

# Helping teens prepare for adulthood: Insights from Sacramento's My Empowerment Project



September 2025

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**Submitted to**

Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services

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**About this Brief**

In 2021, the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded a *Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting* demonstration grant to Sacramento County's Department of Child Support Services (DCSS). With this funding, DCSS implemented the My Empowerment (M.E.) Project. The project sought to educate teens and young adults about parenthood's financial, legal, and emotional responsibilities. MEF Associates conducted a mixed-methods implementation and outcomes evaluation of the M.E. Project. This brief highlights key lessons learned from the evaluation.

The authors thank Shaun Edwards at DCSS and Lisa Spiegler at BGCSAC for their collaboration on the evaluation, as well as Kate Stepleton at MEF for reviewing and providing feedback on the brief.

Early work on this project would not have been possible without the contributions of Dr. Bright Sarfo, who passed away in early 2023. Dr. Sarfo's voice was critical in charting a course for this project and ensuring that the approach elevated the perspectives of the communities served.

**Suggested citation**

Patnaik, A., and Rosen, J. (2025). *Helping Teens Prepare for Adulthood: Insights from Sacramento's My Empowerment Project*. Alexandria, VA: MEF Associates.

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## Introduction

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How can child support programs help young people make thoughtful decisions about their futures? In 2021, the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) funded the *Charting a Course for Economic Mobility and Responsible Parenting* demonstration grants to explore this question. The grants sought to support teens and young adults in making informed choices about delaying parenthood until they finished school, started a career, and entered a committed relationship.

With this grant award, Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) launched the program, *My Empowerment Project: My Life, My Journey, My Choices* (M.E. Project). By helping young people understand the responsibilities of parenthood and guiding them in making informed decisions about relationships, education, work, and finances, DCSS took a proactive approach and sought to equip youth with skills to avoid some of the struggles that can lead to the need for child support enforcement.

DCSS partnered with the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Sacramento (BGCSAC) to deliver the services through its after-school programs, and with MEF Associates to evaluate the project's implementation and outcomes. This brief highlights lessons for policymakers and practitioners to inform future efforts that support youth as they navigate critical life decisions.

## Program design

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Supporting teens as they plan for their future means not only equipping them with knowledge but also building their confidence and creating meaningful opportunities to apply what they learn. The M.E. Project was designed with this holistic approach in mind, combining youth engagement strategies with a curriculum focused on real-world skills for adulthood. In this section, we provide an overview of the program's design.

**Goals.** The program sought to educate youth about the real-life emotional, legal, and financial effects of becoming a parent. The M.E. Project supported OCSS's goal of promoting parenting responsibility and aligned with DCSS's mission to promote the well-being of children and families by supporting responsible parenting and economic stability. By encouraging youth to delay parenthood until they were better prepared, the program sought to foster conditions that support long-term co-parenting and voluntary child support, potentially reducing the need for child support enforcement in the future. Intended to be peer-to-peer, youth-centered, and youth-designed, the program included a youth advisory council to shape its direction during the design phase. It prioritized reaching African American and Hispanic youth, who have historically experienced higher teen birth rates in California.

**Partners.** DCSS selected BGCSAC to design and deliver the M.E. Project in its after-school programs. BGCSAC, a nonprofit organization with twelve sites across Greater Sacramento, offers after-school and summer programs to youth aged six and older, focusing on education and learning, the arts, health and wellness, character and leadership, sports and recreation, and workforce readiness.

**Design.** During the design phase in the 2022-2023 school year, BGCSAC formed a youth council, conducted a needs assessment, selected the curriculum, developed an implementation schedule, and trained and hired facilitators (Patnaik & Heilman, 2024a).

**Curricula.** With youth input, DCSS and BGCSAC selected curricula aligned with four success sequencing<sup>1</sup> themes: college readiness, career readiness, financial skills, and responsible parenting. Exhibit 1 outlines the modules and describes the curricula and lesson topics used for each theme. Together, these curricula offered a roadmap for youth to prepare for adulthood and delay parenthood until they were ready emotionally, financially, and socially.

**Exhibit 1. M.E. Project curricula**

<b>College Readiness Module</b>	This module included eight lessons from the <i>Diplomas to Degrees</i> curriculum (Boys & Girls Clubs of America [BGCA], n.d.-b). <i>Diplomas to Degrees</i> is a curriculum developed by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) that focuses on preparing youth for postsecondary education and career success. Lessons selected for this module included: What is Dating Violence, Lifestyle Reality, Exploring Types of Postsecondary Education, My College Planning Checklist, Show Me the Money, Culture Shock, Planning a College Budget, and Time Management in College.
<b>Career Readiness Module</b>	This module included eight lessons from the <i>Career Launch</i> curriculum (BGCA, n.d.-a). <i>Career Launch</i> is a curriculum from BGCA that helps youth explore careers and build job readiness based on their skills and interests. Lessons selected for this module included: What Is My Vision for the Future?, What Are Potential Careers?, Where Do I Begin?, How Can I Improve My Communication Skills?, How Do I Prepare for an Interview?, What Is Appropriate Work Behavior?, How Do I Create a Resume?, and How Do I Deal with Workplace Challenges?.
<b>Financial Literacy Module</b>	This module included five lessons from the <i>Money Matters</i> curriculum (BGCA, n.d.-c) and three lessons from the <i>SMART Moves</i> curriculum (BGCA, n.d.-d). <i>Money Matters</i> is a curriculum from BGCA that helps youth develop financial management skills. Lessons selected for this module included: How Does Budgeting Help Me Reach My Goals?, How Does Saving Help Me Reach My Goals?, How Do Postsecondary Costs Impact My Goals?, How Does Using Credit Wisely Help Me Reach My Goals?, How Can Investing Help Me Reach My Goals? <i>SMART Moves</i> is a curriculum from BGCA that promotes positive behavior in youth related to substance abuse and adolescent sexual involvement. Lessons selected for this module included: Healthy Boundaries, All the Feels, and Steps to Say No.
<b>Responsible Parenting Module</b>	This module included eight lessons from the <i>Parenting: It's a Life</i> curriculum developed by Iowa State University (Iowa State University, n.d.). <i>Parenting: It's a Life</i> teaches youth about the various responsibilities associated with parenthood. Lesson selected for this module included: Peer Pressure, Healthy Relationships, Risk and Protective Factors, The Cost of Raising a Child, Managing Money, Establishing Paternity, Co-Parenting, and Child Support.

