young children and resolving risk factors associated with substance abuse and other harmful behaviors could be an effective part of the Foundation's environmental approach to prevention.

Specifically, Kaufman and Gutman wanted to reduce children's vulnerability to substance abuse by strengthening their families and neighborhoods—and viewed the Head Start program, with its holistic approach to young, low-income children and families, as a promising vehicle to accomplish that objective.

After consulting with Head Start officials in Washington, local Head Start leaders and child development experts, Kaufman and Gutman developed the concept for a national program subsequently named *Free To Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities*.

In April 1992, the RWJF Board of Trustees authorized spending up to \$5.4 million to fund the program's pilot phase. In April 2000, the Trustees authorized an additional \$8 million for the demonstration phase.

Free To Grow, which ran from 1992 to 2005, supported efforts by Head Start agencies to strengthen the family and neighborhood environment of high-risk preschool children in low-income communities. The goal was to reduce young children's vulnerability to substance abuse and related problems in later life.

Judith E. Jones, M.Sc., clinical professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and founding director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, served on one of the expert panels RWJF organized to solicit comments on the program concept and provided a chance to vet potential program directors.

Jones was Kaufman's and Gutman's first choice as program director. She accepted this assignment and through it played a key role in refining the idea of the program, implementing it and evolving and communicating the concept over time, according to Gutman.

Theoretical Framework

RWJF staff based the program on the theoretical framework—developed by Hawkins and Catalano—of reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. The theories of change underlying *Free To Grow* included the following:

- Lessening community and family risks and increasing protective factors will decrease later substance abuse and other high-risk behaviors.
- The primary strategy for prevention in the preschool years is to strengthen the young child's immediate environment. Therefore, the main targets for intervention are the family and neighborhood, not the child.
- Families can better nurture and protect their young children if they are free of addiction and have a wide range of supports.
- Strengthened and supported families are more likely to resist abuse of alcohol and illegal substances.
- A more stable, protective living environment in safer, cleaner and less chaotic neighborhoods will help reduce the young child's later vulnerability to substance abuse and other problems.

In addition to Head Start's holistic approach, the RWJF staff and advisors identified the federally funded program as an ideal partner because it:

- Provided access to high-risk preschool children's families and were located in the nation's most vulnerable communities

- Had leaders and agencies that were ready to address substance abuse issues as well as a mission and structure compatible with prevention efforts
- Was well established with strong bipartisan support and was growing, offering a national infrastructure for institutionalization of successful models into national program and policy

Refining the Concept

The final program plan developed by Kaufman, Gutman and Jones incorporated these key ingredients:

- *Free To Grow* would focus not only on Head Start families but also on low-income families with young children who lived in the targeted communities but whose children did not attend Head Start. This broader net was based upon a theoretical understanding about the impact the community has on young children's development, as well as an awareness that only a small subset of eligible children of vulnerable families were registered in the Head Start program.
- Instead of providing direct services, the funded projects would build partnerships with local service organizations, schools, police and other government agencies, which would work together to implement strategies, based on nationally recognized best and promising practices, to strengthen families and the community.

For the pilot phase, the idea was that partnerships would provide more expertise in substance abuse treatment and prevention and greater resources overall. Also, involvement of partner organizations increased the chances that families would continue to receive services after their children left Head Start—and that the *Free To Grow* model would continue functioning after RWJF funding ended.

- The projects would implement a mix of existing evidence-based family- and community-strengthening strategies:
 - Family-strengthening strategies would include family assessment, case management, peer mentoring, family counseling, parent education, peer support groups and support for the transition from Head Start to elementary school.
 - Community-strengthening efforts would include community mobilization and advocacy, including by parent and youth advocates, leadership development, community forums and community action projects.
- *Free To Grow* would engage Head Start parents and other community residents in improving their neighborhoods.

RWJF designed *Free To Grow* to begin with a pilot phase to be conducted in five communities, and to be evaluated by Mathematica Policy Research. RWJF planned that if the evaluation's findings were positive, it would fund a larger demonstration phase.

THE PROGRAM

Management

In February 1993, RWJF established the national program office for *Free To Grow* at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health in New York under the direction of Judith E. Jones. Lori Levine joined the staff in 1995 as deputy director, replacing the initial deputy, Glorine Edwards.

Jones and her national program staff helped design the program and oversaw selection of the local Head Start agencies for funding. Once the sites were selected, the office provided technical assistance to the grantee agencies and their partner organizations to implement evidence-based interventions and pilot-test intervention models. The national program staff:

- Conducted visits to the individual sites and convened four to six national and regional technical assistance meetings a year for key site personnel. Many of these meetings were possible due to the additional funding for technical assistance from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.
- Provided the project teams with training in core competencies, such as motivational interviewing, leadership development and family-focused case management, and also in strategic communications and sustainability planning
- Aided the sites in efforts to disseminate information about their work
- Educated federal legislators and agency leadership about *Free To Grow*. As a result, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention provided co-funding for the program's demonstration phase evaluation.
- Developed a [website](#) that provided links to evidence-based interventions in areas such as family assessment, case management, parent education, leadership development, environmental and policy change, and building school and police collaborations
- Helped the Head Start grantees sustain their *Free To Grow* initiatives by developing local and national communications strategies and access to stakeholders from diverse national and federal agencies who might assist with long-term funding and support

Two Advisory Committees

RWJF established a *Free To Grow* national advisory committee to recommend sites for funding and provide general program guidance. The members included experts in substance abuse prevention, child development and Head Start. (See [Appendix 1](#) for the membership.)

The national program staff formed the second committee, an Evaluation Advisory Panel in 2000, in response to the complexity of the *Free To Grow* program and the research needed to evaluate the demonstration phase.

Working in collaboration with Columbia University's Office of Government Affairs, national program staff obtained an initial \$100,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services) in 1999 to establish the Evaluation Advisory Panel to provide guidance on the type of evaluation that would be needed to assess the efficacy of *Free To Grow* in its demonstration phase. Shortly thereafter, RWJF assumed responsibility for the panel in order to increase its independence.

Richard F. Catalano Jr., Ph.D., one of the developers of the theoretical framework upon which *Free To Grow* was based, was the chair. (See [Appendix 2](#) for the full membership.) For details of the evaluation, see [Evaluation of the National Demonstration Phase](#).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention ended up providing a total of \$1.4 million to support the evaluation. Because the *Free To Grow* model included local law enforcement as a partner, the agency was interested in the program's effectiveness in building community-police relationships, its focus on the environments in which young children live, its potential to reduce crime as well as supporting positive youth development.

Pilot Phase (1994–2000)

In 1994, RWJF awarded two-year grants of approximately \$300,000 each to six Head Start agencies to begin developing model *Free To Grow* projects. The six, geographically diverse planning sites were:

- San Isidro neighborhood of Canovanas, P.R. (the grantee was in San Piedras)
- Colorado Springs, Colo.
- Compton, Calif.
- Washington Heights in New York City
- Owensboro, Ky.
- Paterson, N.J.

In 1996, RWJF awarded five of the six sites (all except Paterson, N.J.) three-year implementation grants of approximately \$600,000 each to integrate planned family and community-strengthening strategies into the Head Start infrastructure. (See [Appendix 3](#)

for the names of the grantee organizations, project directors and other grant details of the pilot phase.)

The sites worked to implement activities in the following areas:

- **Family-Strengthening Strategies**
 - Assessment of family strengths and needs
 - Intensive case management of families in need
 - Family-to-family mentoring
 - Family support groups
 - Education of parents and other primary caregivers
 - Substance abuse and mental health treatment
- **Community-Strengthening Strategies**
 - Assessment of community needs
 - Development of local leadership
 - School-linked community advocacy
 - Support for community change by community groups
 - Policy change
- **Partnership-Focused Strategies**
 - Establishment of a continuum of care for families with children ages 0–8
 - Agreements with substance abuse organizations to treat Head Start referrals
 - Culturally competent community outreach
 - Neighborhood revitalization

Pilot Phase Results

Four pilot sites developed models that the national program staff considered especially promising for replication:

- **San Isidro neighborhood in Canovanas, Puerto Rico:** The grantee agency—Aspira de Puerto Rico, located in Rio Piedras—implemented family-to-family mentoring that permitted strong, well-functioning families (called "compay families") to provide intensive support to families with, or at risk of, substance abuse problems. Although formal community-strengthening components were not part of the model as originally conceived, community action work evolved naturally as an extension of the family-

mentoring and advocacy efforts of compay families, many of whom emerged as leaders in a grassroots network of neighborhood groups. (For details, see [Program Results](#) on this project.)

- **Colorado Springs, Colo.:** The grantee—Community Partnership for Child Development—used neighborhood family advocates to create a continuum of care for pre- and post-Head Start families by building linkages with local schools and family service agencies. The grantee also developed Neighborhood Councils that worked with local partners to address resident-identified neighborhood issues. (For more information, see [Program Results](#).)
- **Compton, Calif.:** The grantee—Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science—used Head Start centers and community schools as hubs for a citywide "Safe Space for Children" campaign. Parents involved in the campaign worked to improve the physical, social and cultural environments of their schools and neighborhoods. (See [Program Results](#) for details.)
- **Owensboro, Ky.:** The grantee—Audubon Area Community Services—revised its family service structure so workers could better assess the level of family need and provide intensive case management services to the highest-risk families.

The Owensboro model included a significant revision of the Head Start family assessment questionnaire to focus on high-risk behaviors. This new tool—called the *Family Partnership Plan*—included questions about alcohol and drug use in the home, violence, child abuse and mental illness as well as family strengths.

It also focused on strengthening the community through resident-focused leadership development and community advocacy. Through leadership development training, community advocates prepared parents and other residents to participate actively in grassroots community coalitions. Through these coalitions, parents and other residents engaged in community organizing, needs assessments and the development of strategies to address needs and solve problems. (For more information, see [Program Results](#).)

(Program Results reports are also available on the [New York City project](#) and the planning grant work in [Paterson, N.J.](#))

By the end of the pilot phase in Canovanas, P.R., and Owensboro, Ky., site teams had fully integrated their *Free To Grow* project staff and principles into the Head Start infrastructure and were sustaining their program interventions.

