

# Improving Outcomes for Children by Engaging and Supporting Parents

## An Evaluation of the Healthy Generations Project

---



## Why Parent Engagement Matters

### Engaging parents early is key to children's success

Parents and caregivers shape early childhood experiences. How adults nurture and support young children in their earliest years impacts their long-term success in school and in life. Research shows that parents do a better job of supporting their children when they understand child development and know which activities prepare their children for school. Moreover, when adults feel more confident in their parenting abilities, they have stronger and healthier bonds with their children.

- **School readiness.** Children's social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioral readiness for school is a strong predictor of long-term success in school and life<sup>1</sup>. Children who enter kindergarten with basic skills and who are socially and emotionally ready to learn are more successful in grade school, achieve higher levels of education, and earn higher incomes as adults<sup>2</sup>.
- **Parent well-being.** Adults who are more confident in their parenting abilities experience less stress<sup>3</sup>. When parents can manage parenting and life stressors, they are more able to develop nurturing relationships with their child and support them on the path to success.<sup>4</sup>

### Engaging and supporting low-income parents is especially critical

Low-income families face additional barriers and challenges in accessing quality early educational opportunities for their children. However, research shows that positive parenting practices can help close the achievement gap between low-income families and high-income families<sup>5</sup>. Parental involvement, knowledge of child development, and parenting self-confidence can act as buffers against risk factors and ensure that all children have equal opportunities for success. When these factors are present, children are more likely to succeed, even when faced with adverse life experiences, like poverty<sup>6</sup>. Engaging and supporting parents when children are young improves school readiness, enhances social-emotional skills, and promotes academic success<sup>7</sup>. Parent engagement programs like the Healthy Generations Project that promote positive parenting practices and home learning activities prepare low-income parents to help their children succeed.

## How the Healthy Generations Project supports parents

Working in partnership with BRIDGE Housing, the Healthy Generations Project prepares parents and caregivers with tools and resources to help children become more resilient and prepare them for kindergarten. The program currently serves approximately 300 individuals from 80 families in Potrero Terrace and Annex, one of San Francisco's largest and oldest public housing developments. HGP emerged as part of a comprehensive revitalization effort to rebuild the distressed public housing and create some 900 additional homes serving people across a range of incomes. BRIDGE was selected to lead the Potrero revitalization under HOPE SF, a partnership between the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development and the San Francisco Housing Authority. The first phase of construction began in January 2017.

The Healthy Generations Project uses a peer-to-peer model where six Community Health Leaders provide outreach and lead program activities. Healthy Generations provides weekly parent-child activities for parents and caregivers to strengthen parent-child relationships and provide parents with skills they can use at home. Community Health Leaders lead parent-child activities such as play and reading group activities accompanied by a dinner, meditation classes, parental support groups, community events and dinners, and trips outside of the neighborhood to enjoy cultural activities. Parents and community members can also participate in the program's yearly 8-week workshop to learn about how the five protective factors build resiliency and the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on children's cognitive, emotional, and long-term health. Community members must attend all 8 courses to be eligible to become a Community Health Leader.

### Focus on resiliency

Children who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences or other serious hardships face significant disadvantages when it comes to healthy development and learning. Specifically, the cumulative disadvantages of poverty, community violence, and crime often lead to stress and trauma, which can disrupt healthy brain development and lead to other poor developmental outcomes for children<sup>10</sup>. For this reason, resiliency—or the ability to overcome serious hardship—is especially important for children living in poverty.

Research shows that supportive parent-child relationships help children develop key capacities that build resiliency, for example learning to regulate behavior and the ability to plan<sup>11</sup>. When parents and caregivers actively help their child learn and provide empathetic care, they are not only strengthening the parent-child relationship, but they are directly supporting their child's resiliency. The Healthy Generations Project aims to instill resiliency in parents and their children so that they are equipped to succeed, even in the face of adverse experiences like poverty.

Healthy Generations workshops and activities are based on **5 Protective Factors** that encourage healthy habits and support bonding:

1. Good nutrition
2. Positive parent-child activities
3. Non-toxic environments
4. Positive home and community interactions
5. Education first!

