

Lessons from the field. Engaging parent researchers: Pilot study collecting behavior change data in a family-community education program

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this project is to engage parent researchers in piloting a data collection process to measure program impact. Specifically, in this Lessons from the Field article, we outline the process of combining characteristics of evaluation and action research methodologies to involve attendees of Parent University (Parent U) as researchers in designing and implementing this pilot study.

Background: Measuring the impact of family-school-community programs is challenging due to the numerous contextual factors that influence these programs and the families they serve. Parent U is a nonprofit parenting education program that has served Savannah, Georgia, for over 25 years. Based on previously collected focus group data, we worked with Parent U to research an appropriate outcome measure.

Experience: We outline the process of engaging parent researchers in program evaluation, including brainstorming, parent recruitment, survey design, ethics training, and data collection, illustrating how parent perspectives informed the resulting design. Initial survey data from two parent participant cohorts ($N = 31$ each) are presented. Challenges, successes, and lessons within the process are included.

Conclusion: Data collected by parent researchers demonstrated good reliability for our survey measures, positive correlations between measures, and preliminary evidence of perceived change over time. We reflect on the meaning of the impact data collected and the contextual outcomes related to family-school-community programming.

Abbreviations: Attendees, families who attend parent U events and sessions; Parent U, Parent University; Parent U Leadership, individuals who oversee the programming; Parent Researchers, parent U program attendees who partnered with us as researchers on the project; SF, strengthening families.

KEYWORDS

action research, family-community partnerships, program evaluation, Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework

OBJECTIVE

Decision-making processes related to meaningful data collection in child and family education programs are challenging due to the abstract nature of demonstrating behavioral change in individuals (Darling et al., 2017; McMillen & Israel, 2022). In explaining a model of family life education (FLE), Darling et al. (2020) noted that “demonstrating effectiveness of an FLE program is easier if there is some baseline level ... from which to measure improvement” (p. 430). Unfortunately, as many community-based researchers know, collecting evaluation data to show significant change in family education is difficult in already established family-community programs. Sharing how community-based researchers within family education follow an emergent path toward evaluation design can support others working with similar parent education organizations. As researchers, we (the authors) have been working with Parent University (Parent U) for nearly a decade to assist them with program evaluation efforts. In response to a request by Parent U to assist them in measuring program impact, especially when considering the need for external funding, the Parent U leadership team (individuals who oversee the programming), along with our university-based research team, drew on the parent-centric nature of Parent U to design an evaluation process based on action research methodology. This Lessons from the Field article describes the challenges and successes of designing and implementing a pilot evaluation study aimed at strengthening Parent U’s developing system of program evaluation.

BACKGROUND

Parent U is a nonprofit organization that has expanded and adapted since its founding in 1999. It was developed by a group of concerned parents, including their current Executive Director, to help provide recommendations for approaching the local school system’s partnerships with families. Parent U is representative of the greater Savannah, Georgia, population (where it originated) and inclusive of individuals who are often marginalized, particularly in systems of education. Our demographic analysis for the 2023–2024 year included Parent U participants who identified as 84.1% Black and 84.9% female, and 37.3% reported making less than \$35,000 a year (Gregg et al., 2024b).

Parent U has developed beyond its original mission and is now a thriving community organization with multiple sessions annually held on Saturdays at schools in the local school system with hundreds of families and community members attending each year. This parent and family education program is designed for parents, caregivers, and other adults with a stake in the lives of children (prenatal to 18 years old). Parent U is “a community collaborative that provides services and support to families ... encourages parent involvement and participation in the education of our community’s children and youth” (Parent University, 2026). Parent U recognizes the importance of parents teaching and supporting one another, creating belonging and trust. They emphasize empowering families with the confidence to share information with others in the community and schools. Parent U’s parent-centric approach falls in line with components of other successful family engagement programs that adjust to families’ needs, integrate culturally and locally relevant resources, and use well-known and trusted individuals to lead workshops and sessions (Darling et al., 2017; Mytton et al., 2014; Stefanski et al., 2016). Given that Parent U’s reach is both community and school district wide, the integration of intentional parent empowerment and networking with community agencies in their approach is best classified