Note: The Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) is the national umbrella organization that provides guidance and resources to local affiliates such as BGCSAC, which operates youth programs on the ground.

While the selected curricula have not been rigorously evaluated for impacts, they are grounded in well-established best practices in youth development and have been widely adopted across youth-serving programs.

**Project sites.** In Year One, BGCSAC selected after-school programs at three sites serving youth ages 13 and older for the M.E. Project: the Rio Tierra Junior High Club (Rio Tierra), the Thomas P. Raley Teen Center (Raley), and the Youth Detention Facility (YDF). In Year Two, BGCSAC replaced the Rio Tierra site with the Rancho Cordova Youth Center (RCYC). Exhibit 2 describes each site.

<sup>1</sup> Success sequencing refers to a series of life milestones that are linked to avoiding poverty and achieving middle-class status. These typically include finishing high school, securing full-time work, and having children after marriage (Goesling et al., 2020).

## Exhibit 2. BGCSAC sites selected for the M.E. Project

Rio Tierra (Year One)	Raley (Years One and Two)	YDF (Years One and Two)	RCYC (Year Two)
Opened in 2021 in the Northgate neighborhood of North Sacramento, Rio Tierra serves youth ages 6 to 18 with weekday before- and after-school programs.	Opened in 1999 in downtown Sacramento’s Alkali Flat neighborhood, Raley originally served youth ages 6 to 18 but was converted in 2012 to serve only teens ages 13 to 18 with after-school programming.	Opened in 2014 within a Sacramento County Probation facility ten miles east of downtown, YDF serves juvenile residents with weekday and Saturday programming.	Opened in 2022 in central Rancho Cordova, RCYC serves youth ages 6 to 18 with weekly after-school programs and summer programs.

Once the program design was complete, the M.E. Project moved from planning to practice, delivering its lessons in after-school programs across a variety of youth-serving settings.

## Program implementation

Implementing the M.E. Project required more than delivering the selected curricula. It also involved building connections with youth and tailoring the approach to fit each site’s unique context. In this section, we describe how these different sites implemented the project. While the sites followed a shared framework centered on the core themes, implementation strategies varied by site and evolved based on feedback from staff, facilitators, and participants.

**Outreach at after-school sites.** BGCSAC used a range of outreach strategies at the after-school sites to recruit youth, including school presentations, back-to-school events, and social media. At nearby junior high and middle schools, staff met with principals, health and life skills teachers, counselors, and students to introduce the project. They also spoke with youth currently enrolled in their clubs to explain the opportunity. In Year One, BGCSAC began recruitment the summer before the program started. For Year Two, they began outreach efforts earlier, during Year One implementation, continuing to visit local schools, setting up information tables and hand out flyers through the summer and over Year Two. Staff also contacted parents of current and former club members through phone calls and emails. When parents came to program sites to pick up younger siblings, staff used the opportunity to share information about the project.

**Selection at YDF.** At YDF, county probation staff selected the youth to participate. In Year One, they selected two cohorts from units with older residents and relatively lower turnover. In Year Two, staff selected the unit with the largest population of youth meeting the project’s age eligibility criteria.

**Staffing.** All program sites had similar staffing structures, typically including a Site Manager and one or more Youth Development Professionals (YDPs). In general, YDPs were responsible for facilitating the program and delivering the lessons. At some sites, a single YDP facilitated all lessons, while at others, different YDPs facilitated different modules. For example, at Raley in Year Two, YDPs facilitated lessons that they were best suited to teach based on their knowledge and lived experiences. In addition to facilitation, YDPs tracked attendance, administered pre- and post-assessments, and distributed incentives. Site Managers oversaw program implementation at their sites. At some sites, they also facilitated a few lessons or modeled early sessions to train YDPs. They were also responsible for

outreach and recruitment, leading quarterly youth focus groups, and conducting classroom observations to complete fidelity checklists.

**Curricula delivery.** The M.E. Project period was divided into four quarters, with each quarter focused on one of the project’s four themes (Exhibit 3). This approach mirrored BGCSAC’s overall program structure. Each quarter, sites typically delivered eight one-hour sessions, held once a week over eight weeks.<sup>2</sup> The order in which the modules were delivered changed from Year One to Year Two, based on feedback from staff.

**Exhibit 3. M.E. Project schedule**

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
Year 1	Responsible Parenting	College readiness	Career readiness	Financial readiness
Year 2	College readiness	Career readiness	Financial readiness	Responsible Parenting

**Incentives.** Youth at the after-school sites received snacks during program sessions and quarterly attendance-based stipends of \$8 per session. YDF participants received commissary snacks after each session, funded by BGCSAC.<sup>3</sup> However, this was discontinued in Year Two due to a change in facility regulations.

**Evaluation design**

To understand how the M.E. Project worked in practice, we conducted a mixed-methods evaluation combining quantitative data and qualitative insights. This approach allowed us to capture both the measurable outcomes and the perspectives of youth and staff. In this section, we describe the key research questions guiding our evaluation and the data sources used to explore both how the project was delivered and what it achieved.

**Research questions.** The evaluation was focused on the questions below. Our previous [research brief on program design](#) (Patnaik & Heilman, 2024a) answered Question 1, while our [research brief on the first year of implementation](#) (Patnaik & Heilman, 2024b) answered Questions 2 to 6. This brief offers lessons learned and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

1. How did DCSS and BGCSAC develop the youth-led curriculum?
2. What are the lessons delivered through the M.E. Project curriculum?
3. How are the M.E. Project curriculum lessons delivered?
4. What are the characteristics of youth receiving the M.E. Project curriculum?
5. What are the experiences of youth receiving the M.E. Project curriculum?
6. Is the M.E. curriculum associated with increased knowledge, improved skills, and improved attitudes related to parenting, education, career planning, and financial planning?

<sup>2</sup> In a few cases, modules were delivered back-to-back in two hour sessions; however, this was not common.

<sup>3</sup> The commissary is a store inside YDF where youth can purchase snacks, toiletries, and other personal items. YDF youth cannot have cash and can only make purchases using commissary accounts. Money can be deposited into these accounts by family members, friends, or through job earnings.

**Data sources and collection.** Sources included both primary (collected by our team) and secondary (collected by BGCSAC) data. Most data were collected by BGCSAC, with MEF designing data collection protocols and conducting analysis. Exhibit 4 summarizes the data sources used in the evaluation, including the type of information collected, the frequency of collection, and the staff responsible for gathering each type of data.