To learn more about the Healthy Generations Project visit

<https://www.healthygenerationsproject.org/>.

**Potrero Terrace and Annex** is one of San Francisco's largest and oldest public housing developments. Approximately 1,300 residents live in 606 apartments on 38 acres of land that is physically isolated from the greater San Francisco community. Residents of Potrero Terrace and Annex remain socially and economically isolated as well, with an average annual income of \$16,557<sup>8</sup>. These poverty conditions sit in stark contrast to the Potrero Hill Neighborhood and the city of San Francisco, which have annual median incomes of \$152,431 and \$125,474, respectively<sup>9</sup>.

## Case Study: How HGP has supported Monique

### Early Challenges and Traumatic Experiences

Monique\* grew up in the Potrero Terrace and Annex public housing site in San Francisco, as did her mother, who raised her and her siblings on her own. At twenty-two Monique has two children, a six year old and a two year old. Monique experienced many traumatic events throughout her childhood, all of which are now identified as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). ACEs are characterized as traumatic experiences in childhood that cause ongoing and toxic stress, which have been shown to correlate with cognitive, emotional and physical health problems, which can last a lifetime<sup>12</sup>. Monique's parents were not together, her father was incarcerated, and she witnessed her mother being physically attacked by a boyfriend on several occasions. Due to her mother's drug abuse problems, and the difficulty of raising children by herself, Monique's mother was often neglectful. The public housing site where she lives has frequent shootings and suffers from a higher rate of violent crime compared to the rest of the City.

Through her participation with the Healthy Generations Project, Monique realized that the traumatic experiences in her childhood had an impact on her life. She didn't want her children to suffer as she did during childhood. She struggled in school and dropped out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade when she became pregnant.

### How the Healthy Generation's Project Supports Monique

At first, Monique began bringing her children to Healthy Generations' Parent-Child activities because of the free dinners. Her kids enjoyed the Tuesday night Reading Group, Wednesday's Family Laid Back Night and the Play Group on Thursday nights. During the activities, Monique began learning new parenting strategies with the support of the Community Health Leaders (CHLs). The CHLs encouraged Monique to focus on her child instead of other adults in the room, emphasized calm interactions with her children, and suggested time outs instead of corporal punishment such as spanking.

Monique has also learned the importance of education in her children's lives, and takes advantage of the Healthy Generations Project's Walking School Bus to get her children to school every morning. On Family Laid Back Night the group watches educational children's programs and Monique discovered that she likes to watch the Magic School Bus and Little Einstein's, too. Now, TV time is a time for Monique and her children to learn and enjoy the show together, instead of an opportunity to leave children in front of the screen all the time.

After becoming involved in HGP's Parent-Child activities, Monique began attending HGP's Enrichment Workshop to learn more about how to protect her children from Adverse Childhood Experiences and how to help them become more resilient. Monique is learning about the Five Protective Factors, which if adopted, can help foster a healthier home life that provides emotional support for her children in their early childhood development. She has also learned that being close to her children, "bonding" with them so they know she is a reliable, loving and caring presence in their life, can make all the difference and support their own resiliency in dealing with stressors and traumas in their lives<sup>13</sup>.

\* "Monique" is a composite of several HGP parents.

## Evaluation Questions and Methods

This evaluation assesses the impact of the Healthy Generations Project on children’s school readiness and parent well-being. The evaluation focuses on two questions:

1. How has the Healthy Generations Project impacted **parenting knowledge and attitudes** that support school readiness and parent well-being?
2. How has the Healthy Generations Project impacted **parenting behaviors** that support school readiness and parent well-being?