as what Stefanski et al. (2016) defined as a “community development model” (p. 151) within the family-school-community partnership typologies. The program’s reach across the multiple systems families find themselves a part of is a marker of an intentional community development model and its success (see Gregg et al., 2024a, for an application of bioecological theory to Parent U’s systemic reach). Additionally, over time, the parent-led approach to supporting community and educational needs has resulted in a successful parenting education program when measured by the consistent large number of attendees at each session (Gregg et al., 2024b).

From developing systems for consistently collecting demographic and attendance information to conducting focus groups, we have supported Parent U in processing data to help share their work with others. For several years, Parent U has discussed ideas of how to capture the impacts of this community-focused, parent-driven program over time. The intangible variables of parent education are difficult to measure because they are often not quantifiable. Darling et al. (2020) have reminded us that “acknowledgement that there is some type of a problem that needs to be addressed can help with the evaluation and determining the worth of an FLE program” (p. 430). Acknowledging that evaluation data is integral to Parent U demonstrating the impact of its program to other community leaders, the families they serve, and grant agencies that continue to fund this nonprofit organization, we considered how to align the next steps in the research partnership with Parent U’s parent-centric approach to programming. Instead of our research team solely determining the types, methods, and process of collecting data and disseminating findings, we wanted to engage parent researchers (Parent U program attendees who partnered with us as researchers on the project) in these efforts.

EXPERIENCE

As we discussed next steps with Parent U’s leadership team and in line with many mixed-methods approaches, the design emerged from our interactions with Parent U and borrowed from characteristics of evaluation and action research (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). When we initially partnered with Parent U, we completed focus groups with parents who attended their programming. Although not within the scope of this article, the focus groups are part of the larger mixed-methods emergent study. This type of design applies “discovery-oriented uses of qualitative input designs ... the qualitative study is largely exploratory” (Morgan, 2014, p. 106). In addition, we applied what Dahler-Larsen (2018) referred to as pragmatic-participatory evaluation, and we first spent time observing the program before conducting the exploratory focus groups. These focus groups led us to take a deeper look at the components of quality parent education and community partnerships.

In particular, a review of the focus group data led us to consider the Protective Factors Framework within the Strengthening Families (SF) approach (Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.). The SF Protective Factors “are attributes and conditions that help to keep all families strong and on a pathway of healthy development” (Harper Browne, 2014, p. 2). Completed in the discovery-oriented stage of our larger evaluation study (Morgan, 2014), the focus group narratives were process-coded initially to discover why Parent U attendees were coming to their events, many coming multiple times each year (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Moving into a development-oriented stage of the study, we considered existing family systems frameworks, recognizing the data mapped onto the five SF Protective Factors and provided a way to think about the possible outcomes of the Parent U program (Morgan, 2014). The five SF Protective Factors are (a) parental resilience, (b) social connections, (c) concrete supports in times of need, (d) social-emotional competence in children, and (e) knowledge of parenting and child development (Harper Browne, 2014, p. 5). The SF approach is grounded in seven foundational ideas guiding any program applying it as a planning framework or evaluative tool. Examples of these

foundational ideas include two-generation approaches, strengths-based perspective, and resilience theory (Harper Browne, 2014).

Before beginning the recruitment and planning process with parents, we discussed the use of the SF Protective Factors as a guide to designing the behavior change survey questionnaire with the Parent U leadership team. The benefit of using the SF Protective Factors in discussions with the Parent U leadership team, and later the parent researchers, includes its adaptability to both family- and community-level considerations without forcing adherence to specific curricula or services (Harper Browne, 2014; Sprague-Jones et al., 2020). This application of characteristics of pragmatic-participatory design integrates some of the elements of participatory action research while recognizing the constraints on both researchers and participants (Dahler-Larsen, 2018). Relevant to our study, the pragmatic-participatory design considers various stakeholder groups, including those who will maintain the evaluation process and use the data for decision-making, which in this case is the Parent U leadership team.