The three other sites—Compton, Colorado Springs and New York City—had sustained a limited portion of their *Free To Grow* models.

Pilot Phase Evaluation Findings

RWJF commissioned [Mathematica Policy Research](#) of Princeton, N.J., to evaluate the pilot phase. Under the direction of John M. Love, Ph.D., the evaluation team documented the model development and implementation processes at the sites as well as the lessons that could help shape a national demonstration project.

The evaluators concluded that:

- ***Free To Grow* sites demonstrated the feasibility and value of developing, refining, implementing and integrating substance abuse prevention models into Head Start's program structure.**
- **Although carefully selected from among the best-run Head Start programs, the sites demonstrated different levels of success in designing and implementing their models.**
- **In general, Head Start staff members understood and effectively pursued family-strengthening objectives, but their community-strengthening work—an area where Head Start had less experience—was more inconsistent.**
- **Participants felt that *Free To Grow* had brought about important changes in both family and community functioning, suggesting that the program might be appropriate and attractive to other communities facing similar challenges.**

For additional findings, see [Appendix 4](#).

These conclusions, coupled with growing federal interest in supporting an expansion of *Free To Grow*, persuaded RWJF to authorize up to \$8 million for a four-year national demonstration and rigorous evaluation of *Free to Grow*.

Communications

National program office staff members published articles in the *Journal of Primary Prevention* and in *Children and Families: The Journal of the National Head Start Association*, as well as an annotated bibliography on substance abuse prevention for families with young children. See the National Program Office section of the [Bibliography](#) for details. The program staff also produced a program implementation manual about the Kentucky *Free To Grow* model, which national demonstration sites would later use to assist with program startup efforts.

Staff from Mathematica Policy Research published findings from the pilot phase evaluation in a report entitled, *Protecting Children from Substance Abuse: Lessons from the Free To Grow Head Start Partnerships*. Staff also published five program profiles. See the Evaluation section of the [Bibliography](#) for details.

Demonstration Phase (2001–2005)

In April 2000, the RWJF Board of Trustees authorized up to \$8 million for a four-year national demonstration and evaluation of *Free To Grow*. Half of the funding was to support Head Start agencies and their partners in implementing demonstration projects, with the other \$4 million to support a rigorous competitive external evaluation of the projects and their impact. In addition, RWJF required Head Start grantees and their community partners to match their grant awards dollar-for-dollar with local funding to support program efforts. In total, sites raised \$4 million over four years from local foundations, public agencies and other entities. The requirement was designed to build local buy-in and a foundation for sustainability from the beginning of the demonstration phase.

The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation also supported the demonstration phase with two grants totaling \$2.9 million. These grants helped fund the sites' family-building activities, such as family assessment improvements and parent training. As previously noted, the U.S. Department of Justice (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services) provided \$1.4 million for the evaluation.

Because of this additional private and governmental funding, the national program director emphasized that *Free To Grow* represented a "public/private partnership."

Evaluation

In 2000, RWJF and the national program office convened the Evaluation Advisory Panel to advise them on optimal intervention and evaluation designs. John Love, who directed the pilot phase evaluation at Mathematica Policy Research, also took part, presenting the phase one evaluation findings and recommendations for the demonstration program and evaluation.

In January 2001, RWJF solicited formal demonstration phase evaluation proposals. The three proposals submitted were reviewed by RWJF Program and Research & Evaluation staff, the national program director Jones and deputy director Levine, and the chair of the Evaluation Advisory Panel, Catalano. The proposal submitted by Wake Forest University with Mark Wolfson, Ph.D., as the principal investigator and David Altman, Ph.D., as co-principal investigator was selected as the strongest and most appropriate proposal.

Program Design Changes

In this phase, the premise for the partnerships used in the pilot phase broadened significantly. Diverse, nontraditional partnerships (with schools, police departments and local substance abuse treatment agencies) were deemed critical in order to address not

only family needs but the environmental and systems changes needed to strengthen neighborhoods. Residents were also considered critical partners.

Site Requirements

In June 2000, RWJF issued a call for proposals outlining plans to award grants to up to 20 competitively selected demonstration sites. Under the initial application guidelines, the projects were to implement one of the four successful pilot models. However, early in the application process, RWJF changed the guidelines to require the demonstration of a single multi-component approach by all sites.

RWJF made the change on the recommendation of the Evaluation Advisory Panel. Its members believed that testing a single approach would give the evaluation data greater statistical power given the limited number of sites that could be funded and the difficulty of evaluating multiple different interventions, especially given the lack of standardization of pilot site models.

RWJF required each site to include police and school representatives as core partners in the local project's planning, governance, budgeting and implementation. Also, the Foundation recommended that the grantees partner with a local substance abuse treatment agency and work with:

- Family guidance agencies
- Mental health agencies
- Community-based prevention coalitions and community action groups
- Employment training programs
- Local youth service organizations

For a list of the specific standards each site was expected to meet, see [Appendix 5](#).

These requirements notwithstanding, the sites had leeway to choose family- and community-strengthening strategies that best suited local conditions and resources. Also, the local project teams had considerable freedom in the way they implemented their strategies.

Selected Sites

In May 2001, RWJF awarded one-year planning grants of \$55,000–\$60,000 to Head Start agencies in 18 communities across the country:

- [Barre, Vt.](#): Central Vermont Community Action Council
- Dallas: Head Start of Greater Dallas

- Denver: Rocky Mountain S.E.R/Jobs for Progress
- [Franklin, La.](#): St. Mary Community Action Committee Association
- Hermiston, Ore.: Umatilla Morrow Head Start
- Hughesville, Md.: Southern Maryland Tri-County Communication Action Committee
- Laguna, N.M.: Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education
- Lincoln, Neb.: Lincoln Action Program
- [New Britain, Conn.](#): Human Resources Agency of New Britain
- Orange, Calif.: Orange Children & Parents Together
- Palm Beach, Fla.: Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners
- Phoenix: Southwest Human Development Incorporated
- Redfox, Ky.: Leslie, Knott, Letcher, Perry Counties Head Start Program
- Somerville, Mass.: Community Action Agency of Somerville
- Trenton, N.J.: Trenton Head Start
- Tulsa, Okla.: Community Action Project of Tulsa County
- Wailuku, Hawaii: Maui Economic Opportunity
- [Wausau, Wis.](#): Marathon County Child Development Agency

The highlighted sites are linked to reports the national program office commissioned in 2005. See [Appendix 6](#) for grant details on all sites.

In June 2002, RWJF awarded 15 of these sites three-year implementation grants of approximately \$200,000. Each of the 15 also received two grants of approximately \$58,000 from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Three sites—Denver, Somerville and Trenton—did not make sufficient progress during the planning phase to implement their *Free To Grow* projects.

Project Activities

The 15 Head Start agencies formed partnerships with schools, police departments, treatment providers and other local organizations and worked to implement strategies and interventions aimed at improving outcomes at four levels. Grouped by level, the project activities sought to:

- **At the family level:**
 - Improve parenting skills, family management practices and family bonding

- Reduce family conflict
- Reduce unmet basic needs for shelter, food and clothing
- Increase the number of families entering and completing substance abuse/mental health treatment

Example: The grantee Head Start agencies—on their own or in partnership with local schools—offered classes in parenting skills and related topics. One site provided access to a specialized education program for parents of young children with Attention Deficit Disorder as well as a program for mothers suffering from depression.

- **At the community level:**

- Increase social connectedness
- Reduce neighborhood violence
- Change norms regarding alcohol and drug use

Example: The project teams provided leadership training and introduced community residents to opportunities for leadership roles within their neighborhoods. Many sites offered *Building Leadership for Community Development*—a training program developed by the national program office in the pilot phase as a collaboration between the Owensboro, Ky., *Free To Grow* site and the national program office.

- **At the partnership level:**

- Increase the coordination of services for high-risk families
- Increase the levels of neighborhood-based services
- Develop *dedicated treatment partnerships*—arrangements with substance abuse treatment providers to take referrals from the Head Start agency

Example: Head Start agencies worked with local police officials to increase patrols in targeted areas.

- **At the Head Start organizational level:**

- Increase the capacity to identify and support high-risk families
- Refer more families to substance abuse/mental health treatment
- Increase the level and types of partnerships and collaborations working to address family and community needs

Example: Head Start agencies expanded their use of validated, scaled family assessment tools—questionnaires that enable trained staff to quantify a family's needs and strengths and provide support services accordingly. Many of the sites used the

Family Partnership Plan, the assessment tool developed by the Owensboro, Ky., pilot project.

Organizational Capacity Building

In conjunction with upgrading the family assessment process, the Head Start agencies worked to improve their organizational capacity to meet the needs of vulnerable families. Case management practices and improved family assessment were both components of building capacity and thus providing more intensive services to and frequent contact with families found to have substance abuse and other high-risk behaviors.

Adopting what is known as tiered case management, the agencies assigned families to one of several management levels—the lowest for families needing little or no outside help, the highest for those in a likely crisis situation.

Increasing the agencies' ability to assess, assist and track high-risk families was a key focus of the national program. "Head Start has historically been democratic, treating all families the same," said Jones, the program director. "[But] there's a range of families and needs. We wanted staff to see the families who are most vulnerable."

Community Building

Along with building the Head Start agency' own organizational capacity, strategies to increase the capacity of the community through neighborhood revitalization projects was a key focus of the program.

Implementation Differences

The program required the sites to implement strategies that had an evidence base and set internal benchmarks for progress. Also, each site was required to develop a local logic model, which clarified strategies and hypothesized their short-term, intermediate and long-term impacts.

However, the sites sought and were permitted to adapt the *Free To Grow* model to local conditions. The program, therefore, lacked a uniform appearance from site to site. For example, while some sites worked on identifying substance abuse problems and providing treatment referrals, others did not. Similarly, neighborhood revitalization was a priority at some sites and not at others. Also, the sites used different national, evidence-based education models for instruction in parenting. And some sites offered residents formal training in leadership skills and some did not.