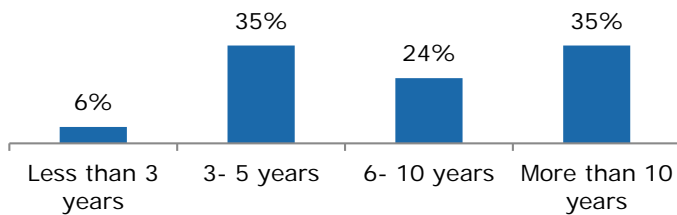
Harder+Company Community Research worked closely with staff at BRIDGE Housing and the Healthy Generations Project to design and administer a retrospective pretest survey to capture change over time. We asked parents questions about how they felt *before* participating in the Healthy Generations Project and *now*, after participating in the program. Harder+Company evaluators trained case management staff to administer the survey in a group setting. They then administered the survey aloud in both English and Spanish to 19 parents and caregivers who have participated in Healthy Generations Project. We recognize that this is a small sample but believe that it is representative of the 60 individuals that participate regularly and can provide valuable feedback.

## Participant Characteristics

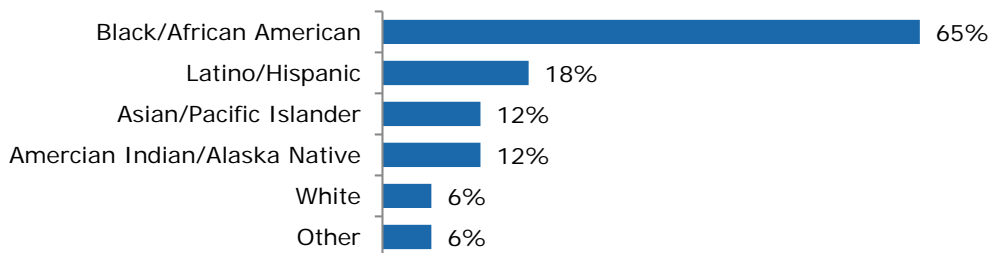
Survey participants included parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors, all of whom were either legal guardians or caregivers for children attending the Healthy Generations Project for 2.5 years on average. As shown in Exhibit 1, more than one third (35%) have been living in Potrero Terrace and Annex for more than 10 years. Most participants identified as Black/African American (see Exhibit 2) and the average age of participants is 41 years old.



**Exhibit 1. Years lived at Potrero Terrace and Annex (N=17)**



**Exhibit 2. Race/Ethnicity of Participants\* (N=17)**



\*Percentages add up to more than 100% because participants could select all that apply.

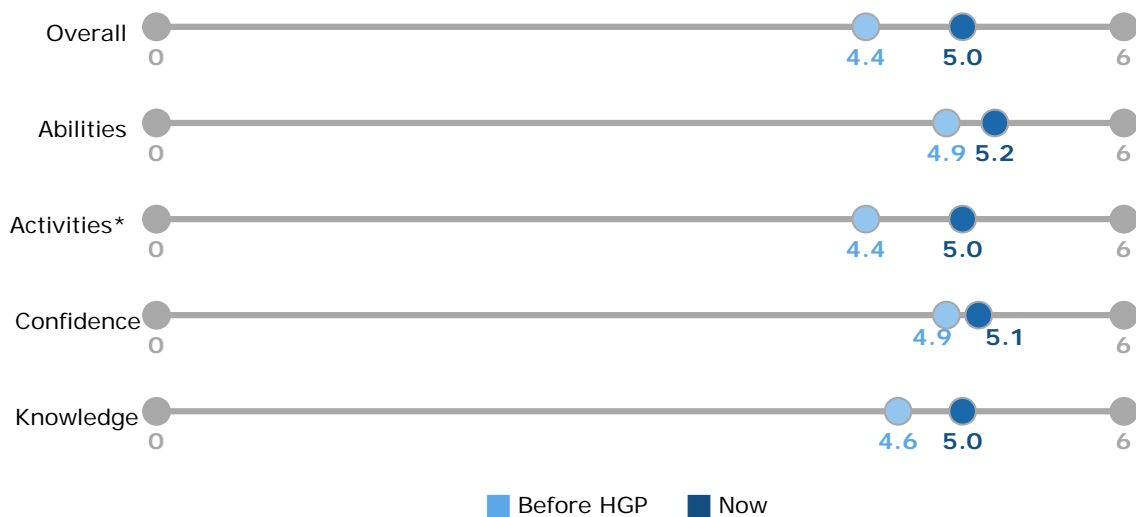
## Key Findings

Survey findings show that the Healthy Generations Project strengthens parenting practices and behaviors, and knowledge of child development. The program also increases parents' self-efficacy, so that parents feel more confident in their abilities as parents (note that we use "parents" in this section to refer to either parents or other caregivers like grandparents, friends or neighbors). Key findings from the survey are outlined below.