**Exhibit 4. Evaluation data sources**

Data source	Description	Frequency	Responsible for data collection
Document reviews	Recruitment materials, lesson plans, and program schedules	Annually	BGCSAC
Program data	Youth demographics and attendance records	Quarterly	BGCSAC
Fidelity checklists	Observations and checklists used to monitor lesson delivery	Quarterly	BGCSAC
Focus groups	Focus groups with participating youth	Quarterly	BGCSAC
Interviews	Interviews with facilitators, site managers, and program administrators	Annually	MEF
Assessments	Pre-and post-assessments measuring youth knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to lesson content	Quarterly	BGCSAC

By drawing on multiple data sources and methods, the evaluation offers robust insights about youth programs to inform future programming and policy decisions.

**Evaluation findings**

Our evaluation had two components which, taken together, provide rich information about the M.E. Project’s delivery and its outcomes. The implementation evaluation explored how the program was implemented across sites, identifying what worked well, the challenges faced, and whether the curricula were delivered as intended. For the outcomes evaluation, we examined changes in youth knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors tied to the project’s core themes. To provide a clearer picture of how each type of data contributed to our understanding of both implementation and outcomes, we present key findings below, organized by data source.

**Document review findings**

Through document reviews and monthly project team meetings, we gained a detailed understanding of how the M.E. Project was implemented across sites. We learned which lessons were delivered each quarter, how sessions were scheduled and structured, and how key components, such as recruitment, attendance tracking, incentives, assessments, and focus groups, were carried out. This analysis revealed not only what sites were doing but also when and why certain practices deviated from the original plan. These findings provided important information about variation across sites and pointed to ways to improve consistency and fidelity.

**Curricula.** Curriculum reviews in Year One helped ensure that each module had an appropriate assessment. For example, the project team selected the Career and College Readiness Self-Efficacy Inventory (CCRSI) to assess the College Readiness module, which lacked its own assessment. The team

also adapted the *Parenting: It's a Life* assessments to better reflect the experiences of Black and Hispanic youth, as the original materials were developed in Iowa with predominantly White youth.

**Timelines and schedules.** Reviewing the annual timelines and schedules helped us track when sites facilitated specific modules and lessons. Timelines identified BGCSAC site closures during winter and summer breaks. Comparing schedules across years revealed changes that sites made in Year Two, such as moving the parenting module to later in the year and removing the session on dating violence.

**Outreach flyers.** Flyers often emphasized stipends to attract youth. Additionally, the focus of Year Two materials shifted from parenting skills to life skills.

**Meeting notes.** MEF staff took detailed notes during project team meetings and reviewed them to track both major and minor implementation adaptations. Major changes included the transition to a new site in Year Two and the removal of commissary incentives at YDF. Minor adaptations included instances where sites delivered two lessons back-to-back. Project administrators also shared real-time context for recruitment strategies, such as the decision to begin Year Two recruitment during Year One, and offered explanations for attendance fluctuations, including youths' conflicts with other extracurricular activities.

## Program data findings

Program data offered insight into who the program serves and how youth engaged with the M.E. Project over time and across sites. Specifically, we examined youth demographics as well as patterns in participation and session attendance.

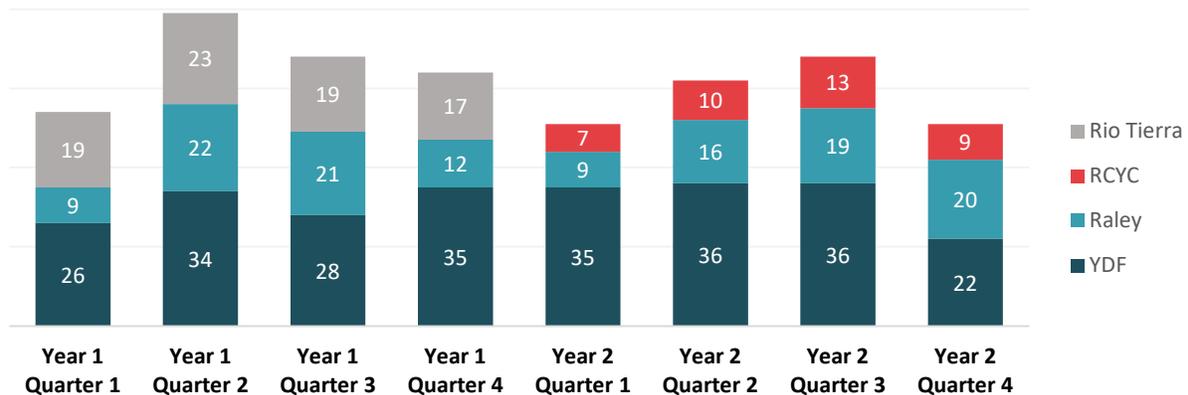
**Demographics.** BGCSAC collected participant demographic data when youth completed the pre-assessments. Overall, the program reached youth across a wide age range from ages 13 to 18 and older.<sup>4</sup> However, age varied widely across sites. Raley and Rio Tierra participants were mostly 13 to 14 years old, while YDF served primarily older youth, with 75 percent aged 17 or older. In contrast, RCYC had a broader age distribution, with most participants aged 13, but a notable share aged 15 to 17. Most youth served by the program identified as male (78 percent), though self-reported gender varied by site. The share of participants who identified as male ranged from 47 percent at Raley to 95 percent at YDF.. Youth participants represented a range of racial backgrounds and most commonly identified as Black or African American (43 percent). Multi-racial youth made up 26 percent of participants, and 20 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino. The racial and ethnic distribution varied by site, with Rio Tierra having the highest proportion of Black or African American youth (58 percent) and RCYC serving the largest share of Hispanic or Latino youth (50 percent). As suggested by age patterns, most participants at RCYC (60 percent) and nearly all participants at Raley and Rio Tierra (98 and 100 percent, respectively) were in middle school. YDF served an older group, with the majority in high school (55 percent) and a notable share in technical school (19 percent) or not currently enrolled (25 percent).

**Participation.** BGCSAC documented youth enrollment and attendance and provided the data to MEF for analysis. The number of youth who participated in the program, i.e., who enrolled and attended at least one session, varied across sites and over time. Participation ranged from a low of 51 youth in the first and last quarters of Year Two to a high of 79 in the second quarter of Year One. YDF consistently accounted for the largest share of participants throughout the project. Exhibit 5 shows the number of participants at each site by quarter, illustrating variation across locations and over time.

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<sup>4</sup> As specified in the grant, the program was only open to youth ages 13 to 25.