COMMUNICATIONS

The national program office implemented a broad communications strategy. Staff members made presentations to national organizations, prepared educational materials for

policy-makers and helped the grantee organizations develop public awareness campaigns and other communications products to build local support for their initiatives.

Among its specific communications products, the national program office published *Tools to Strengthen Families and Communities*—a compendium of tools for family and community assessment, case management, partnership building and community strengthening.

Staff also commissioned and disseminated special reports on four of the demonstration projects ([New Britain, Conn.](#); [Franklin, La.](#); [Barre, Vt.](#); and [Wausau, Wis.](#)) and developed a program website that included information on the program and resources for family assessment, case management and other program-related activities. See the National Program Office section of the [Bibliography](#) for details.

(Separately from the program's communications effort, RWJF included a [chapter](#) on *Free To Grow* in the 2006 issue of the Foundation's annual anthology.)

RWJF Transition Supplement Grant

In October 2006, RWJF provided the national program office with a supplemental \$100,000 grant (ID# 059228) to support efforts to promote and sustain *Free To Grow* principles and activities.

The funds helped five sites (Hermiston, Ore.; Lincoln, Neb.; Palm Beach, Fla.; Redfox, Ky.; and Wausau, Wis.) develop fact sheets about their projects for distribution to potential funders, local and state agencies and other interested parties.

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

The national program staff reported to RWJF that *Free To Grow* encountered a number of challenges.

Policy Changes at the National Level

During the pilot phase, the welfare reform legislation of 1996 affected the level of parent participation. With more parents working, Head Start staff had difficulty identifying parents to participate in leadership development and community action efforts. Also, faced with an increasing number of families needing full-day care, agencies focused more on child care and job training and less on substance abuse prevention.

During the demonstration phase, the national policy environment for Head Start and the early childhood community changed dramatically. The federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, which focused on early literacy, placed attention more fully on teachers and children and diminished attention to family and community issues.

Shortly after the start of the demonstration phase, the federal [Office of Head Start](#) (formerly Head Start Bureau) required the testing of all Head Start children on a series of school readiness indicators. This placed a significant burden on *Free To Grow* site leaders, making it difficult for some to pay sufficient attention to program implementation.

In addition, a fight over congressional reauthorization of Head Start required many project directors to devote significant attention to advocacy efforts.

To address these issues, the national program office worked to help policy-makers understand how the *Free To Grow* family- and community-strengthening approach could facilitate the emerging focus within Head Start on school readiness and early literacy. Staff commissioned and disseminated a report, *Free To Read*, which drew together research on the impact of family and community on early literacy success.

Lack of Resources

As states faced greater deficits and the federal government reduced discretionary funds for human services, resources for mental health and substance abuse treatment became increasingly limited.

Some mental health partners withdrew from site governance teams, unable to provide even limited support to families. At the same time, the growth in undocumented immigrant families increased the number of families without health insurance, making treatment more difficult to provide even when services were available.

To address these issues, many sites used funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to hire mental health and substance abuse treatment counselors to work within the organization in which the Head Start agency was based. Other sites relied on programs with support networks, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous.

The national program office provided guidance to the sites on the use of "natural helper" models to bolster community resources. (Natural helpers are community members who assist others, in this case people trying to quit abusing substances.)

Program Development Capacity

Head Start agency leaders were not used to developing comprehensive programs. Head Start has federal performance standards that provide detailed guidelines for what services should be provided, and how they are to be carried out.

While Head Start agencies adapt these standards to local community conditions, most sites did not have experience developing program models as comprehensive as *Free To*

Grow. Also, *Free To Grow* called for a paradigm shift away from educational and service-focused activities to community-advocacy and systems-change interventions.

By conducting grantee meetings and providing site-specific assistance, the national program office helped the project staffs make this shift.

Staffing and Organizational Capacity

Free To Grow required Head Start staff to learn new skills and new approaches to their jobs. Front-line workers had a particularly difficult time when they did not receive on-going training and supervisory support.

Some project directors did not effectively communicate the program's underlying vision. Thus, some staff members saw *Free To Grow* as more work without understanding the program's benefit to children and families.

To address these problems, the national program office focused technical assistance on helping site leaders and mid-level managers assess their organizational capacity and determine the kinds of staff training and supervisory support that were needed. The national program office also developed tools and training materials that managers could use in staff development.

Sustainability of the Program

In combination, a number of these challenges affected the national program staff members' ability to build local and national constituencies for the *Free To Grow* approach and thus to promote sustainability of the *Free To Grow* program. The challenges were:

- The increased focus of Head Start on early literacy
- The congressional fight over the program's reauthorization
- The limited ability to reframe the policy debate

As the federal policy context became more challenging, the national program staff moved away from trying to sustain *Free To Grow* within Head Start and began trying to institutionalize the program's principles and practices more broadly. Staff worked with some states to explore the potential for sustaining *Free To Grow* by reforming the states' early childhood systems. The national program office also reached out to a network of national community development stakeholders to encourage adaptation of *Free To Grow* principles into their interventions in vulnerable communities.

At the same time, discretionary federal funds for domestic services were at record lows—due to the 9/11 attacks, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The lack of final evaluation data that might answer policy-maker's questions about the program's costs and impacts also affected the sustainability effort, the NPO staff said.

EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL DEMONSTRATION PHASE

The national program staff started the process of building support for the importance of evaluating comprehensive initiatives such as *Free To Grow* through its public education efforts with policy-makers in Washington. These efforts led to federal funding of the evaluation.

In the last year of the pilot phase of *Free To Grow*, the national program office created the Evaluation Advisory Panel, overseen by RWJF, to provide guidance and support to the evaluation. "The Evaluation Advisory Panel brought together the most prominent researchers to provide advice on how to evaluate *Free To Grow*," said Judith Jones, the national program director. In addition to reviewing and endorsing the evaluation design, the panel reviewed requests for adjustments from the national program office and offered suggestions for resolving disagreements about the evaluation.

The Evaluation Advisory Panel, working with the national program office and RWJF evaluation staff, reviewed three proposals for evaluating *Free To Grow*. The committee recommended two potential evaluators: Westat, a Rockville, Md.-based research corporation and Wake Forest University School of Medicine, located in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Following a collaborative selection process that involved the national program office, Richard F. Catalano, the head of the Evaluation Advisory Panel, and Foundation program and evaluation staff chose the Wake Forest School of Medicine to conduct the evaluation. RWJF authorized the funding in April 2001. Mark Wolfson, and initially David Altman, led the evaluation team. When Altman left Wake Forest early in the evaluation, Wolfson continued as principal investigator.

The evaluation included both process and impact evaluation components.

- For the process evaluation, the evaluators conducted surveys and interviews to determine changes in organizational capacity and partnership in the participating communities.
- For the impact evaluation, the evaluators analyzed changes in family and community risk and protective factors in 14 of the 15 participating *Free To Grow* Head Start agencies and communities. (Evaluators did not include the Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education *Free To Grow* site because the evaluation relied heavily on telephone interviews, and members of the tribe said such interviews would not be culturally appropriate to their community.)

Evaluators compared changes in family-level and community-level risk and protective factors in *Free To Grow* sites with changes in family and community risk and protective factors in 14 matched Head Start agencies and communities that did not participate in *Free To Grow* (the comparison sites).

Methodology

Evaluators matched *Free To Grow* and comparison sites using a statistical technique called propensity scoring. Propensity scoring allows researchers to equate different groups on factors of interest. This increases the chance that treatment and comparison groups will be equivalent across those factors.

Evaluators used a form of metric matching (called Mahalanobis distance) that allows comparison and grouping of populations to match *Free To Grow* sites on factors such as the nature of the Head Start agency (community action agency, school, government agency, etc.), total enrollment and race/ethnicity of children. Mahalanobis distance is a way of comparing and grouping populations using a multivariate distance measure.

According to Catalano and Wolfson, this technique allowed the evaluators to match communities on a broader range of neighborhood factors than would have been possible had *Free To Grow* used traditional matching processes.

To allow for the possibility that the effects of *Free To Grow* might be understated due to uneven implementation by sites, the evaluators also analyzed the extent to which the 14 sites implemented the *Free To Grow* model as designed. They identified high- and low-implementing sites according to the degree that the program's family- and community-strengthening strategies were fully implemented.

The evaluation included a qualitative component to document changes in the *Free To Grow* agencies' organizational capacity and ability to develop new partnerships. Measurement of the organizational change and partnership components of the initiative were considered critical by the national program staff and members of the Evaluation Advisory Panel since achievement of these benchmarks were precursors of the family and community outcomes in the program's logic model.

Process Evaluation

To determine changes in organizational capacity and partnerships, evaluators implemented two capacity surveys (2002 and 2005), and three partnership surveys (2003, 2004, 2005) of Head Start staff and staff of partner agencies in both *Free To Grow* and comparison sites. They also interviewed staff at *Free To Grow* sites and comparison sites and the national program office and analyzed reports and other documents generated by *Free To Grow* sites. They used this information to assess whether:

- *Free To Grow* sites reported increased organizational capacity, leadership and skills
- *Free To Grow* sites developed and sustained new partnerships

Outcome Evaluation

The comparison of the 14 *Free To Grow* sites with 14 similar but non-*Free To Grow* sites was designed to assess the family- and neighborhood-strengthening interventions, including their ability to reach beyond Head Start and impact families without children in the federal preschool program.

For both *Free To Grow* and comparison sites, evaluators conducted a quantitative evaluation of changes in family and community risk and protective factors through surveys of caregivers of children in Head Start and caregivers of children ages 3 to 8 who were not enrolled in Head Start.

Evaluators surveyed caregivers of children attending Head Start in both the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites by telephone three times: at baseline and again one and two years after baseline. Since it was expected that implementation quality and strength would improve over time as sites became more familiar with the *Free To Grow* programming, evaluators assigned caregivers in the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites to two groups. They interviewed Cohort 1 the first time in 2002, one year before they interviewed Cohort 2.

