

# IMPACT OF THE BRIGHTER FUTURES' FAMILY CENTERS ON BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES

JUNE, 2012

BRIEF #2

For over twenty years, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving has supported the Brighter Futures Initiative. The Brighter Futures Initiative is designed to prepare young children to enter school ready to learn and succeed during the early grades. It is built on the premise that young children who are healthy, have high quality early childhood experiences, and have families who are supported in their childrearing will experience that success. Six Family Centers, strategically placed throughout Hartford, focus on supporting families in the belief that stronger families grow stronger children. Each center provides programs to develop parent-child interaction, parent education, quality care and education, adult education, and parent leadership development among other activities.

Family Center staff who work with the families that participate in the Centers are asked to assess each family using the Family Assessment Form adapted from the Family Development Matrix created by the California Department of Community Services and Development and from the Family Assessment Form created by the Children's Bureau of Southern California. Families are assessed on the dimensions of parenting skills, ability to meet basic needs, and presence of social supports. Eight aspects of parenting skills, ten aspects of basic needs, and two aspects of social supports are assessed on a score of one to five with one indicating a family in-crisis and five a family that is thriving. An average score is calculated for each dimension as well as an overall average. Assessments are completed after the family has been enrolled in the center for one month and then at six-month intervals.<sup>1</sup>

Family Centers served 3,471 families between July, 2007, and April, 2012. This brief describes changes in Family Assessment scores for the 1,311 families who had both an initial and follow-up assessment. All of these families participated in one of the Family Centers for at least six months and came often enough that the staff were able to make assessments of their strengths and weaknesses. Over half of the families spent more than one hundred hours in Center events. Most of the families (71%) participated in more than one core activity; the average family participated in three. These are not the occasional participants. They are the families who regularly and consistently participated in Center activities. They are the families for whom the Family Centers most likely had an impact.

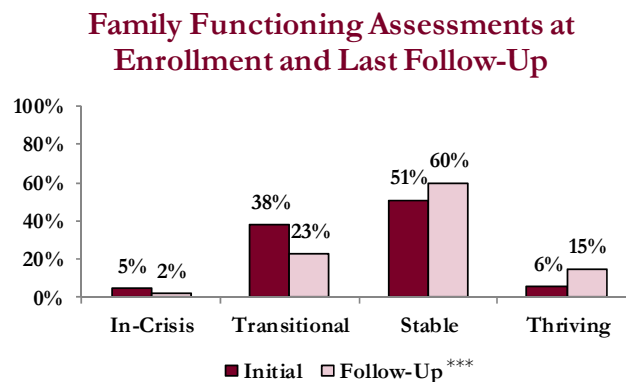
<sup>1</sup>Tests of the original Family Assessment Form indicated that 89% of the time workers rated families exactly the same or differed by no more than one point (McCroskey & Meezan *Family Preservation & Family Functioning*).

*“The Brighter Futures Initiative is designed to prepare young children to enter school ready to learn and succeed during the early grades.”*



## Development Between Initial Assessment and Follow-up

At the time of their initial assessment, half of the families were assessed as stable. About a third (38%) were viewed as transitional, meaning they were not at-risk, but they were not stable either. One in twenty families were in crisis and another one in twenty were thriving.



\*\*\* difference between initial and follow-up is significant at p<.001.

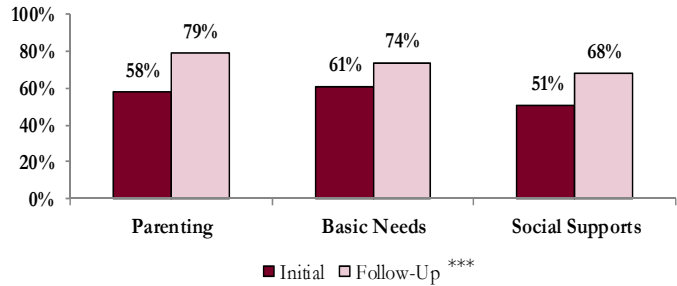
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Meeting basic needs and parenting skills were equally strong domains at the time families began attending the Family Centers. Approximately 60% of the families were seen as stable or thriving on both of these dimensions. Families' social support networks were the weakest domain. Only half of the families had stable or thriving social networks.