### Improving parenting practices and activities

**Parents showed improvements in positive parenting practices and gained confidence and knowledge.** The survey asked parents to reflect on their parenting practices before and after participating in the Healthy Generations Project. Using a ladder as a visual guide, parents assessed change in parenting knowledge, confidence, activities, and abilities on the scale from 0 to 6. The average self-reported scores increased across all of the parenting practices. The findings also show that parents started off fairly high on the scale. Overall, the mean score across all scales before was 4.4, which increased to 5.0 after participating in Healthy Generations (see Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3. Parents showed improvements in parenting practices (N=19)**



\*Statistically significant difference at  $p < 0.05$

**Families reported spending more time engaging in literacy and other activities linked to positive developmental outcomes.** The frequency and quality of time parents spend with their children impact child development and school readiness. Healthy Generations programming demonstrates positive behaviors and activities that parents can repeat at home with their children through a weekly Family Play Group and Dinner where parents and children are presented with an activity they can do together (for example art projects, storytelling, and music). When parents adopt these activities as their own, they become family norms that are carried onto their child in the future. Therefore, the gains parents showed in literacy and other activities are especially relevant to understanding the impact of the Healthy Generations Project. The *Activities* scale measured how often parents engaged in activities like reading, singing, practicing counting, playing indoor and outdoor games and sports, talking about the child's day, and preparing meals with their child. As shown in Exhibit 3, this is the only item where parents reported a statistically significant increase after participating in the Healthy Generations Project. See Exhibit 4 for the number of days families reported engaging in each activity before and after the program.

### What are positive parenting practices?

Positive parenting practices help nurture parent-child relationships, which are the foundation of optimal child development. Some examples of positive parenting practices include:

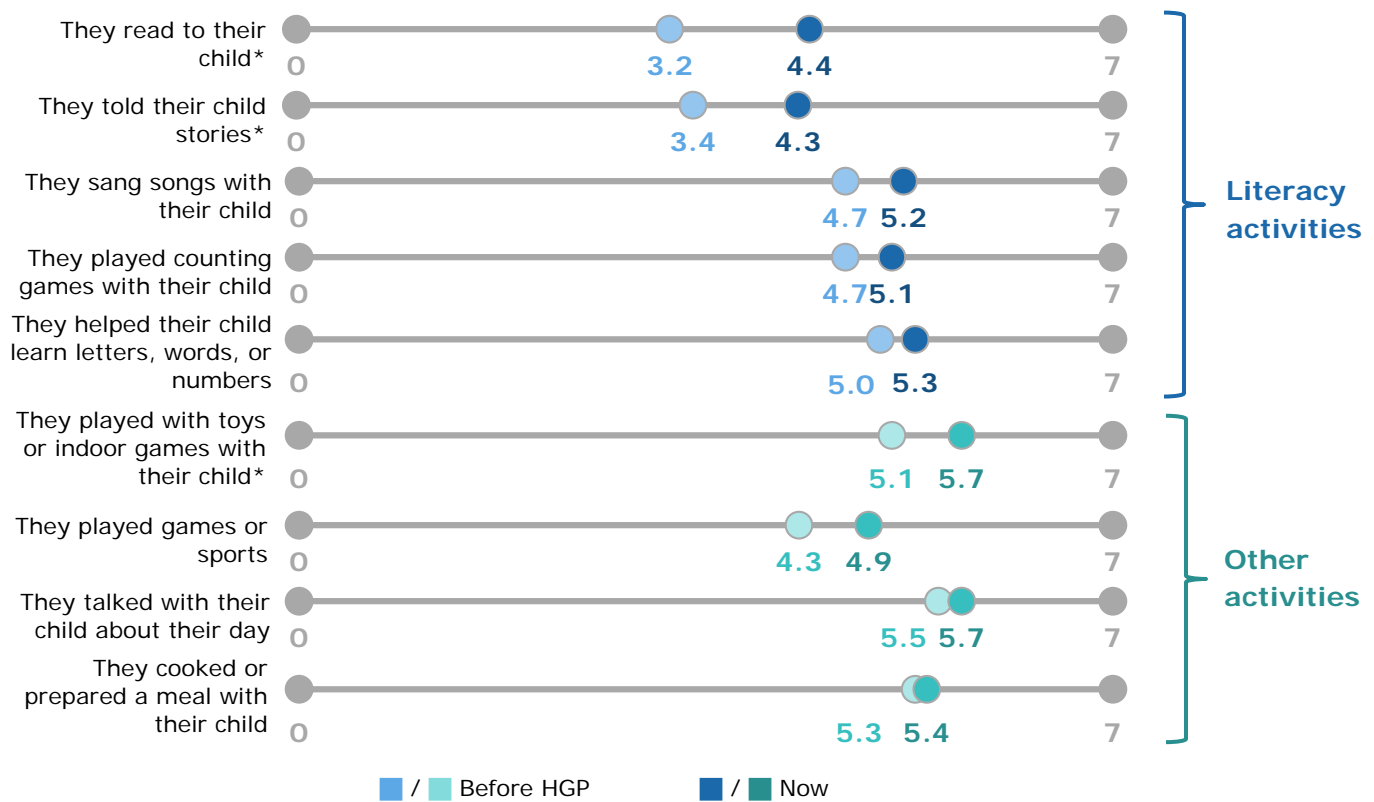
- Effectively setting limits
- Focusing attention on children
- Playing with and talking to children
- Responding effectively when a child is upset
- Using praise to reinforce positive behaviors
- Engaging in activities like reading, singing, and learning letters and numbers.

**Parents reported significant progress in the frequency of literacy activities.**

Daily reading activities support children’s cognitive development and vocabulary growth, two critical components of school readiness. Literacy activities include reading, telling stories, singing songs, playing counting games, and helping children learn letters, words or numbers. The Healthy Generations Project hosts weekly Family Reading Group and Dinner sessions, where children and caregivers have the opportunity to read stories together. Before participating in Healthy Generations, parents reported engaging in literacy activities 4.2 times per week on average. After the program, this increased to 4.9 times per week, a statistically significant increase. Exhibit 4 shows the number of days per week families engaged in each literacy activity, such as reading and telling stories to their child.

More importantly, parents who were less engaged in literacy activities before participating in Healthy Generations (engaging in literacy activities with their children three days a week or less) reported a 56% increase on average after participation, one of the largest gains across the sample. This finding is important because regular exposure to home literacy activities is an indicator of school readiness and educational success.

**Exhibit 4. Families reported an increase in the number of days per week (N=19)**



\*Statistically significant difference at p<0.05

**Increased understanding of child development**

**Participants demonstrated knowledge of parenting and child development.**

Children are more likely to do well in school and life when parents are knowledgeable about parenting and child development<sup>14</sup>. Knowledge of child development gives parents tools to implement parenting practices that are developmentally appropriate for their children; and it improves a parent’s ability to problem solve and make the best decisions for their child’s health and well-being.

In order to assess how well parents in the Healthy Generations Project understand child development, our survey asked six key questions about parenting and child development drawn from a national study of adults conducted in 2000 titled [What Grown-Ups Understand about Child Development: A National Benchmark Survey](#). The national study included over 3,000 adults, a subset of whom were parents of children aged 0 to 6 years old<sup>15</sup>.

When we surveyed Healthy Generations parents on these questions, more than half of participants answered nearly all of them correctly (see Exhibit 5).