## Exhibit 5. Participation



Note: Throughout this report, we use “participation” to refer to the number of youth who attended at least one session during a given quarter, and “attendance” to refer to the number of sessions attended by youth.

**Session attendance.** BGCSAC tracked attendance records and shared the data with MEF for analysis. Session attendance among enrolled participants, that is, the number of sessions actually attended, also varied across sites and over time. Each quarter included eight sessions, and, on average, youth attended six sessions per quarter. YDF youth generally attended fewer sessions than youth at other sites, largely due to structural barriers and turnover.<sup>5</sup>

## Fidelity checklist findings

Site managers completed fidelity checklists during quarterly classroom observations at each site. Each checklist included items assessing whether facilitators started class on time, were prepared with materials, presented topics effectively, facilitated inclusive discussions, responded to questions warmly and responsively, provided supportive feedback, and managed technical difficulties. BGCSAC submitted the checklists to MEF for analysis at the end of each quarter. Our analysis suggested that most sites implemented lessons as intended, though we observed some variations in consistency (Exhibit 6). In Year One, the share of checklist items rated as fully completed ranged from an average of 46 percent at Raley to 85 percent at Rio Terra. By Year Two, fidelity improved across sites, with Raley increasing to 96 percent and YDF rising to 89 percent, up from 75 percent in Year One. These gains suggest more consistent lesson implementation over time.

## Exhibit 6. Percentage of Fidelity Checklist Items Fully Completed by Site and Year



<sup>5</sup> YDF youth often missed sessions because of court appearances, visitations, scheduling conflicts with other facility programs, or restrictions placed by staff due to misconduct. Transfers to other housing units or release from the facility also interrupted participation.

## Focus group findings

Site managers facilitated focus groups with youth at the end of each quarter and submitted their notes to MEF for analysis. The number of youth participating in these focus groups varied by site and quarter, with participation ranging from four to 24 youth per site per quarter. The focus groups offered insight into what worked well and what could be improved. Youth reported greater engagement when sessions were interactive, facilitators were relatable and supportive, content felt relevant to their experiences, and incentives were available.

**Recruitment and attendance.** At after-school sites, youth typically heard about the program from staff, family, or friends. They were motivated to join by the stipends, snacks, opportunities to spend time with peers, and the chance to learn something new. At YDF, participation was often driven by the opportunity for youth to leave their unit and access commissary snacks.

**Engaging curriculum.** Overall, youth identified several lessons and topics that they enjoyed, related to, and felt they could apply to their everyday lives. In general, youth enjoyed lessons related to financial literacy, budgeting, saving money, and paying for postsecondary education. Youth also enjoyed lessons and activities related to postsecondary education, such as researching college options and learning about opportunities to afford college. They also appreciate lessons related to career development, including creating resumes and doing mock interviews. While not all youth related to parenthood lessons, some, especially from YDF, felt these topics were helpful for navigating current social situations.

**Program strengths.** Beyond specific curriculum, youth also identified various program components that made the M.E. Project enjoyable. Across all sites and age groups, youth strongly preferred interactive activities such as role-playing, mock interviews, and group discussions over passive formats like reading slides or completing worksheets. Most youth reported strong rapport with facilitators, noting that they explained concepts clearly and used personal examples that made the material more relatable.

**Recommendations for improvement.** When asked how the program could improve, youth across sites suggested making sessions more interactive to maintain engagement. At after-school sites, they also recommended increasing stipends and offering more snacks. Some wanted more in-depth content on specific topics, such as navigating student loans.

**Facilitation.** Youth across all sites consistently praised the quality of facilitation. They felt staff created a welcoming space where they could share openly and ask questions without judgment. They described facilitators as knowledgeable and skilled at connecting curriculum topics to real life.

## Staff interview findings

We interviewed DCSS and BGCSAC administrators, BGCSAC site managers, and BGGCSAC facilitators to gather staff perspectives on program implementation. In Year 1, we conducted eight interviews, and in Year 2, we conducted seven. Some staff participated in both years, while others were new to the project in Year Two. These conversations revealed that, while staff felt the curriculum content was often too advanced for the youth served, they adapted the content and tailored the material to meet youth needs, connected topics to youths' lived experiences, and created interactive and supportive learning environments. Interviewees also shared successful participant recruitment strategies and suggested improvements such as enhanced training, clearer facilitation tools, and stronger communication.

**Goals.** When asked about the primary goals of the M.E. Project, interviewees offered a range of responses. Most agreed that the project aimed to help youth prepare for adulthood, explore post–high school options, and build early awareness of topics like financial planning and responsible parenting. Some also emphasized broader goals, such as preventing early parenthood or equipping youth with tools to reach their full potential. A YDF facilitator also noted the importance of giving justice-involved youth practical skills and options to support their reentry.

*“For our teen population, I saw [the M.E. Project] as a launching pad of preparation for their future ... setting up the basic information for them to then dig deeper into what they feel they need to gain for the future.”*

—Site manager

**Recruitment.** Interviewees reflected on the recruitment strategies that were effective for the M.E. Project. While incentives helped draw in youth, staff emphasized that the strong, trusting relationships they had established with youth before the M.E. Project played an equally important role. These relationships often motivated youth to join and stay engaged. Peer-to-peer recruitment was also seen as effective, as interviewees felt that youth were more likely to participate when introduced to the program by friends. One manager noted that presenting the program as a unique opportunity, like an “elite club,” helped spark interest. Youth were eager to be part of a community and drawn to the safe and welcoming space where they could learn and connect.

*“Giving them a safe space to be able to open up and really learn about those topics with someone whom they felt relatable to really supported the student staying.”*

—Site Manager

**Attendance.** Attendance fluctuated over the school year, with dips often driven by conflicting sports obligations and other extracurricular activities. The same factors that motivated youth to participate also supported consistent attendance: stipends, snacks, connections with trusted staff fostered through during the M.E. Project, a sense of community, and a safe space to share and learn.