Given these initial exploratory findings and situated within the larger goals of the partnership between Parent U and the research team, this pilot project includes designing and documenting Parent U's parent-centric approach to research and evaluation. Next, we describe the steps taken to engage parent researchers in collaborative discussions on program evaluation during the initial planning.

Initial planning and brainstorming

Prior to the start of the 2023–2024 school year, we worked with the operations team at Parent U to reach out to interested parents and scheduled a half-day brainstorming session face-to-face. We hosted this meeting between parents and our research team at the university's Savannah campus and included lunch and \$20 gift cards as compensation for parents' time. Four parents and three researchers worked together reviewing SF Protective Factors surveys, discussing ethics trainings, talking through the best processes for the parent researchers, and documenting ideas and next steps. In discussing survey development, we (the authors) distributed four different open access SF Protective Factors surveys within the group (FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, 2025; Kiplinger & Harper Browne, 2014). These surveys include the Protective Factors Surveys (PFS), including the PFS, PFS-Retrospective, and PFS-2 (FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, 2025; Sprague-Jones et al., 2020), and the Parents' Assessment of Protective Factors (PAPF; Kiplinger & Harper Browne, 2014). Our university research team talked through the purposes of the surveys, what they measured in relation to the charge given to us from Parent U (i.e., to assess Parent U's impact on parents), and the ways to get this information. The parents made recommendations such as using a retrospective version rather than a pre–post survey to lessen the amount of paperwork parents were asked to do and applying the shorter Likert scale options. As a group, we walked through survey questions looking for what did or did not apply to Parent U's work and documented the suggestions for the surveys. Following this initial meeting, our research collaboration developed the first iteration of the questionnaire.

Research trainings and attendance

Our university research team focused on an initial outline of topics and dates for training parent researchers. For ethical and research requirements within the university collaboration, we reviewed the ethics components that would be embedded in the training. The parents noted the importance of designing the training sequence to include a variety of formats (i.e., online, in

person), so our university research team embedded these as a “class” offered during both online and face-to-face Parent U Saturday sessions. Parents were compensated with \$10 gift cards for attending these research and ethics training sessions.

To date, our research collaboration has offered seven training topics (plus data collection) spanning 19 sessions across in-person and online formats and 38 unique parent researchers. Table 1 describes each training and the number of individual parent researchers in attendance. The most popular workshops (as tracked by the highest number of unique parent researchers) have been Research Ethics Part I ($N = 20$); Overview of Project, SF Protective Factors, and Selecting the Survey ($N = 18$); and Consent and Survey Procedures for Data Collection ($N = 13$). The high level of interest in the ethics of conducting research highlights parent researchers’ experiences with and trepidations about collecting information from members of their communities. Their input during and after these sessions helped our approach to be more sensitive and inclusive. For example, parent researchers were intent on finding ways to include all interested participants but recognized that some parents have limited literacy skills and that reading and responding to a written survey might not be feasible for them. After some discussion, one of our parent researchers suggested incorporating the phrase, “let us know if you need help reading the survey because you forgot your glasses” into the presurvey overview and while we were monitoring survey completion. Her brother struggles with many reading and writing tasks necessary for daily life, and she shared that this is the phrase that helps provide him access while maintaining his sense of pride and worth. This highlights the importance of developing parent participants into parent researchers, as their insights provide the authentic expertise needed to best support their local community. Although understanding the survey and consent procedures was helpful and necessary to the engagement of parent researchers, more essential to maintaining institutional review board standards was engagement with the ethical aspects of conducting research. Consequently, only those parent researchers who had completed Research Ethics Part I were able to collect protective factors data from parent attendees.