Evaluators also surveyed caregivers of children not attending Head Start in both the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites by telephone twice: between January and June 2003 (baseline) and again three years later. These were cross-sectional surveys of randomly selected community residents. Evaluators did not attempt to survey the same people at both points in time.

See [Appendix 7](#) for more details about the surveys.

The evaluators used the surveys to measure 17 factors: seven for neighborhood, six for family strengthening and four for substance use. They analyzed these factors to ascertain whether:

- Caregivers in *Free To Grow* Head Start programs and communities reported better outcomes on these indicators compared with caregivers in the comparison sites
- Families with different risk levels (as measured at baseline) had different outcomes based on the indicators
- High-implementing sites improved more than low-implementing sites and the comparison sites (families surveyed had better scores on the neighborhood, family-strengthening and substance use indicators)

For a description of the measures, see [Appendix 8](#).

For Evaluation Findings, see [Program Results](#).

Evaluation Challenges

Free To Grow posed several evaluation-related challenges.

The Nature of Real-World Interventions

"Evaluating the impact of real-world interventions is very difficult," said RWJF Distinguished Fellow/Senior Scientist C. Tracy Orleans, Ph.D. Orleans was the evaluation officer during the national demonstration phase of *Free To Grow*.

Measuring outcomes at the neighborhood level can be especially difficult. For example:

- Surveys of individuals living in small areas, sometimes just a few blocks, do not provide a large enough picture of a neighborhood.
- Data such as crime statistics, typically available for a city or a county, are often not available at a micro level.
- It is hard to reach families by phone to complete surveys; families may move often, many do not have landlines, cell phone numbers may not be available.

Achieving the types of changes *Free To Grow* sought within the relatively short time period of the program was another challenge, according to Orleans. She also noted that achieving these changes depended to a large extent upon factors beyond the program's control, such as poverty levels and unemployment, and the lack of community resources for safe places for children enrolled in Head Start and their families to walk and play.

An Ambitious and Challenging Program

Free To Grow was a rich, ambitious and challenging program to implement. Head Start directors and staff lacked experience implementing interventions that simultaneously focused on individual, family and community change. National program director Jones noted "most grantees, like their colleagues within the broader nonprofit community nationally, have never had experience developing program models as comprehensive as *Free To Grow*."

Also, differences in program strategies, as well as the varied levels of implementation across sites, made it hard for evaluators to ascertain whether differences in outcomes resulted from unequal intensity of implementation or real program differences.

The tailored approach used by *Free to Grow* to engage families with differing strengths and needs in different interventions also made it difficult to assess whether the families

surveyed had actually been targeted for or participated in specific program strategies, potentially diluting the observed program effects.

Tensions Between Program Implementation and Evaluation

There can often be tensions between those implementing the program (both at the national program office level and at the site level) and those evaluating it. With *Free To Grow*, these tensions were higher than usual based on steeper than usual challenges to program development and implementation—and evaluation.

According to the program director and deputy, perhaps the most fundamental disagreement between them and the evaluation team was that the director and deputy were interested in informing national policy, and were seeking an evaluation that would be able to assist in the process. They considered the type of evaluation design employed by the Wake Forest team to be a "pure academic research model" and inadequate for capturing the program's real-world impacts.

They also felt there were insufficient resources dedicated to assessing the program's intermediate impact on organizational change and partnership. They stated that this "omission was critical, given that sites were funded for only three years—a timeframe that has often been shown to be too short to achieve family and community level outcomes of the sort that *Free To Grow* was seeking."

The evaluators and the Evaluation Advisory Panel, on the other hand, thought the evaluation included a rich and rigorous research design that could capture individual, family and community changes over time and help to establish the efficacy of the *Free To Grow* approach to Head Start agency staff and directors and to policy-makers. They believed that although the conceptual model for the program was well defined at the start of the national demonstration phase, implementation protocols and standards were not sufficiently standardized to permit uniform implementation across multiple sites. This made it difficult for the evaluators to evaluate the conceptual model uniformly.

For example, the national program office expected the sites to implement family- and community-strengthening strategies and to follow *Free To Grow* standards. The evaluators, however, found the standards to be vague; one, for example, said the sites should "include both family- and community-strengthening strategies in program design and implementation;" another said that the "breadth, length and intensity of the interventions chosen must fit the nature of the problems addressed."

RWJF's Orleans said, "It looked like the intervention models were more standardized than proved to be the case." She noted that this is a common challenge in effectiveness research seeking to replicate promising models in a variety of real-world settings where local adaptation and tailoring are inevitable.

Responding to the contention that a lack of uniformity limited the program's implementation and evaluation, the program director and deputy director argued that the Evaluation Advisory Panel was partially responsible.

They noted that it was on the panel's recommendation that the original plan to require the sites to follow one of four specific pilot-tested models was shelved. Instead, the two program leaders wrote to the RWJF program officer editing this report, that the sites were able to adopt "a mix and match of strategies," including strategies that had not been tested during the pilot phase.

"In truth, this change in the program design resulted in the 'demonstration phase' becoming more like a second model development phase," their note concluded. Orleans agrees, noting that in hindsight an evaluability assessment would have been the next appropriate step after the pilot phase.

Response to Evaluation Challenges

The evaluators, RWJF evaluation staff and the national program office staff took several steps to reduce these challenges.

Including a Qualitative Component

To address the difficulties in measuring individual community change processes that cannot be easily assessed via quantitative surveys, evaluators combined the quantitative surveys with interviews of site and national program office staff. These interviews solicited staff insights regarding how the program changed their organizations, the extent to which they developed new partners and their roles as community leaders. They also allowed evaluators to address issues that might not have emerged through traditional measurement.

Other Changes to the Evaluation

In addition to including the qualitative assessment described above, the evaluators also developed an encounter form that *Free To Grow* Head Start sites could use to collect data on all program encounters—both with Head Start families and with people in the community who did not have children enrolled in Head Start. For example, when project staff visited people at home to discuss neighborhood revitalization efforts, they would fill out an encounter form. They also distributed encounter forms at neighborhood meetings. However, there was uneven collection at program sites, and differences in how local encounter information was collected. Although the information could be used for measuring exposure to the program at the site level, it could not be used to develop individual-level measures of exposure to the program.

The evaluators made other revisions to the evaluation in response to program staff requests to capture individual site differences and the evolution of program models. "There was a lot of flexibility," said Catalano. "Sometimes it [what the national program office wanted] just cost too much."

For example, Wolfson, the lead evaluator, noted that the evaluation might have detected additional effects if the evaluators had been able to measure individual exposure to specific family- or community-strengthening interventions. However, this was not feasible given the number and diversity of intervention strategies and challenges related to collection of encounter-form data referred to above. Yet, they did conduct additional follow-up assessments and subgroup analyses to identify effects that might have been missed in the overall evaluation.

In the end, many tensions remained unresolved. "We didn't fully test this idea," said Orleans. "We can't say that family and community strengthening in Head Start didn't work. All we can say is that in this particular demonstration we didn't show clear effects, and few sites fully implemented the model. This doesn't nullify the idea."

For the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, *Free To Grow* and its evaluation provided a great deal of practical knowledge that has informed its work in child abuse prevention, according to Francie Zimmerman, program officer/consultant at Duke. See [Afterward](#) for more information about the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's related work after *Free To Grow*.

Many children in New Britain were growing up with substance abuse and family violence. Staff at the New Britain Head Start program knew this but did not ask about it—until Free To Grow.

Read more about improved family assessment and case management in New Britain and Orange.

Dissemination of Evaluation Findings

As of November 2008, evaluators had submitted for publication a journal article on findings from *Free To Grow*. They were also writing articles for a proposed special issue of a journal. In these articles, evaluators planned to review the challenges of evaluating comprehensive community initiatives such as *Free To Grow* and present evaluation methods.

PROGRAM RESULTS

National Program Office Report

The following were among the results of *Free To Grow* reported to RWJF by the national program office in December 2005 at the conclusion of the demonstration phase:

- ***Free To Grow* enhanced the capacity of some participating Head Start agencies to identify and assist vulnerable families, especially those with substance abuse and mental health problems.** The use of validated, scaled family assessment tools and tiered case management in conjunction with staff training enabled the agencies to identify high-risk behaviors associated with substance abuse, family violence, depression and other mental health issues—and to provide support and referrals tailored to address those needs. Examples:

- The Head Start site in Wailuku, Hawaii, contracted with Aloha House, a nonprofit substance abuse treatment organization, to train agency workers to identify and refer families with substance abuse problems. The agency provided intensive case management to 68 families and referred a third of them to treatment and counseling at Aloha House. See [sidebar](#) for more information.
- In New Britain, Conn., from 2001 through May 2005, Head Start workers referred 64 parents for mental health/substance abuse services, and 11 parents received services. Although small in number, the referrals represented a major change in the work of the local Head Start agency.
- In Orange, Calif., Head Start workers assessed 1,648 families and provided case management services to 1,165. Families found to have minimal needs (management levels 1 and 2) received monthly contact from a family support worker while families considered at higher risk (Levels 3–5) received intensive case management, including mental health services, clinical oversight and other resources.

Many children in New Britain were growing up with substance abuse and family violence. Staff at the New Britain Head Start program knew this but did not ask about it—until *Free To Grow*.

- ***Free To Grow* increased the opportunity for parents, other caregivers and residents of the target areas to develop leadership skills and participate in community activities and advocacy.** Through program-initiated leadership training classes and community-improvement projects, members of the target areas increased their involvement in community activities and helped strengthen the local environment. Examples:

- In Tulsa, Okla., 13 community members completed leadership training and developed four community action groups, including one—the Education and Job Skills Group—that delivered English as a Second Language classes and instruction for the General Educational Development (GED) test.

From the corner tavern to birthday parties and church fundraisers, beer is part of everyday life in Wisconsin, home to some of America's largest brewers. Partners in the Free To Grow project in Wausau worked together to change social norms about drinking. Read more about this effort.