*“They won't attend the whole week except for on Wednesdays. They don't miss [the] M.E. project. I feel like [the] M.E. project is one of the things that brings the kids to [the] program. ... A lot of them don't have people that they can talk to, and our staff is really good at being able to talk to people.”*

—Facilitator

**Program design.** Interviewees were asked about various elements of program design, including the curriculum, lessons, materials, and activities. Across sites and roles, interviewees felt that some content was too advanced for many youth participants; however, a few also recognized the importance of exposing youth to these topics at an early age. One administrator and site manager viewed the decision to move parenting topics to the final quarter in Year Two as a positive change. They felt that youth connected more to the material because they had matured over the school year and gained knowledge about other aspects of adulthood in earlier quarters. Similarly, another interviewee felt that introducing college readiness topics early in the academic year helped youth make informed decisions about high school. Several interviewees noted that the program’s design required skilled, experienced facilitators to work around what they perceived as some of the curricula’s weaknesses. One facilitator, for example, felt that the curricula lacked relatable examples, did not flag sensitive topics that could be challenging to navigate, and was unclear about how lessons were connected. Another facilitator appreciated that the lessons included open-ended, thought-provoking questions that encouraged discussion.

*“A lot of the things I feel like were a little bit above our kids' level, but everything was something that needed to happen. You need these discussions because if you don't have these discussions, and you wait until later, I feel like it's too late. So, do I think it's a little bit above their level? Yes. But do I think that this was needed? Absolutely.”*

—Facilitator

**Measures of success.** Definitions of success varied by role and site. Most site managers and facilitators gauged success by how actively youth engaged with the program and whether they participated in discussions, showed interest, or applied lessons to their lives. In contrast, administrators focused on measurable outcomes, such as improvements in assessment scores and fidelity of program delivery.

*“How I would say it was a success is if I were to bump into one of my students, let's say 10 years from now ... They apply [the lessons] to their real life and they were able to have something to show for it.”*

- Facilitator

*“Success for this project specifically would be seeing an uptick in pre- and post-survey results...the youth are taking [the surveys], are learning, are understanding, and from a data standpoint [we are] seeing that the post-surveys are higher ... than the pre-survey. So that's an analytical part of success.”*

—DCSS administrator

## Pre- and post-assessment findings

We measured changes in youth knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors using quantitative data from youth who completed both the pre- and post-assessments each quarter. Exhibit 7 describes the assessments used during the M.E. Project. Assessments varied by module. When available, we used assessments provided by the curriculum developers.

### Exhibit 7. Assessments used for M.E. Project curricula

Module	Corresponding assessment used and description of assessment
College Readiness	The <i>Diplomas to Degrees</i> curriculum developer did not provide an assessment so we used the Career and College Readiness Self-Efficacy Inventory (Baker et al., 2017) which measures individuals' belief in their readiness to begin studies in a career pathway and preparedness for success in postsecondary education using four factors: 1) College Knowledge, 2) Positive Personal Characteristics, 3) Academic Competence, and 4) Potential to Achieve Future Goals
Career Readiness	We used the assessment provided by the <i>Career Launch</i> curriculum developer, which measures participants' attitudes and beliefs, behaviors, and knowledge related to job readiness.
Financial Literacy	We used the assessment provided by the <i>Money Matters</i> curriculum developer, which measures participants' attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge related to financial management.
Responsible Parenting	We used the assessment provided by the <i>Parenting: It's a Life</i> curriculum developer, which measures participants' attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge with questions about their romantic relationships, plans for parenting, and awareness of parenting topics.

We shared our findings with the project team quarterly to support continuous improvement and outcomes tracking. Over the two years of implementation, we observed statistically significant changes in some measures from the Career Readiness, Financial Literacy, and Responsible Parenting Modules (see Exhibit 8).

## Exhibit 8. Pre-post changes in youth outcomes by curriculum and year

Module	Year One	Year Two
College Readiness	-	-
Career Readiness	<p>↓ % reporting “I know what my interests are and the kinds of things I like to do.”</p> <p>↑ % reporting they “Talk to a parent, teacher, Club staff, or other adult about a possible work experience (paid or unpaid).”</p> <p>↑ % agreeing that “Finding a mentor is important as you plan for a career.”</p>	<p>↓ % agreeing that “There’s a lot help available to me as I plan my career.”</p> <p>↓ % agreeing that “If I start early, work hard and plan, I can have a fulfilling career.”</p> <p>↑ % reporting they “Talk with a friend, fellow Club members, or another youth about a possible work experience.”</p> <p>↑ % reporting they “Participate in school clubs or activities that help you discover your interests.”</p>
Financial Literacy	<p>↓ % reporting setting short-term life goals</p> <p>↓ % expressing confidence about someday investing money.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about saving money in a savings account.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about making a career decision that will help them reach their goal.</p>	<p>↑ % expressing confidence about someday investing money.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about making a career decision that will help them reach their goal.</p> <p>↑ % reporting they made a savings plan to reach goals.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about paying for college or postsecondary education.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about managing credit card debt someday.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about making financial decisions in the next 2 years that will help 10 years from now.</p> <p>↑ % expressing confidence about linking purchasing decisions to goals.</p>
Responsible Parenting	<p>↓ % reporting they would like to have their first child at the age of 19 or younger.</p>	<p>↑ Youths’ knowledge of Risk and Protective Factors.</p>

Note: Arrows indicate statistically significant pre-post changes: ↑ = increase in a desired outcome, ↓ = decrease in an undesired outcome, ↑ = increase in an undesired outcome, and ↓ = decrease in a desired outcome.

Dashes indicate no significant change. All results at p<.05 or better.

Due to the small number of participants overall and the limited share who completed both assessments, our analytical sample size was relatively small (ranging from 19 to 53 youth per quarter). This small sample size increases the likelihood that the changes we saw could be due to chance rather than the program. As a result, we cannot draw firm conclusions about whether the program caused the observed changes.

### Limitations

While the implementation evaluation provided valuable insights, it had some limitations that could affect the interpretation of results. Although staff interviews were conducted privately and with confidentiality protections, respondents may have been influenced by a desire to provide positive feedback or avoid criticism (social desirability bias), affecting the accuracy of reported experiences. Similarly, youth may have felt reluctant to share candid opinions in focus groups led by program staff.

*“They share things obviously in our focus groups and things like that. But sometimes I really feel like it's not genuine. I think it's more so ... ‘let me just [tell the facilitator] what they want to hear.’”*

*—Site manager*

The fidelity checklists were brief and may not have captured the full complexity of lesson delivery. Additionally, because site managers conducted the observations and completed the checklists, their reporting may reflect bias and lead to overestimates of fidelity. Finally, the documents we could review may have been incomplete or not fully reflective of actual practice, limiting the insights we gained.

