Executive Summary: Social Support Norms among Colorado Families

Highlights from Listening Sessions in Five Colorado Communities

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Three key findings resulted from the community listening sessions:**
  - Informal support comes mostly from close relationships.
  - Social support needs exist along a continuum, requiring different sources of support.
  - Asking for and giving support happens most comfortably in mutual relationships.

- **Recommendations for the Partnership's community norms work include:**
  - Social connections should be fostered with consideration to unique cultural and community context.
  - Cultivate formal and informal supports side-by-side.
  - Focus on norms related to mutual relationships to reduce stigma and strengthen cohesion.

- **Implications for the community norms survey administration and use are also outlined.**

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Project Background

The Colorado Partnership for Thriving Families (the Partnership) aims to create conditions where children and the adults in their lives—parents, family members, caregivers, providers, and educators—can thrive. As a cross-system collective impact effort, the Partnership works to influence systems-level change and bring to scale successful strategies tested within their sandbox. Strategies for increasing social connections, cohesion, and support among are being explored by the Partnership as part of strategic Priority Three: positively shift community norms on support behaviors and increase social connections and cohesion. Social connections are one of five leading protective factors identified in the Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors Framework. Four types of social support can emerge from social connections: emotional, informational, instrumental, and spiritual (or appraisal). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Essentials for Childhood framework has identified changing social norms to support parents as an evidence-based strategy for preventing child abuse and neglect. The Partnership is collaborating with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University to develop a survey to assess community norms on social connectedness and support behaviors. The survey end goals are to: (1) develop a Colorado-specific behavioral model on social connections and support; and (2) use the behavioral model to inform public awareness efforts and localized norming projects.

Project Description

In aid of this work, the Colorado Lab conducted a series of listening sessions with Colorado parents/caregivers to contextualize the community norms survey and inform strategy development.

> **The purpose of this project was to elicit diverse racial, social, cultural, and geographic insights on how social connections and support show up in the lives of parents/caregivers in Colorado, including their experiences, needs, and hopes. In doing so, findings can be used to promote family-centered, equity-grounded survey use and cultural responsiveness in community norms strategies chosen.**

Sessions were co-designed and co-facilitated with county, community, and family leaders from the five demonstration counties currently supported by the Partnership. In total, six sessions across five counties were held in November 2021. Table 1 summarizes the five counties targeted and final participant sample.

Table 1. Project Reach

County	Primary Partner(s)	Session Language	No.
Adams	Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County	Bilingual (English, Spanish)	7
Boulder	Boulder County Public Health, Boulder County Department of Housing and Human Services	One English session One Spanish session	12
Denver	Public Health Institute at Denver Health, Roots Family Center	Spanish	11
Jefferson	Jefferson County Public Health, Jefferson County Department of Human Services, Circle of Parents	English	10
Prowers	Prowers County Department of Human Services, Cornerstone Family Resource Center	English (with bilingual design)	5
		TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	**45**

Key Findings

Three key findings emerged from the analysis of participant narratives, as summarized below. These findings speak to the **who** of social connections, **what** types of social support are needed and given, and **how** support-seeking and support-offering behaviors are promoted or inhibited. We also identify leading cultural and community considerations that emerged for five **affinity groups**.

Key Finding #1 – Informal support comes mostly from close relationships.

Family and close friends were the most frequently identified sources of informal support.

Individuals affiliated with health, human service, and educational institutions were the most frequently identified sources of formal support.

Informal supports are often conditional and lacking.

Cultural and Community Considerations for Fostering Social Connections

- Parents/caregivers who move to a **new area as adults or who have children with disabilities** have fewer informal social connections.
- Parents/caregivers may deliberately distance themselves from **unsafe family members**, which can lead to low to no family support and cohesion.
- **Families with undocumented members**, as well as families living in **rural areas**, are less likely to trust neighbors, coworkers, or other community members.
- **Parents/caregivers impacted by SUD** often lose their informal networks once in recovery; while those networks may have enabled their addiction, the loss is still experienced as a support loss.
- **Families in lower SES status households** have less access to community activities (e.g., gyms) where new connections could be made.