**Exhibit 5. Healthy Generations parents answered most child development questions correctly (N=19)**

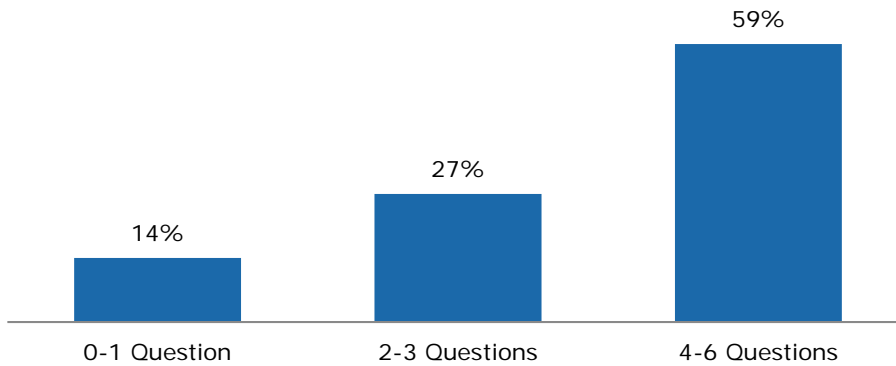


Exhibit 6 shows key child development questions from the survey that Healthy Generations parents were more likely to understand compared to parents in the national study.

**Exhibit 6. Key topics that Healthy Generations parents understand better (N=19)**

Statement	Healthy Generations Participants	National Benchmark Survey of Parents
Children get equal benefit from hearing someone talk on TV versus hearing a person talking next to them (Answer: Definitely False)	46%	33%
A child aged six months or younger who witnesses violence such as seeing his father hit his mother, will not suffer any long term effects because children that age have no long term memory (Answer : Definitely false)	50%	48%
A child who is spanked as a regular form of punishment is more likely to deal with their own anger by being physically aggressive (Answer: Definitely true)	36%	34%

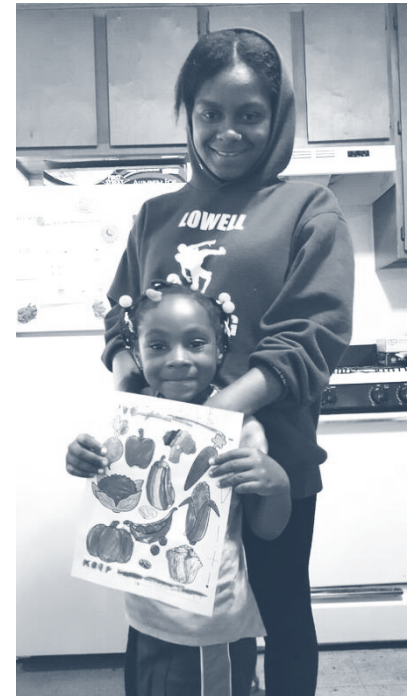
**Increased Self-Efficacy**

**Parents reported positive changes in parenting self-efficacy.** Parenting self-efficacy is defined as an individual’s perceived competence in their parenting role.<sup>16</sup> When parents feel confident in their parenting skills, they experience less stress and improved mental health and well-being. This in turn increases a parent’s

capacity to engage their children and be more empathetic and patient. It also increases parents' ability to assess challenges and solve problems. All of this strengthens parents' resiliency and is linked to positive development outcomes for children.