Our outcomes evaluation had additional limitations that could influence the reliability and generalizability of the findings. We used a single-group pre-post design and did not include a comparison group that did not receive M.E. Project services. As a result, it is difficult to say whether any observed changes could be attributed to the program. Our analysis also relied on youth who completed both the pre- and post-assessments, who may differ in meaningful ways from those who did not complete both assessments, limiting the representativeness of the results.

The timing of the assessments also presents a limitation. The assessments measured changes over the course of the module, typically eight weeks, a relatively short period to capture shifts in knowledge, attitudes, or behavior that may evolve over time. Longer-term follow-up is needed to understand the lasting effects of the program. Assessment data was self-reported, which may have been influenced by how well youth understood the questions or whether they tried to give what they thought was the “right” answer. This may have affected the quality and accuracy of responses. Finally, several facilitators shared concerns that youth may not have taken the assessments seriously. They described some cases where youth rushed through the surveys or skipped questions, potentially reducing the reliability of the data. Together, these limitations highlight the challenges of evaluating a small-scale, community-based program in real-world settings. While the data do not allow for definitive conclusions, they provide a valuable starting point for understanding youth outcomes and refining future evaluation efforts.

## **Key lessons to inform future efforts**

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Programs like the M.E. Project offer valuable lessons for those working to support youth at critical points in their development, whether in after-school programs or juvenile justice settings. While each setting presented unique challenges and opportunities, several key themes emerged about what it takes to engage young people meaningfully and deliver content that resonates with them. The following sections share insights for program practitioners and policymakers, drawn from the M.E. Project’s implementation across several contexts.

### **Insights for program practitioners working with teens in after-school settings**

M.E. Project implementation across multiple community-based sites demonstrates how success sequencing content can be integrated into existing after-school programs. Below, we offer key lessons that can help after-school providers design and deliver programming that helps equip teens with the knowledge and skills to plan for their futures academically, professionally, financially, and personally.

### **Equip facilitators to effectively deliver lessons with curriculum-specific training and tools.**

M.E. Project staff received general training through the Boys & Girls Club and guidance on project processes like administering assessments, tracking attendance, and distributing incentives. However, many facilitators expressed a need for more focused training on the curriculum content and facilitation strategies. The M.E. Project experience suggests that providing project-specific training could increase facilitator confidence, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as abusive relationships. Offering opportunities to shadow experienced staff, review recorded sessions, or access clear implementation guides may further support facilitator readiness. This aligns with existing research showing that strong training and practical tools not only improve delivery but also establish clear standards for implementation fidelity and promote consistency across sites (Wiedow, 2018; Wilson et al., 2021).

*“Just watching [the site manager run the program] and [the site manager] taking us in one at a time and showing us how each session is supposed to run and how we’re supposed to do it was a big help.”*

—Facilitator

### **Give staff adequate time to prepare and plan.**

Although facilitators were committed and resourceful, they reported that they lacked adequate time to prepare before lessons. Facilitators felt supported by their site managers but shared that more time was needed to review materials, plan activities, and build confidence in delivering content.

*“Wednesdays are crazy, but I would give [the facilitator] an hour... [to] read over [the lesson plan], pull your resources. If there’s anything you need to change, we can prep new worksheets, [and reword] anything.”*

—Site manager

Lessons from the M.E. Project suggest that investing sufficient time upfront for staff preparation may not only strengthen implementation but also reduce stress on frontline staff. Site managers could support facilitators by printing materials in advance, reading the curriculum and highlighting key activities, and offering concrete suggestions for tailoring lessons to their group.

### **Plan and implement coordinated and sustained recruitment strategies.**

M.E. Project site managers found success in recruitment by visiting local schools, setting up informational booths at school events, distributing flyers, and speaking directly with students and parents. Leveraging existing relationships between staff and teens was another key strategy, as youth were often more willing to join when invited by a trusted adult. This evaluation also suggests that peer-to-peer recruitment may be effective. During focus groups, youth reported joining the M.E. Project because their friends joined. Staff and administrators expressed similar sentiments during interviews. At the same time, the M.E. Project encountered some barriers to recruitment, such as conflicts with participants’ after-school sports or other extracurricular activities. The M.E. Project experience suggests that effective recruitment may require a coordinated and multi-pronged approach that adapts outreach and scheduling to fit the needs of youth and families.

### **Use incentives to engage and empower youth.**

Both M.E. Project staff and youth participants emphasized the importance of monetary incentives in supporting engagement. Stipends not only motivated youth to sign up for the program but also encouraged consistent attendance. Facilitators used incentives creatively, such as integrating them into budgeting lessons to reinforce key skills. One site manager felt that stipends helped build financial confidence among participants, many of whom came from families with low incomes, by reinforcing that financial stability was achievable. Lessons from the M.E. Project suggest that, when used thoughtfully, incentives may serve as both a motivator and a tool for building real-world skills and confidence.

*"I really appreciate giving youth an opportunity to earn a stipend. ... There's a lot of trauma associated with financial stability, and so I think that giving them the opportunity to get a paycheck, it's kind of like a start and an open door of 'I can do this'."*

—Site manager

### **Make content youth-centered and age appropriate to improve engagement.**

M.E. Project staff frequently observed that some lessons were too advanced or the materials were too complex for participants, particularly for younger participants at after-school sites. Facilitators noted that the curriculum often took a "one-size-fits-all" approach, with some content lacking relevance or relatable examples that reflected youths' lived experiences. To address this, facilitators routinely adapted lesson plans to meet the abilities, needs, and interests of the youth in their classrooms. They also made real-time adjustments in the classroom when activities failed to engage the youth.

*"We still taught the lesson, but it looked different than what it is on paper, always adapting to the needs of the kids first."*

—Site manager

The M.E. Project experience suggests that avoiding generic lessons and designing content that is youth-centered, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in real-life experiences may help spark and sustain engagement.

### **Bring lessons to life through lived experience.**

M.E. Project site managers noted the importance of being intentional in selecting facilitators who are not only trained but also have lived experience with the topics being taught. Facilitators described incorporating their lived experience into lessons to make curriculum content more real, relevant, and relatable for youth. They shared personal stories to bring abstract topics to life, such as being the first in their family to apply to college, navigating early parenthood, or preparing for a job interview. Program staff and managers felt that these moments helped youth connect the material to someone they knew and trusted, encouraging deeper engagement and more meaningful conversations. The M.E. Project's approach suggests that using facilitators who can authentically relate to youth may help connect the curriculum to real life.