Key Finding #2 – Social support needs exist along a continuum, requiring different sources of support.

Instrumental support, particularly child care, transportation, and financial resources, were frequently shared as unmet survival needs.

Informational support was cited as necessary to both better support their own family and their networks.

Emotional support is needed to move from surviving to thriving, but difficult to obtain or prioritize.

Cultural and Community Considerations for Types of Social Support

- **Families in lower SES status households** commonly have informal social connections that equally struggle with economic security. Most instrumental support needs cannot be readily met.

- Parents/caregivers who spoke **languages other than English** experience more barriers in receiving every type of social support, from both formal and informal networks.

- **Parents/caregivers of children with disabilities** and **single parents** are frequently isolated due to greater caregiving responsibilities combined with lack of shared experiences with others.

- **Families in rural communities** may be less likely to seek out emotional support due to internalized norms around strength expectations and a value of privacy.

- **Parents/caregivers impacted by SUD,** especially when child welfare-involved, have increased emotional and informational support needs that require specialized understanding.

Key Finding #3 – Asking for and giving support happens most comfortably in mutual relationships.

Primary barriers to asking for and giving support included expectations around self-sufficiency, stigma, and judgment.

In a reciprocal relationship, participants felt less likely to be judged when asking for support. They are also more willing to provide support when they know they will be supported in return. In turn, trust and rapport were effectively built.

Shared identities within reciprocal relationships were especially appreciated.

Cultural and Community Considerations for Primary Barriers to Asking for and Receiving Support

- **Rural communities** have a shared value of privacy that can prevent dialogue and action.

- **Parents/caregivers impacted by SUD** experience intensified stigma, discriminatory treatment, and internalized experiences of not being worthy of support.

- The **mental and physical health of parents/caregivers** can reduce behavioral capacity, especially for depression and anxiety disorders, those immunocompromised, or with mobility issues.

- **Families with undocumented members** report fear of deportation and other immigration-status challenges, such as eligibility for a resource connection offered.

- **Parents/caregivers of children with disabilities** experience higher rates of judgment and lack of shared understanding from informal supports in their life.

- **Families in lower economic households** are commonly unable to provide instrumental support.