- In Wausau, Wis., a neighborhood group that grew out of *Free To Grow* worked with the fire and code enforcement departments to identify and fix houses in disrepair. First, staff from the two departments identified dangerous houses and wrote letters to the property owners. Then, members of the neighborhood group showed up to help with the needed repairs.
- In New Britain, Sylvia Cruz, a Head Start mother originally from Guatemala, was concerned about alcohol and drug use in her neighborhood. Through *Free To Grow*, she and many of her neighbors developed leadership skills, organizing neighborhood cleanups and meetings with police and other local officials. In 2003, Cruz became the first Latina elected to New Britain's City Council. See [sidebar](#) for more information on this project.
- ***Free To Grow* demonstrated that Head Start agencies are capable of building diverse partnerships to strengthen families and communities.** Police departments, schools, other local government agencies, substance abuse treatment providers and a range of nonprofit organizations collaborated with the participating Head Start agencies to help the targeted neighborhoods. Examples:
 - In Lincoln, Neb., a partnership involving law and building code enforcement officials and the local [NeighborWorks](#) agency provided the foundation for a block-by-block neighborhood revitalization strategy. The effort reduced crime and blight and brought stakeholders together to address residents' concerns.
 - In Wausau, the Marathon County Child Development Agency, which manages the Head Start program, enlisted 13 partners during *Free To Grow*—including fire, police and health departments, private substance abuse and mental health treatment and counseling services and a marketing and media firm.
- ***Free To Grow* enabled Head Start parents and other primary caregivers and residents to strengthen their relationships with local police.** Examples:
 - In Wailuku, the police department and public housing authority helped residents of Kahekili Terrace, a low-income public housing complex, start their own patrol organization to reduce crime. The police provided training and other support to the volunteers and also increased their patrols of housing authority properties.
 - In Barre, Vt., the city police participated in "coffee hour" discussions with residents of Highgate, a low-income housing project, and also offered bike safety programs. The police involvement in these and other community events contributed "enormously" to a decrease in crime at Highgate, says Barre Police Chief Trevor Whipple. See [special report](#) on this project.

Abandoned cars littering the road outside Kahekili Terrace used to be "offices" for drug dealers. A resident patrol started during Free To Grow helped get the cars towed and the neighborhood cleaned up. Residents feel safer now. Read more about the experience in Wailuku.

- **Evidence-based primary caregiver education offered by the sites reached non-Head Start families as well as Head Start families in the target communities.**

Examples:

- In Hermiston, Ore., the *Free To Grow* project collaborated with local schools and hospitals to provide parenting education classes using curriculum from the *Incredible Years* organization in Seattle.
- The Head Start agency in Palm Beach, Fla., offered *Roots and Wings*, a parent education curriculum focused on drug-related issues and cultural diversity. To reach the target community's increasing Haitian immigrant population, classes were in Creole as well as English.

- **Participating Head Start agencies expanded their interventions to include families whose children were not enrolled in the Head Start educational program.** More than 50 percent of the agencies' community encounters were with non-Head Start families, according to program records.

Because of *Free To Grow*, the agencies began shifting their focus from delivery of individual client services to development of systemic strategies to improve conditions for families overall.

"The sites became a catalyst for change beyond the Head Start program—for change in the community," Ann Linneman, quality assurance director of the U.S. Office of Head Start, said in an interview conducted for this report.

- ***Free To Grow* developed models of family- and community-focused prevention interventions that could be disseminated to other Head Start agencies and the larger early childhood community.** The program's replicable strategies and activities included:

- Formation of treatment partnerships between Head Start agencies and other organizations
- Head Start/school collaborations to provide primary caregiver education, leadership development activities and other kinds of family support
- Case management conferencing across multiple agencies to coordinate support services for children of at-risk families
- Neighborhood revitalization strategies that brought together Head Start parents other residents and diverse neighborhood partners to reduce crime, improve neighborhoods and promote policy change

- **The participating Head Start agencies enhanced their overall operations as a result of *Free To Grow*.** The technical assistance provided by the program elevated the agencies' performance, said Linneman, the federal Head Start official.

"It made them much more aware of their overall management systems and made them stronger programs," she said. They also became more aware of the importance of data, and how to use data to identify community needs and influence approaches to address those needs, she said.

- **At the conclusion of *Free To Grow* in December 2005, most of the 15 demonstration sites appeared likely to sustain at least some of the program's family- and community-strengthening activities.**

The national program office attributes this at least in part to RWJF's requirement that Head Start grantees match their grant awards dollar-for-dollar with local funding, which was designed to build local buy-in and a foundation for sustainability from the beginning of the demonstration phase.

The following information is based largely on program reports to RWJF in 2005, at the end of *Free To Grow*, and interviews conducted in 2008 with directors of New Britain, Conn.; Orange, Calif.; Wailuku, Hawaii; and Wausau, Wis.

- **Hermiston, Ore.:** The Head Start agency (Umatilla Morrow Head Start) "integrated and embedded" the philosophies and ideas of *Free To Grow* in its programs, structure, policies and procedures, the agency leadership told RWJF at the program's conclusion.

The *Free To Grow* governance team continued to operate after the grant ended, and the partner organizations continued the program's neighborhood revitalization work and advocacy to prevent child abuse and substance abuse and to reduce crime. The Head Start agency received funding from the cities of Umatilla, Pendleton and Hermiston to support neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Agency staff established the *Free To Grow* Oregon Learning Network, which provided two state-level trainings in the program's principles and leadership development approach.

- **Lincoln, Neb.:** The *Free To Grow* partners worked to expand the program to more neighborhoods in Lincoln and also in other Omaha communities. The Head Start agency (Lincoln Action Program) obtained funding from the Nebraska Children and Family Foundation to support the effort.

- **New Britain, Conn.:** The Head Start agency (Human Resources Agency of New Britain) sustained the program's structural changes, principles and practices, including the new approaches to family assessment and case management. "That is the only way we do business now," said Head Start director Elizabeth Donnellan.

With funding from the Connecticut Health Foundation, the agency continued its community advocacy and leadership development work, focusing on domestic violence. Staff raised awareness of the issue and provided education and leadership training to community members.

Free To Grow partners and the residents of the North-Oak target neighborhood successfully advocated for a new park, which as of November 2008 was under construction on the site of a crime- and drug-infested housing project that the city demolished. Plans called for soccer fields, basketball courts, picnic areas, a toddler playground and additional facilities. See [sidebar](#) on New Britain and Orange County for more information.

- **Orange, Calif.:** The Head Start agency (Orange Children & Parents Together) sustained the organizational changes, principles and service-delivery system that were implemented through *Free To Grow*. The agency received a grant from Orange County to support some of the work. See [sidebar](#) on New Britain and Orange County for more detail.
- **Phoenix:** The *Free To Grow* agency (Southwest Human Development) created a community development division within the Head Start program to provide parent education and work with community partners. The agency also continued to use the family assessment and case management tools developed during *Free To Grow*.
- **Tulsa, Okla.:** The *Free To Grow* grantee organization (Community Action Project of Tulsa County) maintained its family-strengthening activities, including use of the new family assessment tool. The agency's partners (Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, YWCA Intercultural Center, Community Services Council and Union Public Schools) continued to support the community action groups developed during the project.

The agency also received a grant from [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Local Funding Partnerships](#), another RWJF national program.

- **Wailuku, Hawaii:** At the Kahekili Terrace housing project, the *Free To Grow* grantee organization (Maui Economic Opportunity) added parenting groups that provided classes and counseling outside the Head Start program. The organization received a Hawaii Children's Trust Fund grant and County of Maui funding to sustain this work.

Project staff worked with the Head Start State Collaboration to expand *Free To Grow* to the community of Waianae on the island of Oahu, but lack of funding prevented the program's adoption. See [sidebar](#) on Wailuku for more information.

- **Wausau, Wis.:** The Head Start agency (Marathon County Child Development Agency) sustained the program's family assessment and case management improvements, use of family strength-based strategies and collaboration with community partners.

Staff members promoted the family- and community-strengthening principles of *Free to Grow* by working with the Washington-based Center for the Study of Social Policy as well as with the Wausau School District and local child care organizations. The agency received a Drug-Free Communities grant. See [sidebar](#) on Wausau for more information.

Of *Free To Grow* as a whole, the national program director and deputy director told RWJF:

"We hoped to inform the field about what kinds of combinations of family and community strengthening strategies showed promise for strengthening the environments that young children grow up in—as well as what it would take to help local community-based organizations implement them. Both of these goals were, to a large degree, accomplished."

Evaluation Findings

The Wake Forest University evaluation team reported the following in an evaluation summary submitted to RWJF in fall 2008 and in a 2009 report, *Evaluation of Free To Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities*. (The national program staff disagreed with some findings, contending the evaluation failed to fully identify the program's impact on families and communities.)

Organizational Capacity

- **As a group, the *Free To Grow* sites were generally successful in building staff and organizational capacity to design and implement best or promising programs, policies and practices to address substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and other risk behaviors.** Of the 15 *Free To Grow* Head Start agencies:
 - Thirteen adopted some policy, procedure or structure to incorporate *Free To Grow* into their organizational structure.
 - Twelve developed a strategic plan to integrate *Free To Grow* principles and practices into their work.
 - Seven revised their staffing structure, job descriptions and staff development requirements for family service workers.
 - The extent to which the Head Start agencies endorsed or adopted *Free To Grow* principles was (on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "not at all" and 4 "very much"):
 - Nine agencies rated 4 on the scale.
 - Five agencies rated 3.5.
 - One agency rated 3.0.

Family- and Community-Strengthening Interventions

- ***Free To Grow* sites were more likely than comparison sites to implement family- and community-strengthening strategies consistent with the *Free To Grow* model.** Examples:

- Eleven *Free To Grow* Head Start agencies did "knock and talk" community assessments (talking to people at home) compared to four Head Start agencies not involved in the program.
- Nine *Free To Grow* Head Start agencies held leadership development classes and actively worked with neighborhood associations, compared to four Head Start agencies that were not part of the program.
- **In contrast to comparison sites, *Free To Grow* sites were more likely to implement validated interventions. *Free To Grow* sites were also more likely to offer programs and services to families beyond those enrolled in Head Start.**
- **However, there was substantial variation in the degree to which the different *Free To Grow* sites implemented the recommended components of the *Free To Grow* model.** By the final year, only three of the 14 demonstration sites were judged by expert raters as having both a "strong" family-strengthening approach and a "strong" community-strengthening approach.