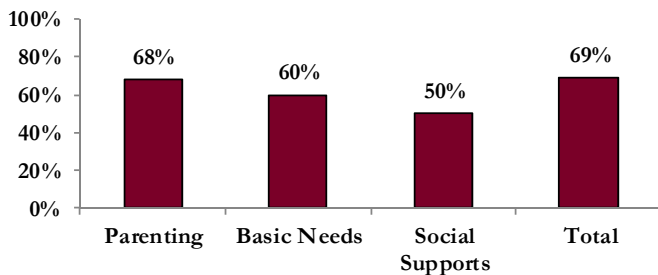
**Family Functioning Assessments at Enrollment and Last Follow-Up By Domain (percent stable or thriving)**



\*\*\* difference between initial and follow-up is significant at  $p < .001$  for all three domains.

Family functioning strengthened between enrollment and follow-up assessments on all three dimensions. There was a significant increase on every component of all three dimensions. The greatest increase was in parenting skills where 20% more families were assessed as stable or thriving at follow-up; 17% more families had stable or thriving social supports; and 13% more families were meeting basic needs at a stable or thriving level. Overall, the percent of families assessed as stable or thriving increased from 57% at enrollment to 75% at follow-up.

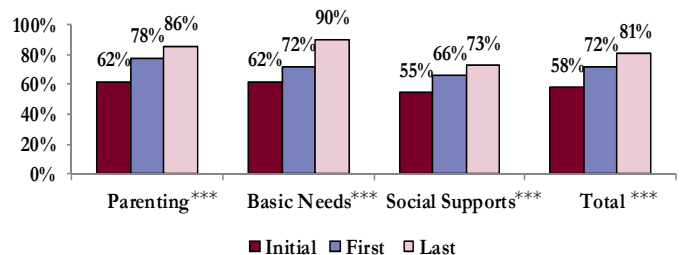
**Percent of Families Improving Family Functioning Between Enrollment and Last Follow-Up**



Over two-thirds of families had higher family functioning scores at follow-up than at enrollment. The most families (68%) demonstrated higher parenting skills while the fewest (50%) had stronger social supports.

At least two follow-ups have been completed for 638 families. The percent stable or thriving on each dimension of family functioning increased between enrollment and first follow-up and between first and last follow-up. This suggests that family functioning continues to improve as families continue to participate in the Family Centers. The impact is not immediate followed by a leveling off, but instead is a process of continuing growth.

**Family Functioning Assessments At Enrollment, First, And Last Follow-Up By Domain (percent stable or thriving)**



\*\*\* difference significant at  $p < .001$ .



## Impact of Participation in Core Activities

Family Centers offer programs in seven core areas.

- *Nurturing Families* is a home-visiting program of the Children's Trust Fund for first-time parents which teaches parenting and child development skills.
- *Parent-Child Interaction* provides recreation and other activities parents and children can do together.
- *Parent Advocacy* provides leadership development and information to help parents advocate for their children.
- *Parenting Education* develops parenting skills among parents.
- *Adult Education* includes adult basic education, literacy skills, and English language skills.
- *Quality Care* provides full-day child care stressing school readiness.
- *Home Links* increases the skills of home-based day care providers.

In each core activity, over two-thirds of the families that participated in the activity increased the strength of their overall family functioning between their assessment at enrollment and their last follow-up assessment. It did not matter in which core activities families participated – participation was related to strengthening families. There was one exception – families whose children were in home-based day care and therefore reached through Home Links showed the greatest improvement. Almost ninety percent (87%) of those families improved their overall family functioning.

### INDEPENDENT EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATION IN CORE ACTIVITIES

(Unstandardized coefficients)

Core Activity	Family Functioning Dimensions			
	Parenting	Basic Needs	Social Supports	Total
Nurturing Families	.02	.00	-.06	.04
Parent-Child Interaction	-.10*	-.04	-.02	-.05
Parent Advocacy	.04	-.01	-.02	.03
Parenting Education	.04	.05	.03	.07*
Adult Education	.03	.12*	.11*	.00
Quality Care	.00	-.03	-.06	-.02
Home Links	.22***	.18***	.23***	.22***

Regression coefficients were calculated to measure the independent effects of participation in each of the core areas. These coefficients show how much difference there is in the change in family functioning scores between participants and non-participants in each of these areas, controlling for the effects of participation in other areas. For example, on average the parenting scores of participants in Home Links increased 0.22 points more than the parenting scores of families who did not participate in Home Links. In each domain, Home Links had the strongest impact on family functioning.