Recommendations for Community Norms Work

Based on findings, below we summarize intersecting recommendations for the Partnership's community norms work. The figure below illustrates key activation pathways for increasing social connections, cohesion, and support among informal networks, as informed by study findings.
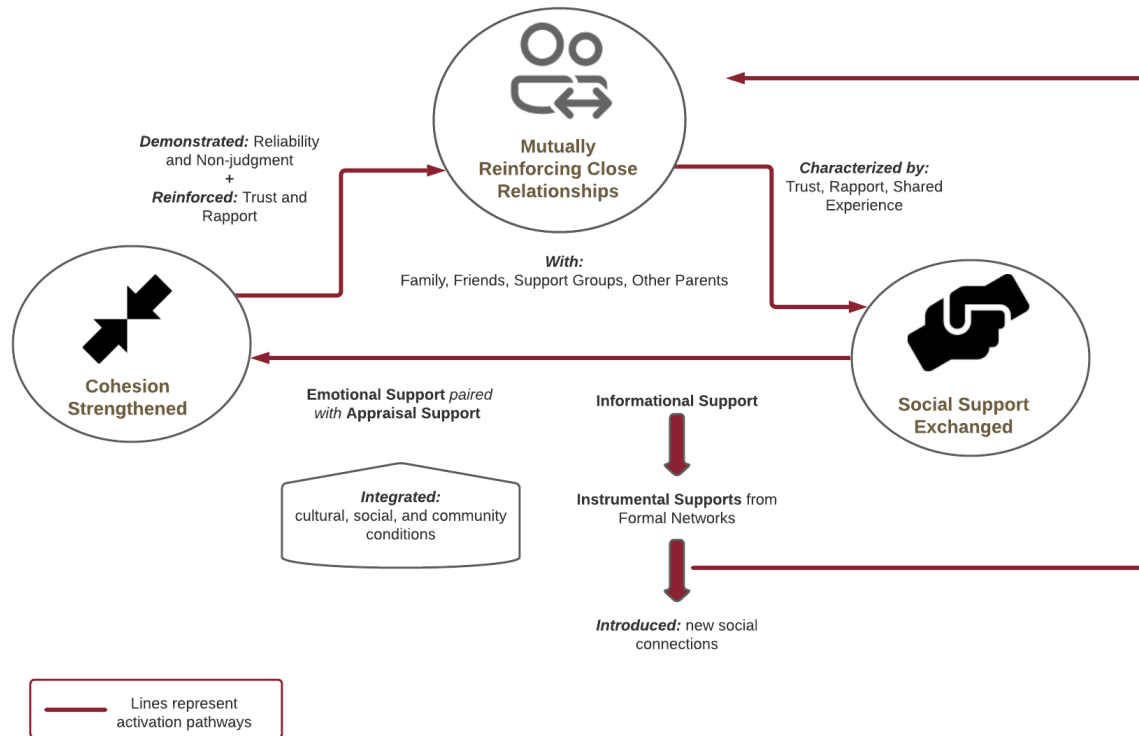
Recommendation #1 – Social connections should be fostered with consideration to unique cultural and community context.

> A "one-size-fits" all strategy for fostering social connections will not work. Choosing the right strategy to increase social connections and strengthen cohesion will depend on the cultural and community context. Without responsiveness to these unique considerations, the norming strategy is unlikely to succeed.

Recommendation #2 – Cultivate Formal and informal supports side-by-side.

> Create a bridge between informal supports and formal supports to more holistically meet the continuum of needs families have.
>
> Formal networks should expand reach, access, and cultural/linguistic responsiveness. Informal networks should be promoted to help families meet emotional support needs and through informational support, also connect them to instrumental supports from formal networks.

Recommendation #3 – Focus on norms related to mutual relationships to reduce stigma and strengthen cohesion.

> To take a strengths-based approach to promoting positive community norms around social support, the driving facilitator of reciprocity in relationships should be centered. This is a meaningful way to reduce barriers of stigma and judgment, while cultivating facilitators of trust, rapport, reliability, and non-judgment.

Implications for the Community Norms Survey

Below we summarize overarching implications for the community norms survey, both in administration and in subsequent use of findings to inform norms strategies.

Make the purpose, confidentiality, and actionability of the survey clear.

> To make the purpose and actionability of the survey clearer, consider renaming it. While a survey may be perceived as purely informational and one-sided, a name such as a "Family Insight and Action Survey" can better demonstrate its goal— understanding families' experiences—and impact—centering insights to make change. Confidentiality messaging should start during recruitment and outreach.

Consider minor refinements to survey content.

> There are five areas where survey content may need to be refined:
>
> - **Expand lists of informal support networks**
> - **Revise examples of support**
> - **Update belief statements on support asking and offering**
> - **Create convincing rationale for demographic questions**
> - **Ensure both linguistic and cultural considerations during translation**

Leverage key findings and stakeholder voice during interpretation of survey results and norms strategy development.

> Survey findings will not speak for themselves. They must be given interpretation that is culturally responsive, family-centered, and locally understood.
>
> Community norms strategies should be informed by an iterative combination of survey findings, recommendations from this project, and multi-stakeholder advisory groups.

Next Steps

The listening session approach proved successful for gathering rich, narrative data on family experiences of social connections, cohesion and support that can inform cultural and community considerations in norms strategies. Looking forward, such community dialogues should continue to both expand insights received and as a pathway for continuous learning and action.