Community Partnerships

- ***Free To Grow* Head Start agencies were more likely to have built partnerships with local law enforcement agencies and public schools than were the comparison Head Start agencies.**
 - In the first implementation year of *Free to Grow*, 14 of 15 sites had established partnerships with law enforcement agencies, compared to only two of the comparison sites. The *Free To Grow* sites were also much more likely than the comparison sites to sustain these partnerships over time.
 - Law enforcement partners were especially involved in neighborhood revitalization efforts and promoted *Free To Grow* outside the targeted communities.
 - In the first implementation year of *Free to Grow*, all 15 sites had established partnerships with schools, compared to only three of the comparison sites. Again, the *Free to Grow* sites were also much more likely than the comparison sites to sustain these partnerships over time.
- **Community partners at *Free To Grow* sites were significantly more likely to work on behalf of Head Start than were partners at comparison sites—for example, speaking in public on behalf of the Head Start program and serving as a Head Start representative to other groups.**
 - Partners were particularly engaged in the four *Free To Grow* sites that implemented organized neighborhood revitalization efforts: Hermiston, Ore.; Lincoln, Neb.; Orange, Calif.; and Wausau, Wis.

Impact on Families and Neighborhoods

- **There was no consistent evidence of changes in family functioning or neighborhood conditions when the 14 *Free To Grow* sites were compared to the 14 matched sites.**
 - Among Cohort 1 survey respondents (first interviewed in the fall of 2002), the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites showed a significant difference over time on only one of the 17 outcome measures—*Neighborhood Involvement*. While both categories of sites improved on this measure, the improvement of the comparison sites was significantly greater than that of the *Free To Grow* sites.
 - Among Cohort 2 respondents (first interviewed in the fall of 2003), there was a significant difference over time only on use of time out (sending a child to his/her room). Use of *Time Out* increased among *Free To Grow* participants and decreased among comparison participants.
 - Among primary caregivers of young children not enrolled in Head Start, there were no significant differences between the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites on any of the 17 neighborhood, family and substance abuse outcome measures.

Impact by Family Risk Level

- **Analyses that controlled for the risk status of parents/caregivers in the *Free To Grow* and comparison communities produced little evidence of impact.**
 - Among high-risk Head Start caregivers in Cohort 1, there were no differences over time between the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites.
 - Among low-risk families in Cohort 1, both the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites decreased their use of *Time Out*, with a slightly greater decrease in the *Free To Grow* sites.
 - However, in Cohort 2, use of *Time Out* increased among high-risk *Free To Grow* participants and decreased among high-risk comparison site respondents.
 - Among high-risk non-Head Start caregivers, the *Free To Grow* sites had better outcomes than the comparison sites on three measures: *Satisfaction With Police Enforcement*, *Neighborhood Norms Against Substance Use* and *Physical Discipline: Hitting*.
 - In low-risk families in Cohort 1, the *Primary Caregiver/Household Substance Use* measure grew worse for the *Free To Grow* sites and remained stable for the comparison sites.
 - Among low-risk non-Head Start caregivers, *School Involvement* decreased among both *Free To Grow* and comparison sites, but the decrease was greater among comparison communities.

Impact by Degree of Program Implementation

- **There was some evidence that within the three *Free To Grow* sites that implemented the program model most fully, the model had a positive impact on caregivers of young children *not* enrolled in Head Start.**

- Community participants in the three high-implementing *Free To Grow* sites reported higher levels of *Neighborhood Organization and Family Norms Against Substance Use* in 2006 than in 2003, whereas little change was observed within the low-implementing *Free To Grow* sites and the comparison sites.

This suggests that the community-strengthening strategies carried out in the three high-implementing sites "had a measurable effect on neighborhood conditions as perceived by a representative community sample of parents of young children."

- The community sample of parents in the high-implementing sites also reported improvements in three family outcomes: *Physical Discipline: Spanking, Physical Discipline: Hitting and Family Conflict*.
- However, the improvement was not uniform. Two measures—*Neighborhood Involvement and Family Norms on Drinking*—worsened among the community sample in the high-implementing sites but improved in the low-implementing sites.

Also, among caregivers of Head Start children, only *Neighborhood Involvement and Family Norms against Drinking* changed significantly, and both measures declined in the high-implementing sites while the low-implementing sites and the comparison sites either improved or did not change.

Conclusion

In the 2009 report, the evaluation team concluded:

"First and foremost, it is important to consider our finding—and one that is likely to obtain in similar initiatives—that only a subset of sites can implement a program model with enough intensity, comprehensiveness, and fidelity to show measurable changes in families and communities. In concept, there are a number of ways in which this shortcoming could be addressed: (1) the program model could be made easier to implement (for example, by making it more prescriptive); (2) more central guidance and support could be provided; or (3) more selectivity could be exercised at the time of site selection, provided that factors are associated with the capacity to be a high implementer can be identified and accurately assessed in prospective sites. Each of these approaches, however, has its own set of challenges.

"In summary, the results... here provide limited support for the concept that family and neighborhood conditions that are likely to affect child development and well-being can be attained through organized change efforts implemented by local Head Start programs."

LESSONS LEARNED

At the end of the *Free To Grow* pilot phase, members of the RWJF and national program staffs and the Mathematica Policy Research evaluation team identified 20 lessons that might be of help to others interested in initiating a similar program. See [Appendix 9](#) for a partial list.

At the end of the demonstration phase, participants identified these lessons from their experiences:

Project Assistance

1. **Use a consistent, dedicated technical assistance team to maximize the help provided to project sites.** The national program office initially hired part-time consultants to provide technical assistance, but they did not provide the concerted team approach needed to address both organizational capacity and best practice needs.

The program's technical assistance efforts became significantly more tailored and strategic when the national program office hired a full-time in-house technical assistance team. (National Program Director)

2. **Provide training that helps employees build new skills and learn new procedures.** Without the intense training and support made possible by *Free To Grow*, the Head Start agency in Tulsa would not have been able to adopt the more comprehensive assessment tool and revamp its delivery of family services. (Project Director/Tulsa, Okla.)

3. **Provide leadership training to empower residents to create stronger communities.** *Free To Grow* included leadership development, and as a result participants in the New Britain, Conn., project gained self-confidence and an ability to advocate for themselves, their families and their community.

This "gave people the power to take action, and because of it, our target community has improved dramatically," the Human Resources Agency of New Britain, which runs the local Head Start agency, reported to RWJF. (Project Director/New Britain)

4. **Be aware that if complex models such as *Free To Grow* are difficult to define and communicate clearly to site leaders and staff, an evaluability assessment should be conducted to clarify processes and procedures and develop manuals prior to intervention evaluation.**

Free To Grow involved organizational changes, forging of partnerships with diverse community organizations and delivery of integrated family- and community-strengthening strategies. The many moving parts made the program model exceedingly complex for the Head Start agencies to implement. (Evaluator/Wake Forest University)

Building Partnerships

5. **Consider working with nontraditional partners to achieve change and improve services.** Previous to *Free To Grow*, Umatilla Morrow Head Start in Hermiston, Ore., had partnered with school districts, human services agencies and child welfare agencies. By adding nontraditional partners, such as the police department and city government, the agency was able to begin to achieve systemic change.

Orange Children & Parents Together, which managed the Head Start program in Orange Calif., was able to create a more effective services delivery approach by partnering with agencies that staff had "once considered outside the scope of its program." (Project Directors/Umatilla Morrow and Orange)

6. **Motivate partners and keep them involved by creating a shared vision.** The Head Start program in New Britain, Conn., worked with partners to create a shared vision of what their joint efforts could accomplish. This served "as a glue to keep partners motivated and willing to give more." (Project Director/New Britain)
7. **Persevere with partnerships even when managing them seems more difficult than working alone.** Project staff at Southwest Human Development, which managed the Head Start program in Phoenix, persevered with their partners despite "perils and difficulties." Staff members knew that a multifaceted impact was only possible by working with others with a similar mission and goals. (Project Director/Phoenix)

Sustainability

8. **Foster project sustainability by working with diverse funding sources.** Project staff at Maui Economic Opportunity in Wailuku, Hawaii, worked with a variety of partners, including foundations, the county government, police and a housing and community development corporation. As a result, the agency was able to raise foundation and government funds to sustain parts of *Free To Grow*. (Project Director/Maui)
9. **Policy work is more effective when a program has existed long enough to show a long-term impact, and evaluation data are available.** The national program director tried to "sell" the *Free To Grow* approach to policy-makers while it was still "a work in progress." As a result, she could not answer policy-makers' questions about evaluation results, and did not have enough experience implementing the approach to speak confidently of its long-term impact.

"In retrospect, the program's policy efforts would have benefited significantly from more sites funded over a longer period of time, with clear lessons learned before federal and state sustainability outcomes were realistically expected," said Jones, the program director.

AFTERWARD

After the national program office closed in October 2006, materials from *Free To Grow* remained available on a number of pages of the program's [website](#) (including the Research and Policy pages).

Work by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

Since providing funds for *Free To Grow*, the [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#) has made a number of grants that integrate child abuse and neglect prevention strategies and training into early education/child care settings and systems. These prevention initiatives were influenced by the work done by *Free To Grow*, as well as other relevant research and program endeavors. For more information on the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Child Abuse Prevention Program go to its [website](#).

Prepared by: Lori De Milto

Reviewed by: Michael Brown and Molly McKaughan

Program officers: Marjorie Gutman, Nancy Kaufman, Karen Gerlach Joyce and C. Tracy Orleans

APPENDIX 1

Free To Grow National Advisory Committee

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

(Members' titles were current at the time of their committee service.)

Pilot Phase

Reed Tuckson, M.D. (Chair)
Senior Vice President, Professional Standards
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Chicago, Ill.