\* difference is significant at  $p < .05$ ;

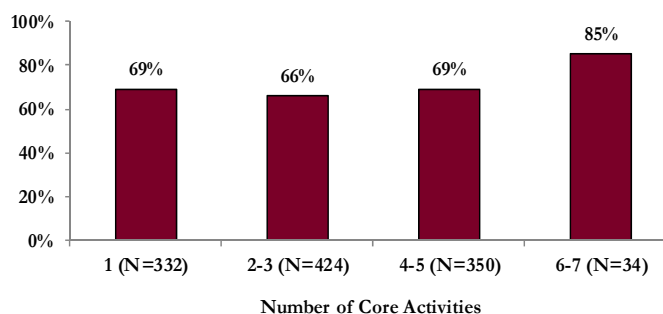
\*\*\* difference is significant at  $p < .001$

The only other core activity that had an independent effect on overall family functioning was Parenting Education. Controlling for the effects of participation in other areas, families that participated in Parenting Education increased their overall family functioning scores 0.07 points over families that did not participate in Parenting Education.

Adult Education independently increased the ability of families to meet their basic needs and social support networks. Controlling for the effects of participation in other areas, families that participated in Adult Education increased their abilities to meet their basic needs by 0.12 points over other families and increased their social supports by .11 points over other families.

Except for those families who participated in almost all of the core activities, the number of core activities in which a family participates is unrelated to improved family functioning. Eighty-five percent of the families that participated in six or seven core activities improved their family functioning, compared to two-thirds of other families.

### Percent of Families Improving Family Functioning Between Enrollment and Last Follow-Up By Number Of Core Activities





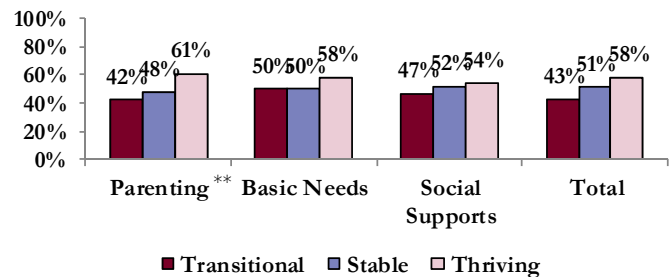
### Family Functioning and Child's Level of Development

The developmental levels of pre-school children three years old and older who are participating in each Family Center are assessed using the Early Screening Profile. This tool assesses children's cognitive skills, language skills, and motor skills through interaction directly with the children. Self-help and social skills are obtained from reports by teachers about what they have seen each child do. Assessments of children are conducted on approximately the same schedule as family assessments. Early Screening Profiles are available for 163 children whose families also have completed Family Assessments.

The higher the family's functioning assessment, the higher the level of development demonstrated by their child. Children whose families were assessed as thriving at follow-up scored 35% higher on the Early Screening Profiles than children whose families were assessed as transitional and 14% higher than children whose families were assessed as stable.

Parenting skills are particularly related to child development. Children whose families' parenting skills were rated as thriving scored 19 percentile points (or 45% higher) than children from transitional families. Thriving basic needs produced an 8 percentile point difference and social supports was associated with a 4 percentile difference.

**Family Functioning and Child's Level of Development**  
(N = 163)



\*\* difference is significant at  $p < .01$ .

### Implications

- The assessment of families participating in the Brighter Futures Family Centers demonstrates that the typical family drawn to a Center is neither in-crisis nor thriving. Overall, half are evaluated as stable at the time of enrollment and another third are transitional. They are strongest in parenting skills and meeting basic needs and weakest in social support networks.
- More than two-thirds of the families demonstrate improved functioning while participating in a Center. Two-thirds develop better parenting skills but only half build stronger social support networks.
- Families continue to grow and develop as they participate in Center programs. At each assessment, family functioning scores are stronger than found in the previous assessment.
- In each core activity, over two-thirds of the participants who participated in that activity improved their overall family functioning. Participation in Home Links and Parenting Education had the greatest independent impact on overall family functioning, but participation in Adult Education had independent impacts on the ability of the family to meet basic needs and build social support networks.
- The higher the family's functioning assessment, the higher the level of development demonstrated by their child. Higher parenting skills were particularly related to child development.

