

THE FAMILIES AND DEMOCRACY PROJECT: AN OVERVIEW

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We are developing a way for professionals to move into the community with new thinking and with a set of public practices for working on family and community problems. Based on the Public Work Model of Harry Boyte, Nancy Kari and their colleagues at the University of Minnesota's Center for Democracy and Citizenship (www.publicwork.org), the Families and Democracy Model has seven principles and seven strategies for implementing action initiatives. The model stresses the importance of civic engagement to strengthen family life, the need to transcend the traditional provider/consumer model of health care and professional service delivery, and a vision of families creating public initiatives.

Principles

1. Strengthening families in our time must be done mostly by families themselves, working democratically in local communities.
2. The greatest untapped resource for strengthening families is the knowledge, wisdom, and lived experience of families and their communities.
3. Families must be engaged as producers and contributors to their communities, and not just as clients or consumers of services.

4. Professionals can play an important role in family initiatives when they learn to partner with families in identifying challenges, mobilizing resources, generating plans, and carrying out public actions.
5. If you begin with an established program, you will not end up with an initiative that is "owned and operated" by citizens. But a citizen initiative might create or adopt a program as one of its activities.
6. A local community of families becomes energized when it retrieves its own historical, cultural, and religious traditions about family life--and brings these into the contemporary world of family life.
7. Family and Democracy initiatives should have a bold vision (a BHAG--a big, hairy, audacious goal) while working pragmatically on focused, specific goals.

Strategies

We have learned to use the following strategies to ensure that an initiative flows from the Families and Democracy model instead of becoming a traditional program or professional service, or even a traditional volunteer activity that involves people as helpers but not as productive citizens.

1. Employ democratic planning and decision making at every step.
2. Emphasize mutual teaching and learning among families.
3. Create ways to fold new learnings back into the community.
4. Continually identify and develop new leaders.
5. Use professional expertise selectively--"on tap," not "on top."
6. Generate public visibility through media and community events.
7. Forge a sense of larger purpose.

The Project

The Families and Democracy Project is a team of faculty, graduate students, and community professionals working on projects and developing the model as we go. Here is our purpose, general action plans, and specific projects.

Mission: To develop the theory and practice of democratic public work in the family field.

Actions:

1. Generating theory based on readings, consultations, and studying current families and democracy projects and other similar projects.\
2. Developing and articulating the craft skills needed for this work with families.
3. Developing the theory and craft skills needed for influencing the paradigm, practices, and professional identities of professionals who work with families.
4. Exploring how the model applies to family life in dimensions such as citizenship, leadership, and participatory democracy.

BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal): To renew and transform family science and practice as work by and for citizens.

Specific Projects: We currently have projects in seven communities working on the following issues: diabetes care, overscheduled kids and underconnected families (www.puttingfamilyfirst.info), community support for married couples, community-engaged parent education, parent-led faith formation of children, and family and community connections through music. We hope to expand the Project through research projects and through training other professionals in this work

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