Protective factors data

Since Spring 2023, with support from the trained parent researchers, we collected quantitative protective factors data utilizing two different surveys (given changes to the survey during the Updating the Survey and Data Collection Process training) from Parent U participants. Parent researchers were compensated with \$20 gift cards for leading data collection efforts at Parent U Saturday sessions; parent participants were compensated with \$10 gift cards for completing the surveys. Presented below are the results from those two surveys: Cohort 1 included Parent U participants who completed the first version of the survey, and Cohort 2 consisted of Parent U participants who completed the second, revised version of the survey. Of note, we did not exclude participants from completing both surveys, and the parent researchers did not complete either of these surveys.

Cohort 1 survey design and data

For our first wave of data collection, parent researchers designed the survey based on their community insight. They selected to use the questions from the PFS survey, the “Before versus Now” format of the PFS-2 survey, and the scale response of the PAPF survey to best answer their questions about the effectiveness and impact of Parent U on parents and families (see Figure 1 for an example). This combination of survey components aligns with the SF Protective Factors design as a general framework that is malleable to the needs, goals, and values of a given organization’s evaluation goals (FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child

TABLE 1 Training topics and attendance data.

Training topics	Description	Individual attendees ^a	No. of sessions ^b
Overview of Project, SF, and Selecting the Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions of parent researchers and GS research team • Overview of project • Explain SF and why we selected it based on focus groups • Brainstorm pros and cons to SF surveys (content and structure) • What other data do we want to collect? 	18	3
Demographic Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share attendance/demographic data • Identify nonessential data • Identify questions we should include in the future 	5	1
Research Ethics Part I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do we need research ethics? • Belmont Report and principles • Importance of informed consent and protecting vulnerable populations • How does this relate to Parent U? 	20	2
Research Ethics Part II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicts of interest • Coercion in research • Privacy and confidentiality • How does this relate to Parent U? 	6	2
Consent and Survey Procedures for Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review informed consent and finalized surveys • Plan timeline for recruitment activities • Finalize recruitment materials and strategies • Role-play recruitment, informed consent, data collection 	13	3
Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce project to participants • Explain what data will be used for • Review survey instructions and participant rights • Help with reading survey items 	5	4
SF Data Analysis and Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to think about and categorize data • Overview of descriptives and correlations in data • Interpret data • What other questions do we want to answer? 	6	1
Data Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to visualize data • How to explain data to others • Present results to Parent U leadership, expansion sites, conferences, etc. • Which data for which audience? Why? 	0	0
Updating the Survey and Data Collection Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the SF surveys • Select preferred SF items across all surveys • Update and practice newly designed surveys 	10	3

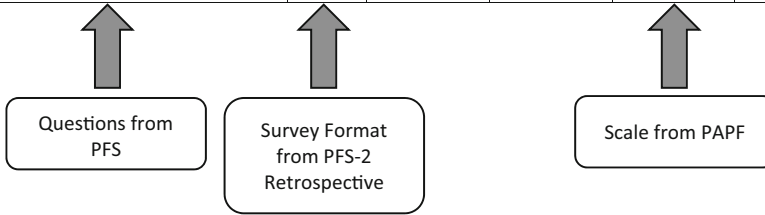
Note. GS = Georgia Southern University; Parent U = Parent University; SF = Strengthening Families. “We” refers to our research collaboration.

^aRefers to the number of individual (not duplicate) parent researcher attendees at each type of training. Several parent researchers attended the same training more than once (e.g., Research Ethics Part I) but were only counted once toward the total of attendees for that training.

^bRefers to the number of different times a training was offered to parent researchers (either in person or online). We have not offered the Data Presentation session yet as we are still collecting data and updating the survey to the parent researchers’ specifications.