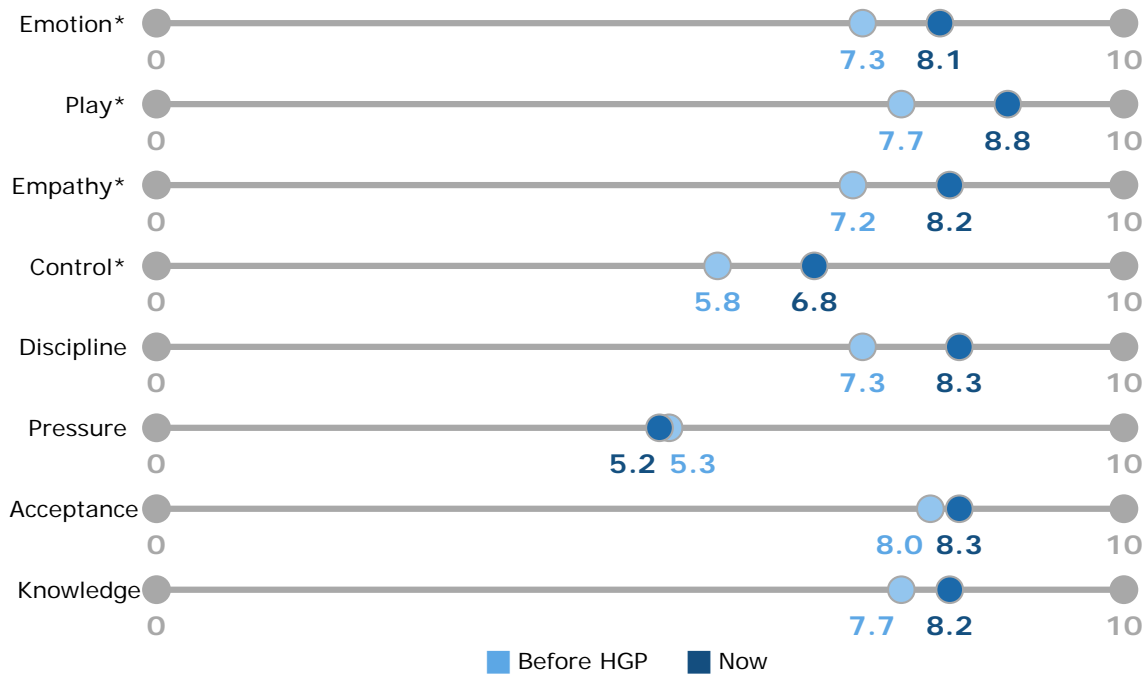
We used the *Tool to Measure Parenting Self-Efficacy (TOPSE)* to assess parenting self-efficacy among Healthy Generations participants. The TOPSE has been used to evaluate a range of parenting programs and interventions. The tool accounts for the views and experiences of parents from a diverse range of cultural, educational, and social backgrounds. We asked parents and caregivers to rate their level of agreements with a series of self-efficacy statements centered on seven key parenting areas, listed below with examples of statements participants rated.

- **Emotion and affection:** *I am able to show affection towards my child.*
- **Play and enjoyment:** *Playing with my child comes easily to me.*
- **Empathy and understanding:** *I am able to comfort my child.*
- **Control:** *I am able to stay calm when my child is behaving badly.*
- **Discipline and boundary setting:** *Setting limits and boundaries is easy for me.*
- **Pressures:** *I do not feel a need to compare myself to other parents.*
- **Self-acceptance:** *I know I am a good enough parent.*
- **Learning and Knowledge:** *I am able to recognize developmental changes in my child.*



Together these parenting skills function to support parents' self-efficacy. Across nearly all areas, parents and caregivers demonstrated improved scores (see Exhibit 7), with significant increases in emotion and affection, play, empathy, and control.

**Exhibit 7. Changes in parenting self-efficacy scores (N=19)**



\*Found to be statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$

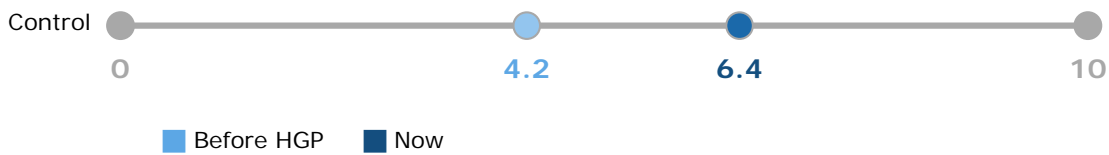


**Parents learned to provide more emotional support, affection, and empathy.** Parents who are concerned, caring, and empathetic are more able to support a child’s social and emotional development, which is a key part of school readiness, and strengthens parent-child attachment. Parents participating in the Healthy Generations Project rated themselves as more empathetic and better able to show emotion and affection for their children.