*"Being able to tell them what it's like in real life, not just the statistics and the numbers, but from somebody that's actually lived it personally and give them personal advice and personal experience, I feel like that helps keep [the youth] really engaged."*

—Facilitator

### **Prioritize interactive and hands-on learning to improve engagement.**

M.E. project staff noted that youth were more engaged during interactive activities than when staff lectured or used slide decks. Youth participants in focus groups also expressed strong preferences for activities like role-playing, mock interviews, and group discussion over worksheets or lectures. Experiences of participants involved with the M.E. Project suggest that staff should find ways to incorporate different types of activities and choose formats that allow teens to actively apply what they're learning in a supportive environment.

*"Those interactive pieces that the staff ... [create] based off of the assignments or the curriculum provided really help hit the nail on the head."*

—Site manager

### **Foster an open, safe, and respectful space for learning.**

Both M.E. Project staff and youth participants emphasized the importance of creating a safe, respectful space where youth felt comfortable sharing, asking questions, and engaging in meaningful discussion, even around sensitive topics. Facilitators cultivated this environment by setting clear expectations, establishing group norms, carefully preparing the physical classroom, and modeling positive behavior. They also treated missteps as learning opportunities. For example, when a youth made an inappropriate comment, the facilitator removed the student from class but later addressed their behavior in a one-on-one conversation, explained why it was harmful, and invited the youth to reflect and return, turning the situation into a teachable moment.

Insights from the M.E. Project suggest that specific facilitator practices can help build a space where all youth feel safe, valued, and ready to participate. For example, during focus groups, youth reported that staff always answered their questions and made them feel comfortable asking them. Facilitators echoed this, describing in interviews how they welcomed personal questions and made intentional efforts to ensure youth felt heard and supported.

*"Making them feel like they're important in this space helps a lot."*

—Site Manager

### **Use facilitator enthusiasm to build youth engagement.**

Facilitators' enthusiasm played a key role in setting the tone for youth participation in the M.E. Project. When facilitators conveyed genuine excitement about the material, it signaled to youth that the content was relevant and worth their attention. The M.E. Project experience suggests that enthusiastic facilitation may help create a positive, engaging atmosphere that encourages participation and curiosity.

*"The material became engaging because of the way it was delivered."*

—Facilitator

### **Create dedicated time for reflection and collaborative learning among staff.**

M.E. Project staff shared the desire to connect with and learn from peers. Lessons from the M.E. Project suggest that programs could consider ensuring staff have regular, scheduled opportunities to pause and reflect on their experiences. Programs could encourage cross-site collaboration where staff can exchange effective strategies for engaging youth and delivering the curriculum successfully. This

collective learning approach may have the potential to not only strengthen individual practice but also build supportive networks across sites.

### ***Separate cohorts by age to support developmentally appropriate engagement.***

At M.E. Project after-school sites, youth of different ages and grade levels were grouped together. Staff noted that working with a wide age range of teens in a single group made it harder to keep them engaged and ensure the content was relevant to everyone. The M.E. Project experience suggests that practitioners can potentially prepare for these challenges by grouping youth by age when delivering programming. This may allow each group to participate in discussions and activities that align with their developmental stage. It also may make it easier to manage group dynamics, encourage peer interaction, and foster a sense of belonging. Even if the content is the same for all, separating participants by age may support more effective facilitation and deeper engagement with the material.

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After school programs are powerful platforms for preparing teens for life beyond school. The M.E. Project suggests that when youth feel seen, supported, and engaged, they're more open to thinking critically about their futures. With thoughtful planning, strong facilitation, and a commitment to meeting youth where they are, after school programs have the potential to help young people build the confidence and skills to navigate school, work, relationships, and life with purpose.

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### **Insights for program practitioners working with youth in juvenile justice settings**

The M.E. Project's experience at YDF offers valuable lessons for practitioners designing and delivering programs in juvenile justice settings. These settings come with unique constraints, including rigid security protocols, unpredictable schedules, high participant turnover, and limited space and time for programming. These factors can disrupt session flow, challenge continuity, and require frequent adjustments to group size and composition. Despite these challenges, the M.E. Project experience highlights effective strategies for engaging youth and delivering meaningful content in these settings. Below, we offer key lessons that can help guide efforts to incorporate success sequencing content into juvenile justice programs and help youth prepare for a successful return to their communities.

### ***Collaborate with correctional facility staff for smoother delivery.***

The YDF experience highlights the importance of having buy-in from correctional facility staff when delivering programs in detention settings. YDF staff noted that when facility staff understand a program's purpose and see its value, they are more likely to serve as partners rather than gatekeepers. Facility staff's support can potentially help secure space and time for programs, encourage youth attendance, and reinforce key messages outside scheduled lessons. Strong collaboration with facility staff can also potentially support real-time problem solving and help programs work within institutional routines and constraints, leading to more consistent delivery and stronger youth engagement.

### ***Design flexible programs that support continuity in dynamic settings.***

Programs in juvenile justice settings must be able to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. At YDF, youth participation was often disrupted by court dates, transfers, security protocols, lockdowns, and changing group composition.

*"The kids run on a point system. ... If too many points are lost in a day, unfortunately, then ... they can't come to [the] program. We also deal with fights and behavior issues ... So if they have excessive point loss or behavior issues, anything like that, then, unfortunately, they cannot attend [the] program".*

*—Site manager*

Despite these challenges, facilitators remained flexible by adjusting the pace of lessons and tailoring activities to fit the group. Lessons from YDF suggest that programs designed with built-in flexibility, such as modular curriculum components or adaptable activities, may be better equipped to maintain continuity and keep youth engaged, even when disruptions occur.

### **Create predictable routines to support engagement in unpredictable environments.**

Even though the YDF setting could be unpredictable, facilitators felt that youth responded positively to structure and consistency. Facilitators observed that the M.E. Project's familiar session format, including warm-ups, clearly defined activities, and closing reflections, helped youth feel grounded and stay focused. The YDF experience suggests that establishing reliable routines, using consistent session structures, and organizing the learning space may help create a sense of stability, making it easier for youth to engage even within a constantly changing environment.

*"We pretty much just set the room. ... We go over agreements and expectations each time [they] come... We wanna make sure that everybody is on the same page ... We set the tone with them. We go over the expectations. We go over what we're gonna talk about, the lesson ... any handouts, things like that. ... Go over the lesson, and then we open it up for any type of feedback."*

*—Site manager*

### **Plan for stable cohorts to support learning.**

In settings like YDF, where youth frequently cycle in and out due to releases or transfers, maintaining continuity can be a constant challenge. Facilitators often had to revisit past lessons or reestablish group norms, which disrupted momentum and made it harder for youth to build on earlier lessons.