Cohort 1 (Spring 2023) Survey Example:

Parental Resilience/Family Functioning & Resiliency		This is NOT AT ALL LIKE me or what I believe	This is NOT MUCH LIKE me or what I believe	This is A LITTLE LIKE me or what I believe	This is LIKE ME or what I believe	This is VERY MUCH LIKE me or what I believe
1. In my family, we talk about problems.	Before	1	2	3	4	5
	Now	1	2	3	4	5
2. When we argue, my family listens to "both sides of the story".	Before	1	2	3	4	5
	Now	1	2	3	4	5
3. In my family, we take time to listen to each other.	Before	1	2	3	4	5
	Now	1	2	3	4	5
4. My family pulls together when things are stressful.	Before	1	2	3	4	5
	Now	1	2	3	4	5
5. My family is able to solve our problems.	Before	1	2	3	4	5
	Now	1	2	3	4	5



Cohort 2 (Spring 2024) Survey Example:

Parental Resilience/Family Functioning & Resiliency	This is NOT AT ALL LIKE me or what I believe	This is NOT MUCH LIKE me or what I believe	This is A LITTLE LIKE me or what I believe	This is LIKE ME or what I believe	This is VERY MUCH LIKE me or what I believe
1. In my family, we talk about problems.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My family pulls together when things are stressful.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I feel positive about being a parent/caregiver.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I find ways to handle problems related to my child.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I take good care of my child even when I have personal problems.	1	2	3	4	5

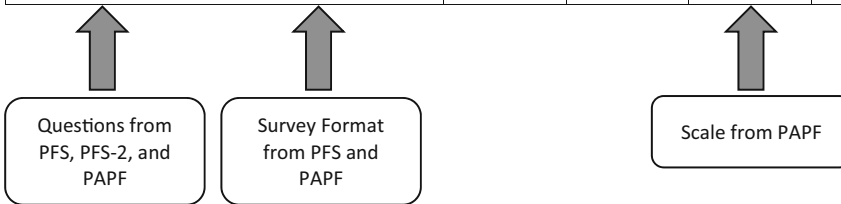


FIGURE 1 Strengthening Families Framework adapted survey examples.

Note. PAPP = Parents’ Assessment of Protective Factors; PFS = Protective Factors Survey Original; PFS-2 = Protective Factors Survey, 2nd Edition; PFS-2 Retrospective = Protective Factors Survey, 2nd Edition, Retrospective.

Abuse Prevention, 2025; Kiplinger & Harper Browne, 2014; Sprague-Jones et al., 2020), Parent U’s aim of being parent-centric and adaptable to its participants, and pragmatic-participatory evaluation, which assumes participants are both knowledge producers and coresearchers (Dahler-Larsen, 2018).

The first cohort (Spring 2023) consisted of 31 Parent U participants ranging from those who had attended Parent U less than 5 years ($N = 14$), 5–10 years ($N = 6$), or more than 10 years ($N = 8$). The youngest child identified for those participants ranged from 2 to 21 years old

TABLE 2 Cohort 1 Strengthening Families Protective Factors descriptive and inferential statistics for Before and Now.

	Parental resilience	Social–emotional supports	Concrete support	SEC for child	Child knowledge
Parental resilience	.93/.81	.70***	–.46*	.60***	–.06
Social–emotional supports	.67***	.84/.71	–.28	.65***	.16
Concrete support	–.36	–.14	.85/.76	–.54**	–.07
SEC for child	.20	.27	–.29	.78/.71	.31
Child knowledge	–.07	.22	.39 [†]	–.11	.30/.57
Before <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	18.14 (5.60)	10.53 (3.67)	7.86 (4.27)	17.00 (3.14)	15.89 (3.95)
Now <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	21.83 (3.89)	13.14 (2.75)	6.65 (3.84)	18.18 (2.44)	15.83 (4.91)
<i>t</i> value (<i>df</i>)	–2.92 (22)**	–3.56 (21)***	1.92 (21)*	–1.58 (21) [†]	–0.51 (22)
Cohen's <i>d</i>	–0.61	–0.76	0.41	–0.34	–0.11

Note. SEC = social–emotional competence. Correlations above the diagonal denote Before and correlations below the diagonal denote Now survey responses. The diagonal denotes Cronbach's alpha reliabilities Before/Now. One-tailed paired samples *t* tests were conducted comparing Before and Now scores.