More importantly, parents who rated themselves lower than a 6 (out of 10) on emotion and affection prior to the program reported some of the greatest increases after participation, increasing 41% on average. Parents who had lower scores on the empathy scale prior to participation also showed substantial improvements after participating in the Healthy Generations Project, increasing 58% on average, which suggests that the program is particularly effective in supporting parents who have higher levels of need and lower self-efficacy.

**Parents showed increased competence in control.** Setting clear expectations and limits with children lead to positive parent-child interactions<sup>17</sup>. This is another area where parents report that they also improved through participating in the Healthy Generations Project. Parents who assessed themselves as 5 or less on the topic of control reported a 52% increase on average after participating in Healthy Generations (see Exhibit 8).

**Exhibit 8. Changes in control among lowest performing parents (N=8)**



## Conclusion

The Healthy Generations Project helps parents strengthen parenting skills that support optimal child development and school readiness. This evaluation found that parents who participated in the program are thriving in three key areas of parenting:

- **Parents regularly engage in literacy and other activities with their children.** Research shows that children who are exposed to reading at home have better childhood development and higher rates of academic success.
- **Parents demonstrated increased knowledge about child development.** When parents know more about child development they can use parenting practices that are developmentally appropriate for their children.
- **Parenting self-efficacy improved.** Parents who feel competent are less stressed and have better mental health and well-being. Parents with higher rates of self-efficacy are more resilient when faced with parenting and life stress.

This evaluation shows that the Healthy Generations Project helps parents develop nurturing and caring relationships with their children and support them on the path to academic and life-long success. Children living in poverty need strong relationships with their parents to build resiliency, and when parents are supported and given the right tools, they can help their children thrive and succeed.

## Works Cited

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Linder, S., Ramey, M., & Zambak, S. (2013). Predictors of school readiness in literacy and mathematics: A selective review of the literature. *Early Childhood Research and Practice, 15*(1).
- <sup>2</sup> Duncan, G., Ziol-Guest, K., & Kalil, A. (2010). Early-childhood poverty and adult attainment, behavior, and health. *Child development, 81*(1), 306-325.
- <sup>3</sup> Bloomfield, L., & Kendall, S. (2012). Parenting self-efficacy, parenting stress and child behaviour before and after a parenting programme. *Primary health care research & development, 13*(04), 364-372.
- <sup>4</sup> Browne, C. H. (2016). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework™: A Pathway to Healthy Development and Well-Being. In *Innovative Approaches to Supporting Families of Young Children* (pp. 1-24). Springer International Publishing.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2017). [Parent Engagement Practices Improve Outcomes for Preschool Children, Issue Brief.](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Browne, C. H. (2016). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework™: A Pathway to Healthy Development and Well-Being. In *Innovative Approaches to Supporting Families of Young Children* (pp. 1-24). Springer International Publishing.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2017). [Parent Engagement Practices Improve Outcomes for Preschool Children, Issue Brief.](#)
- <sup>8</sup> San Francisco Housing Authority; Administrative Data, 2015.
- <sup>9</sup> US Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2015). [The Science of Resilience \(InBrief\). The InBrief Series.](#)
- <sup>11</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2015). [The Science of Resilience \(InBrief\). The InBrief Series.](#)
- <sup>12</sup> Felitti, V., Anda, R., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D., Spitz, A., Edwards, V., Koss, M. and Marks, J. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), pp.245-258.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomson, P. and Jaque, S. (2017). Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and adult attachment interview (AAI) in a non-clinical population. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 70*, pp.255-263.
- <sup>14</sup> Browne, C. H. (2016). The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework™: A Pathway to Healthy Development and Well-Being. In *Innovative Approaches to Supporting Families of Young Children* (pp. 1-24). Springer International Publishing.
- <sup>15</sup> Zero to three (2000). What grown-ups understand about child development: A national benchmark survey.
- <sup>16</sup> Weaver, C. M., Shaw, D. S., Dishion, T. J., & Wilson, M. N. (2008). Parenting self-efficacy and problem behavior in children at high risk for early conduct problems: The mediating role of maternal depression. *Infant Behavior and Development, 31*(4), 594-605.