Christopher Carman
Assistant Director
Hawkeye Area Community Action Program
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Linda J. Carson
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Administration for Children and Families
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Nicholas Freudenberg, Ph.D.
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Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community
Health
City University of New York
New York, N.Y.

Aida Giachello, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Director
University of Illinois Midwest Latino Health
Research, Training and Policy Center
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Sarah M. Greene
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National Head Start Association
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Judy Howard, M.D.
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Gloria Johnson-Powell, M.D.
Director
Camille Cosby Ambulatory Care Program
Judge Baker Children's Center
Boston, Mass.

Marie Littlejohn, M.S.W.
Director
Social Services, Maternity, Infant Care
Family Planning Projects/Medical and Health
Research Association
New York, N.Y.

William J. McCord
Former Director
South Carolina Commission on Alcohol and
Drug Abuse
Columbia, S.C.

Helen Taylor (Deceased)
Associate Commissioner
Head Start Bureau
Administration on Children, Youth and
Families
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National Demonstration Phase

Angela Blackwell (Chair)
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Oakland, Calif.

Geoffrey Canada
President and CEO
Harlem Children's Zone
New York, N.Y.

Sarah Greene
President and CEO
National Head Start Association
Alexandria, Va.

Gloria Johnson-Powell, M.D.
Associate Dean for Faculty
Director, Center for Research on Ethnicity in
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Madison, Wis.

Michael H. Levine
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National Campaign for International
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Asia Society
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Joan Lombardi
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Aubrey Nehring
Head Start Director
Audubon Area Community Services
Owensboro, Ky.

Abraham Wandersman, Ph.D.
Professor, Prevention Center
University of South Carolina Department of
Psychology
Columbia, S.C.

APPENDIX 2

Free To Grow Evaluation Advisory Panel (Demonstration Phase)

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

(Members' titles current at the time of their committee service.)

Richard F. Catalano Jr., Ph.D. (Chair)
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Social Development Research Group
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Human Development
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Anthony Biglan, Ph.D.
Director
Center for Community Interventions on
Childrearing
Research Scientist, Oregon Research Institute
Eugene, Ore.

Robert Boruch, Ph.D.
University Trustee Chair Professor of
Education and Statistics

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Gainesville, Fla.

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Professor of Psychiatry and University
Professor
New Jersey Medical School
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Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Ph.D.
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Anne Bergan
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Prevention
U.S. Department of Justice
Washington, D.C.

APPENDIX 3

Free To Grow Pilot Sites

Compton, Calif.

Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science

Planning Grant: ID# 024233 (May 1994 to April 1996): \$290,692

Implementation Grant: ID# 029047 (May 1996 to April 1999): \$548,748

Project Director

Kalem Aquil
(310) 608-3383

Colorado Springs, Colo.

Community Partnership for Child Development

Planning Grant: ID# 024234 (May 1994 to April 1996): \$276,250

Implementation Grants: ID#s 029044 and 029694 (May 1996 to April 1999): \$709,938

Project Director

Terry Schwartz
(719) 635-1536 Ext. 217

Owensboro, Ky.

Audubon Area Community Services

Planning Grant: ID# 024236 (May 1994 to April 1996): \$280,376

Implementation Grant: ID# 029046 (May 1996 to April 2000): \$649,970

Project Director

Suzanne Hays
(207) 686-1631

Paterson, N.J.

Concerned Parents for Head Start

Planning Grant: ID# 024235 (May 1994 to April 1996): \$287,332

Project Director

Cecile Dickey
(973) 345-9555

New York, N.Y.

The New York project began in 1992 as part of an RWJF-funded project of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Foundation and continued as a *Free To Grow* pilot program when that program was launched.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Foundation

Planning Grant: ID# 019083 (October 1992 to October 1994): \$399,509

Ft. George Community Enrichment Center

Planning Grant: ID# 021219 (November 1994 to December 1995): \$197,997

Implementation Grant: ID# 026406 (November 1995 to October 1997): \$377,340

Project Director

Lenore M. Peay
(212) 297-2210

Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico

Aspira Inc. of Puerto Rico (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico)

Planning Grant: ID# 024240 (June 1994 to May 1996): \$295,116

Implementation Grant: ID# 029043 (June 1996 to May 2001): \$610,933

Project Director

Edme Ruiz

(787) 257-2725

aspirapuertorico@bigplant.com

APPENDIX 4

Additional Findings from the Pilot Phase Evaluation

The Mathematica Policy Research evaluation team summarized its findings and conclusions in a final report and five detailed grantee case studies. Those documents included the following:

Perceptions of Changes Effected by Free To Grow

The evaluation was not long enough to observe long-term outcomes. However, the evaluators conducted site visits, focus groups and interviews with Head Start personnel, staff of partner organizations, parents and other community residents. From that data, the team documented perceptions of the changes that *Free To Grow* had brought about in risk and protective factors in the children's families and communities:

- **In the area of family functioning, the largest changes reported were improvements in parenting skills, bonding between children and their primary caregivers and meeting families' basic needs for housing, food and clothing.** The evaluators observed smaller changes in reducing domestic violence and the use of drugs and alcohol, areas in which change would be expected to take longer.
- **At the community level, the greatest perceived changes were greater resident involvement in the community and school and more interactions among residents.** Problems such as drug and alcohol sales to minors and drug trafficking were reduced to a lesser extent. Respondents also reported some improvements in the level of crime and violence and in the extent to which community residents felt safe and wanted to stay in the community.

Free To Grow—The Value to Head Start

The evaluators concluded that the *Free To Grow* family- and community-strengthening strategies could substantially benefit Head Start in a variety of ways:

- **By emphasizing family and community partnerships, *Free To Grow* supported Head Start's efforts to meet the requirements of the Revised Head Start Performance Standards.**

Actively involving parents and other primary caregivers in addressing substance abuse issues within their communities through leadership development, community

coalition planning and volunteer involvement in activities that address risk and protective factors supported Head Start's efforts to meet those standards.

- ***Free To Grow* uses primary caregivers as resources.** Peer mentoring and parent advocacy strategies provided stable Head Start primary caregivers with opportunities to mentor, support and serve as role models to other Head Start families.

These primary caregivers also developed their own leadership skills. Using primary caregivers as volunteers or paraprofessional staff was an effective and relatively economical alternative to hiring new staff or expanding the responsibilities of current staff.

- ***Free To Grow* strategies strengthened existing Head Start interventions for families at risk.** Family-to-family mentoring, specialized case management and family therapy built on existing case management services and enhanced Head Start's work with families at risk for or affected by substance abuse.
- ***Free To Grow* expanded knowledge about substance abuse prevention.** Prevention training helped staff become more aware of the symptoms of substance abuse and more knowledgeable about appropriate strategies and resources for families.
- ***Free To Grow* enabled Head Start to form collaborative relationships with nontraditional community partners.** Several sites forged new relationships with police departments and other law enforcement organizations, essential partners in the *Free To Grow* community-strengthening efforts.

APPENDIX 5

***Free To Grow* Standards for Demonstration Sites**

Demonstration sites were expected to meet the following standards:

- Include both family- and community-strengthening strategies in program design and implementation
- Demonstrate integration in program design so that family- and community-strengthening activities are not discrete activities lacking relationship to one another
- Choose interventions with breadth, length and intensity to fit the nature of the problems addressed
- Use a team of core partners, including neighborhood schools and law enforcement agencies, to carry out program planning, governance and implementation
- Use research-based knowledge of key risk and protective factors for substance abuse and other high-risk behaviors to guide program implementation

- In the family-strengthening approach, target risk factors that research shows are linked to both substance abuse and child abuse and neglect
- Reflect the culture of the parents and communities that the project seeks to support and engage. Staffing and governance structures should be consonant with the ethnic and cultural diversity of the target community. Interventions should be respectful of the values of the Head Start families and the communities served
- Integrate implementation of family- and community-strengthening strategies into both the Head Start organizational infrastructure and community institutions in order to support eventual program institutionalization

APPENDIX 6

Free To Grow National Demonstration Project List

Planning and Implementation Grants

Phoenix, Ariz.

Southwest Human Development

Planning Grant: ID# 042581 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045324 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$205,910

Project Director

Mary Dana

(602) 266-5976 Ext. 116

mdana@swhd.org

Orange, Calif.

Orange Children & Parents Together

Planning Grant: ID# 042541 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045319 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$197,959

Project Director

Robyn L. Class

(714) 639-4000

robync@ocpt.org

New Britain, Conn.

Human Resources Agency of New Britain

Planning Grant: ID# 042583 (June 2001 to December 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045331 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$207,000

Project Director

Elizabeth Donnellan
(860) 225-4688
edonnellan@snet.net

Palm Beach, Fla.

Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners

Planning Grant: Grant ID# 042580 (June 2001 to May 2003): \$42,114
Implementation Grant: ID# 045320 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$191,750

Project Director

Carmen A. Nicholas
(561) 233-1611
cnichola@co.palm-beach.fl.us

Wailuku, Hawaii

Maui Economic Opportunity

Planning Grant: ID#s 042578 (June 2001 to February 2003): \$40,384
Implementation Grant: ID# 045318 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$213,000

Project Director

Lyn McNeff
(808) 249-2988
lyn.mcneff@meoinc.org

Redfox, Ky.

Leslie, Knott, Letcher, Perry Counties Head Start Program

Planning Grant: ID# 042577 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000
Implementation Grant: ID# 045333 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$192,000

Project Director

Aleece Jones
(606) 642-3317
lkphead@tgtel.com

Franklin, La.

St. Mary Community Action Committee Association

Planning Grant: ID# 042575 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$55,000
Implementation Grant: ID# 045323 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$192,000

Project Director

Natalie Duval
(337) 828-9480
nduvalfreetogrow@aol.com

Hughesville, Md.

Southern Maryland Tri-County Community Action Committee

Planning Grant: ID# 042542 (June 2001 to November 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID#045325 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$195,859

Project Director

Juanita Nether
(301) 274-4474 Ext. 220
juanita@smtccac.org

Lincoln, Neb.

Lincoln Action Program

Planning Grant: ID# 042539 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045334 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$192,000

Project Director

Kathy Stokes (no longer at the agency)

Laguna, N.M.

Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education

Planning Grant: ID# 042584 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045321 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$207,000

Project Director

Darlene Waseta
(505) 552-6467
d.waseta@lagunaed.net

Tulsa, Okla.

Community Action Project of Tulsa County

Planning Grant: ID# 042534 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045317 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$192,000

Project Director

Maria Elena Loya
(918) 560-1304
mloya@fcsok.org

Hermiston, Ore.

Umatilla Morrow Head Start

Planning Grant: ID# 042544 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045327 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$207,000

Project Director

Shannon Jackson

(541) 564-6878

sjackson@umchs.org

Dallas, Texas

Head Start of Greater Dallas

Planning Grant: ID# 042536 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045330 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$198,000

Project Director

Deneeco Young

(214) 428-4701

deneeco@sbcgloval.net

Barre, Vt.

Central Vermont Community Action Council

Planning Grant: ID# 042527 (June 2001 to October 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045316 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$198,000

Project Director

Marianne Miller

(802) 479-1053

mmiller@CVCAC.org

Wausau, Wis.

Marathon County Child Development Agency

Planning Grant ID# 042582 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$55,000

Implementation Grant: ID# 045336 (June 2002 to May 2005): \$206,003

Project Director

Cathy Howe

(715) 845-2947

chowe@mccdahs.org

Planning Grants Only

Denver, Colo.

Rocky Mountain S.E.R./Jobs for Progress

Planning Grant: ID# 042574 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$49,612

Project Director

Manuel Escamilla

(303) 937-1060 Ext. 215

escamillaflores@uswest.net

Somerville, Mass.

Community Action Agency of Somerville

Planning Grant: ID# 042530 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$23,340

Project Director

Donna Cabral

(617) 623-7370

dcabral@caasheadstart.org

Trenton, N.J.

Trenton Head Start

Planning Grant: ID# 042543 (June 2001 to May 2002): \$31,283

Project Director

Patricia Kleppinger

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PKLEP3@aol.com

APPENDIX 7

Quantitative Evaluation Survey Methodology

Surveys of Caregivers of Children Enrolled in Head Start

Since the sites did not implement *Free To Grow* at the same pace, the evaluators recruited two survey cohorts of Head Start families at the *Free To Grow* and comparison sites. In both cohorts, the respondents were caregivers of children enrolled in Head Start. The difference was in when the surveying began:

- Cohort 1 consisted of Head Start caregivers initially surveyed between September 2002 and January 2003 (baseline) and again in the same months in each of the two

following years. In Cohort 1, 1,919 caregivers completed the initial survey, 1,234 the second and 868 the third.

- Cohort 2 consisted of Head Start caregivers initially surveyed between September 2003 and January 2004 (baseline) and again in the same months in each of the two following years. In Cohort 2, 955 caregivers completed the initial survey, 667 the second and 459 the third.

Some 54 percent of caregivers in both groups responded to all surveys.

Surveys of Caregivers of Children Not Enrolled in Head Start

- To determine whether *Free To Grow* prompted changes in community risk factors that extended beyond the Head Start program, the evaluators surveyed 2,023 caregivers of children ages 3–8 not enrolled in Head Start in both *Free To Grow* and comparison sites.
 - 1,110 caregivers participated in the 2003 survey.
 - 1,093 caregivers participated in the 2006 survey.

APPENDIX 8

Measures Used in the Evaluation

Neighborhood Measures

- Neighborhood involvement (e.g., participated in the past 12 months in a neighborhood watch block/tenant association or neighborhood meeting)
- School involvement (e.g., participated in the past 12 months in a Parent-Teacher Association meeting or volunteered at school)
- Social connectedness (e.g., number of friends in the neighborhood and people help neighbors)
- Neighborhood organization (e.g., there is a lot of crime in the neighborhood or neighbors take good care of houses/apartments)
- Availability of alcohol and illegal substances (e.g., ease with which people under age 21 can buy or otherwise get alcohol or buy marijuana)
- Norms against substance use (e.g., how many people in the neighborhood approve of teen drinking or people using illegal drugs)
- Satisfaction with police enforcement (e.g., the extent to which residents believe the police are doing a good job)

Family Measures

- Family conflict (e.g., the extent to which family members feel they fight with each other, throw things or criticize other family members)
- Parenting frustration (e.g., the parent finds it hard to understand the child's concern or lets the child have his/her way)
- Hitting (with hard object, e.g., belt, hairbrush, etc.)
- Spanking (frequency with which the parent spanks the child)
- Use of rules (e.g., the extent to which the parent explains rules and uses them to manage the child's behavior)
- Use of time out (the frequency with which the parent uses time out or sends the child to his or her room (Use of time out was considered a positive indicator.)

Family Substance Use Measures

- Primary caregiver alcohol use (frequency of caregiver alcohol use within the past month)
- Primary caregiver and household substance use (frequency of drinking and illicit drug use by any household member within the past month)
- Family norms toward drinking (e.g., how acceptable is it for family members to drink)
- Family norms toward getting drunk (e.g., how acceptable is it for family members to drink to intoxication)

APPENDIX 9

Some Lessons Learned from the Pilot Phase

1. **The quality of the program model and the effectiveness of the implementation contribute independently to the success of a site.** The grantee in Paterson, N.J., for example, developed an excellent program model, but problems with implementation prevented further funding. Other projects were less well structured but more successful because of strong implementation. (Program Director/Jones)
2. **Model development did not come easily to Head Start administrators whose primary experiences were with running a service-delivery organization.** Designing and implementing coherent, practical models was difficult, even for the most successful sites. Under these circumstances, the chances of producing a set of replicable models or program components would have been substantially increased if more sites had been included. Significant technical assistance was needed to help

them succeed in this area. (Program Director/Jones, Evaluator/Mathematica, Program Officer/Gerlach Joyce)

3. **Community building is a new and challenging area for Head Start agencies, which are used to focusing on the individual child and family.** Consequently, the work in community-strengthening was inconsistent. Also, very few members of the site-based professional staff were able to work effectively in both family-strengthening and community-strengthening initiatives.

Agencies need to hire appropriate staff and provide them with substantial training and technical assistance in order for projects to succeed. (Program Officer/Gerlach Joyce, Evaluator/Mathematica, Program Director/Jones)

4. **Despite their lack of experience in model development, it is important that administrators be fully involved in planning their own projects.** Aware that projects developed with the help of consultants were not well understood by Head Start staff, the national program office ensured that the project staff was directly involved in preparing proposals for implementation funding, without assistance from consultant grant writers. (Program Director/Jones)

5. **To implement programs such as *Free To Grow*, the funder should promote an "environment of learning" in grantee organizations.** Implementation requires a paradigm shift that involves capacity building, learning and adjusting.

The best-performing agencies have a culture that is open, willing to take risks and aware of the advantage of analyzing what works and what does not. These agencies also tend to be more receptive to technical assistance. (Program Director/Jones, Deputy Director/Levine)

6. **To move community change agenda forward requires seasoned leaders who can negotiate a balance between competing interests of residents and primary caregiver activists and those of their institutional partners.**

While recognizing the importance of grassroots efforts to make neighborhoods and service systems more responsive to the needs of families, agencies must also avoid jeopardizing their relationships with institutional partners on whom they depend for political and financial support and who might be the target of resident activism. (Program Director/Jones, Evaluator/Mathematica, Project Director/Colorado)

7. **Agencies should "think out of the box" in adopting nontraditional strategies to recruit children's primary caregivers into leadership positions.** By requiring primary caregivers to move into the workforce, welfare reform made it increasingly difficult to engage primary caregivers and other community residents in *Free To Grow*. Successful grantees were those that devised recruitment strategies that accommodated primary caregivers' available time. (Program Director/Jones, Deputy Director/Levine)

8. **State or city organizations should allow their delegate agencies to control the implementation of a community-based program such as *Free To Grow* in order to secure the buy-in of local leadership and staff.** Head Start super-grantees, such as New York City's Administration for Children's Services, offer the potential to disseminate *Free To Grow* broadly (ID# 033888).

However, the administration chose to maintain control over implementation of *Free To Grow* at the citywide level, which resulted in limited buy-in at the local level and the inability to adequately integrate *Free To Grow* program staff within the local organizations. (Program Director, Deputy Director)

9. **When providing technical assistance on the local level, a national organization should recognize the impact of timing and consistency on the grantees' ability to integrate the information.** If material is shared too early or is inappropriate for the agency or community context, it is not useful. (Program Director/Jones, Deputy Director/Levine)
10. **A consistent technical assistance team is preferable to a broad number of consultants who may be unfamiliar with grantees or the program principles.** Sites felt that interacting with too many different people was sometimes confusing and resulted in mixed messages. (Evaluator/Mathematica, Project Director/Puerto Rico)
11. **A national organization or funder should establish benchmarks to assist grantees in mapping the progress of their program implementation.** This provides an objective framework on which technical assistance interactions can be based and helps reduce the tensions that inevitably arise when sites experience implementation difficulties.

While the technical assistance relationship is a partnership, a significant level of prescriptive benchmark setting is necessary to ensure that program goals and objectives do not get lost in the planning and implementation process. (Program Director/Jones, Deputy Director/Levine)
12. **Use logic models to show grantee organizations the pathways through which interventions are expected to influence short and long-term outcomes.** The program's logic models proved highly useful as both an evaluation and technical-assistance training tool. (Program Director/Jones, Evaluator/Mathematica, Evaluation Officer at RWJF/Orleans)
13. **The evaluators should help develop local data collection systems that are coordinated among grantees.** Because there was no uniform data collection system across sites, the evaluation and technical assistance teams lost valuable data that could have assisted in program management and implementation. (Program Director/Jones)

14. **When managing projects in Latino or Black communities, national staff should be attentive to cultural and linguistic differences.** The lack of national program office staff members fluent in Spanish and attentive to cultural differences in attitudes toward common issues, such as substance abuse, was an obstacle for the Puerto Rico site, especially at the beginning of the pilot period. (Project Director/Puerto Rico)

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