[†]*p* < .01.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

(*M* = 8.18, *SD* = 5.46). Correlations between factors¹ are noted in Table 2, and paired samples *t* tests were conducted to examine any mean differences Before versus Now for each protective factor. There were some statistically significant differences, such that Parental Resilience and Social–Emotional Supports were both higher Now compared to Before, but Concrete Support was lower Now compared to Before.

Cohort 2 survey design and data

After data collection for the first cohort, the parent researchers informally (i.e., debriefs after data collection sessions) and formally (i.e., Updating the Survey and Data Collection Process session) shared their insights on the data collection process and survey construction, such as concerns about participants' understanding of the survey items and instructions with the Before versus Now formatting. These concerns were backed up statistically by the amount of missing survey data (9.3%–46.5% across individual survey items for Cohort 1) and low reliabilities for the Child Knowledge items ($\alpha = .30$ –.57). Our university research team met three times with parent researchers to redesign the survey by rereading the three different versions of the SF Protective Factors surveys to select the best fitting items for Parent U participants to target parental resilience, social–emotional supports, concrete supports, and social–emotional competence for children.² A mixture of questions from across the three surveys were combined to create a single survey assessing participants' current experiences at Parent U (see Figure 1 for an example). Based on reliabilities (Table 3) for these four factors, this new survey is working well with the population.

The second cohort (Spring 2024) was similar to the first cohort in that it consisted of 31 Parent U participants ranging from those who had attended Parent U less than 5 years (*N* = 11),

¹Although we present correlations between the SF Protective Factors, these factors are not necessarily expected to be statistically significantly connected to one another (Kiplinger & Harper Browne, 2014; Sprague-Jones et al., 2020). Their presentation here is solely descriptive.

²Child Knowledge was removed as an evaluated factor given its low reliability in the first survey, optional standing in the Protective Factor surveys, and lack of direct relevance to parent researchers' goals of evaluating Parent U.

TABLE 3 Cohort 2 Strengthening Families Protective Factors correlations.

	Parental resilience	Social–emotional supports	Concrete support	SEC for child
Parental resilience	.90			
Social–emotional supports	.87***	.91		
Concrete support	.60***	.71***	.73	
SEC for child	.89***	.90***	.68***	.94
<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	37.39 (9.59)	44.25 (12.45)	23.07 (5.25)	17.00 (4.92)

Note. SEC = social–emotional competence. The diagonal denotes Cronbach's alpha reliabilities. Child Development was removed as a factor for Cohort 2 due to its low reliability in the first survey, optional standing in the Strengthening Families surveys, and lack of direct relevance to parent researchers' goal of evaluating Parent University.

*** $p < .001$.

5–10 years ($N = 8$), or more than 10 years ($N = 10$). The youngest child identified for those participants ranged from newborn to 17 years old ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 5.01$). Descriptive statistics and correlations between protective factors are shown in Table 3. Future waves of data collection will allow us to analyze the development over time of these four protective factors since this current wave and to examine differences between new (less than 1 year of attendance) and veteran participants.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important successes of our collaborative approach to program evaluation has been building the capacity of Parent U to collect its own program impact data to include in grant applications for continued funding of this nonprofit organization. Parent researchers developed skills as researchers and program evaluators. They learned about the ethics of conducting research, particularly when asking about people's personal contexts and experiences, and became more open to the idea of quantitative survey data and its practical uses in obtaining information of particular interest to potential funders. Further, their insight enhanced data collection by offering respectful ways for participants who needed literacy support to complete the survey. The observations and wisdom of Parent U parent researchers enhanced program evaluation efforts and helped initiate the development of an infrastructure for research, training staff, and the ability for Parent U, in the future, to conduct their own program evaluation with less hands-on support of university researchers. In this pragmatic-participatory approach to knowledge production, parent researchers were effective partners in the development of the evaluation and encouraged discussions in these new spaces for learning with Parent U and university researchers (Dahler-Larsen, 2018).