*"Kids can come in and out of the maximum security unit ... [we are] pretty much starting new every week for the most part."*

*—Site manager*

Insights from YDF suggest programs may consider implementing practices to minimize participant turnover, such as by more intentionally structuring cohorts. For example, programs could consider working with facility staff to identify youth who are likely to remain in the unit for the duration of a short-term curriculum. Another potentially useful approach may be to break the curriculum into short, self-contained modules that repeat throughout the year, so even if someone joins late or misses a session, they can still jump in and participate fully without needing to "catch up." Still another strategy could be to offer rolling admissions throughout the year but lock group membership once a curriculum block begins. In this approach, youth can enroll at designated intervals, but no new participants are added after the first session of that block. These adaptations may help maintain group cohesion and create a more stable, supportive space where youth can focus and learn.

### **Tailor curricula to connect with youth's lived experiences and boost engagement.**

Like their peers in the after-school sites, YDF youth were most engaged when facilitators connected the material to their lives. They responded well to content that addressed immediate concerns, such as avoiding trouble, managing relationships, and planning for reentry. Interactive activities that encouraged personal reflection and peer dialogue were reported to be particularly engaging. Facilitators who shared personal stories and brought authenticity to discussions helped build trust and rapport.

*"It's hard for a lot of [the youth at YDF] to open up to somebody else, let alone in front of their peers. ... It's really good being able to have those open discussions with them."*

—Site manager

Insights from YDF suggest that programs may benefit from using curricula that reflect the day-to-day realities of detention while also speaking to youth's hopes for the future. Making space for youth to reflect on their experiences may help them feel seen and understood, potentially increasing their willingness to engage in the program while in a restrictive environment.

### **Build practical skills that help youth prepare for life after release.**

Similar to the participants at after-school sites, YDF youth valued lessons that taught useful, real-world skills and responded positively to hands-on, scenario-based activities like mock interviews, budgeting exercises, and goal-setting worksheets. Facilitators observed that this practical focus made the content feel relevant and encouraged youth to plan for their futures. The YDF experience suggests that programs may benefit from focusing on skills youth can use both while in the facility and after release. These include coping strategies for managing stress and conflict, as well as everyday life skills like managing money, communicating effectively, setting goals, preparing for work, and parenting. These types of lessons may help build confidence and resilience, preparing youth for a more stable and successful return to their communities.

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Despite the challenges, it is important to offer youth in juvenile justice settings opportunities to plan for their futures at a turning point in their lives. The M.E. Project experience shows that, with strong partnerships, thoughtful planning, and youth centered design, youth programs can be successful even in restrictive environments. These lessons can guide practitioners seeking to help youth succeed during detention and upon reentry.

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### **Insights for child support policymakers**

The M.E. Project offers a glimpse into what's possible when child support agencies take a proactive approach to engage young people before they become parents. Lessons from the program offer insights into how child support agencies can partner with trusted, community-based organizations to reach youth before they become parents and help them make informed choices about school, work, finances, and relationships. These lessons are especially timely as agencies look for ways to promote stable family formation and financial responsibility early. By supporting youth through skill-building and awareness, agencies can help them prepare for healthy relationships, intentional parenthood, and sound financial decisions, potentially lowering the need for child support enforcement down the road.

*"We're constantly trying to push outreach to the community or just to raise that awareness ... if we have youth that kind of know about the [child support]"*

*program before becoming an adult, if they ever need to contact our agency in the future, they're more willing to cooperate with us."*

—DCSS administrator

Implementing youth-focused programs through child support agencies, however, comes with unique challenges. Staff may lack experience working directly with youth, timelines and scopes may shift as partnerships evolve, and internal systems may not be designed to support non-enforcement activities. Limited visibility into day-to-day implementation can also make it harder to provide timely support to those implementing the program. Despite these barriers, the M.E. Project demonstrated how strategic collaboration and thoughtful design can position child support agencies as proactive partners in supporting family stability. Below, we offer key lessons for child support policymakers seeking to support youth programming in their communities.

### ***Embed youth voice in program design to increase engagement.***

The M.E. Project demonstrated the importance of developmentally appropriate content that speaks to young people's real-life experiences. Youth were most engaged when lessons felt relevant and connected to their current realities. However, some content was perceived as too advanced or disconnected from their lives, especially by younger participants.

*"I do see ... a little bit of a lack of a connection there. There's no personal tie to them, and they feel like, 'I'm just hearing you say this stuff [and] I don't know how it's applicable to me.'"*

—Facilitator

The M.E. Project experience suggests that involving youth earlier in the design process may help ensure materials are not only age-appropriate but also engaging and relatable.

### ***Partner with trusted community groups to reach and engage youth more effectively.***

Youth participation and engagement in the M.E. Project were closely tied to strong relationships with program staff and the sense of safety and belonging they created. Sensitive topics like relationships and parenting were easier to explore when youth trusted their facilitators and felt respected. The M.E. Project's approach suggests that child support agencies can potentially broaden their reach and effectiveness by working with organizations that have deep, established connections with youth, particularly in under-resourced and marginalized communities.

*"...the relationships that were already formed, I think that's the number one reason why kids come to the club and continue to come, especially in the age range where they have the option to stay home if they'd like."*

—BGCSAC administrator

### ***Set up clear and consistent communication to support partner coordination.***

Ongoing communication among M.E. Project partners helped align expectations, address challenges, and support quality. However, communication gaps at times led to confusion and delays in addressing issues. Lessons from the M.E. Project suggest that setting up structured communication channels, regular check-ins, and clear points of contact across all partners may help ensure transparency, coordination, and timely problem-solving.

## **Build and sustain cross-sector partnerships to strengthen capacity.**

DCSS staff valued working alongside a trusted community partner like BGCSAC and an experienced evaluator like MEF. These partnerships expanded the agency's capacity, improved program delivery, and strengthened overall program quality. The M.E. Project's approach suggests that by building cross-sector partnerships that combine policy expertise and community trust, child support agencies can augment their resources and bring new perspectives to the table.

Child support agencies have an opportunity to reimagine their role, not just as enforcers of obligations, but as proactive partners in prevention and family well-being. The M.E. Project suggests that with the right partnerships, intentional design, and youth-centered approach, these agencies can play a meaningful role in empowering the next generation. By helping young people make informed choices about their futures, these agencies can contribute to youth having healthier relationships, stronger families, and long-term economic stability.

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