One of the primary reasons that this pilot project was productive was the preestablished trust among university and Parent U researchers. Our work with Parent U has extended for nearly a decade. Our regular presence at Parent U events, annual reports of demographic data that illustrate our approach to privacy and confidentiality, and prior focus groups that valued participants' voices and experiences were pivotal in the relationship-building work that formed the foundation of the research partnership. Also instrumental in developing trust was the designing of a quantitative survey instrument that aligned with participants' experiences within a research-informed approach. Designing a survey based on themes that arose from focus groups demonstrated to Parent U leadership that we, as university researchers, would value and foreground the voices and experiences of Parent U participants as is embedded in the Parent U mission.

IMPLICATIONS

Future directions with Parent U

Through numerous conversations with Parent U staff, leaders, and participants at leadership retreats, focus groups, research trainings, and information sessions, the importance of qualitative data has been repeatedly stressed by Parent U attendees. Qualitative interview and focus group data are of particular importance to this population in giving voice to the lived experiences of Parent U participants as well as discomfort with impersonal survey methodologies. At the same time, to meet sponsor requirements, solicit further funding, and document impact, Parent U also needs quantitative data. As such, this type of sequential mixed-method approach to program evaluation has sought to fill the data gaps to meet these competing interests. Within the larger research project, this pilot study focused on the process of collecting quantitative data using adapted SF Protective Factors surveys in partnership with parent researchers. At each data collection session, our Parent U researchers have also asked participants if they would be interested in follow-up interviews, adding a question at the end of the survey to allow us to contact interested participants. We want to continue to involve the parent researchers in planning these qualitative interviews to expand on themes from the pilot data.

Although our approach to program evaluation process has had successes, it is ongoing. Through the continued partnership with Parent U, our research team, Parent U leadership, and the parent researchers plan to develop processes and structures for Parent U to engage in continued program evaluation efforts; however, these are not yet embedded into the routine practices of Parent U leadership. Even though we have engagement from Parent U participants and leadership, as university researchers, we are still directing many of the efforts related to data collection and program evaluation. We anticipate at least 2 to 3 more years of training parent researchers and collecting quantitative data using the SF survey before sufficient organizational capacity is developed so that this parent-centric approach to program evaluation becomes a normalized process at Parent U and funded through external grant agencies. Further, maintaining our engagement will allow time to coconstruct a procedures manual for training, data collection, and data analysis so that current parent researchers can train future researchers. Additionally, our university research team is working with Parent U leadership to have a parent researcher as a permanent member of the operations team that plans Parent U events. This will be another step in making program evaluation a regular and consistent part of the work of the Parent U organization.

Applications for family education programming

A pragmatic-participatory evaluation approach to community-based research is not widely used in family sciences and FLE (Leticq et al., 2022), but it can support practitioners and organizations when making decisions about providing programming. Although there are evidence-based programs in FLE, implementing these programs with fidelity in the diversity of real-world settings can be challenging due to the influences of context and culture (Darling et al., 2017). Using components of action, evaluation, and other types of mixed-methods research to engage participants in identifying and evaluating program content and structure based on the strengths and needs of their communities can aid in planning future program adaptations. When incorporating components of community-based evaluation research to FLE program evaluation, consider the following:

- Building relationships and establishing a context of mutual trust and respect is essential. Participant researchers need to know that they are valued as coconstructors of the research and coanalyzers of the results.
- Providing research training (i.e., ethics, data collection, analysis techniques) needs to happen at times and in formats that align with the schedules and preferences of participants. Most sessions will need to be offered multiple times and in varied formats to provide access to participants.
- Supporting participant researchers in taking the lead when explaining the research project to potential participants is helpful. Public speaking is not a skill that we all have and allowing time to practice and providing opportunities to present in pairs was helpful for us and our parent researchers.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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