



Suppers at South

Social isolation is common among families of children or youth who have emotional or behavioral challenges. Families who are socially isolated report higher stress and fewer sources of support, while for children, social isolation can lead to fewer opportunities for developing positive social skills, increased behavior problems, and a strong fear of failure. Community life can suffer too when people with disabilities become socially isolated, as this may cause communities to grow increasingly intolerant of people whose behavior or appearance is atypical. *Suppers at South* was developed as a means of reducing social isolation for families of children or youth with emotional or behavioral challenges. *Suppers* works by gathering over 20 families together each month at South Eugene High School. The families share a communal meal and then break out into groups to take part in different recreational activities. The goal of the program is to give parents a well-deserved break while providing an opportunity for children to have fun.

Suppers at South was developed by a system of care resource coordinator in conjunction with several parents of teens with emotional and behavioral problems in an effort to help other parents of children with similar challenges. *Suppers* serves all youth from 0–20 years old, although the program specializes in serving children ages 5–12. *Suppers* includes entire families of children with emotional and behavioral challenges, including parents and siblings. The sole criterion for a family to join is to have a child with an emotional, behavioral, or mental health disorder. *Suppers* recruits families by distributing flyers to community centers and local mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, and educational programs. Many other families learn about *Suppers* from friends who have already participated.

One of the primary goals of *Suppers at South* is to reduce the isolation of families of children with mental, behavioral, and emotional challenges. Factors that contribute to family isolation include: (1) bad experiences with community activities, (2) perceived or actual public intolerance, (3) embarrassment that atypical behaviors will be noticed, or (4) fear that the child cannot be

successful with regular activities. These factors do have a real foundation. Kids with emotional or behavioral challenges often do not have friends in their neighborhood because they are different. They may not be able to get involved with a team sport because they go to a special school or because their school's athletic program does not have the capacity or desire to deal with challenging behaviors. Families may hesitate to take their emotionally or behaviorally disordered child to the swimming pool or another public venue because people notice the behaviors and even give inappropriate and unsolicited advice. Family isolation is a societal issue that directly correlates to the loss of community (Jacobs, 1961). To combat this isolation, *Suppers at South* targets three areas: the family system, the educational system, and the community system.

On a familial level, parents need to have a way to receive support from people who care and understand. They need friends who can help the entire family get out and do things that are fun. They need people who point out the good things in their lives. Parents need an opportunity to have personal time. Above all they need to have a sense of humor and not let things get them down.

Suppers at South creates an informal family support network that allows parents to have a break while their children have fun in a way that does not disturb their parents' time. After the communal dinner, parents and youth meet in separate groups. The parents' group uses the first few meetings of the school year to plan activities for the rest of the year. Parent activities range from relaxation and recreation to educational meetings about resources and advocacy. Recreational activities have included therapeutic massage, aikido breathing exercises, bingo nights, and craft activities such as painting mugs and making vinaigrette bottles. Educational meetings have hosted guests such as the directors of the Eugene and Springfield school districts, local therapists, and representatives from local advocacy organizations.

As parents are engaged in their activities, their children gather in the school's cafeteria to have their own

fun. The children's activities are supervised by a combination of professional, paraprofessional, and student volunteer staff, some of whom also eat dinner with the families. After the meal, students and *Suppers* staff arrange the cafeteria into at least three distinct zones using environmental design strategies. Each zone contains a different activity, usually one each for crafts, games, and physical recreation. The games section includes K'Nex, playdough, chess, origami, and many other activities. Each area is overseen by a paraprofessional. Student volunteers either work within a specific area or move about the room. Some kids latch on to a specific student and stick with him or her throughout the evening.

Suppers at South has a no eject, no reject policy; kids are not asked to leave because of challenging behaviors. In addition, because of the structure of the children's activities, children and families involved often experience a change in their own perceptions. Their fear of failure around participating in community activities is challenged by the success the children experience with *Suppers at South*.

On an educational level, future professionals need to learn ways to help reduce the parent blame that helps to reinforce family isolation (Early & Poertner, 1993), and treatment goals need to include more normative activities. With this in mind, positive reinforcement has become the cornerstone of *Suppers at South* success. The underlying idea is that children (and adults) are more likely to have positive behaviors if others focus on strengths and describe what they *want* to see rather than what they *do not* want to see. Children with emotional and behavioral challenges receive a lot of negative attention—at school, at home, and in the community. Positive reinforcement is a means of showing children what they are doing *right*.

The professional, paraprofessional, and student volunteers at *Suppers* all receive training regarding the use of positive reinforcement strategies. The Center for Family Development has been instrumental in this process. At *Suppers*, we point out even the littlest things. For example, our reinforcement includes saying, "Thank you for waiting your turn. Thank you for sharing. You are an incredible artist. You are great at solving puzzles. Thank you for helping. Thanks for being nice to your brother," and so on. Another strategy we use is to describe what we want to see. For instance, our staff would say, "Please stand on the floor," rather than, "Don't stand on the table." To further reward positive behaviors, we hand out poker chips that are cashed in for prizes at the end of the evening. The cash-in process is also a wonderful way to transition at the end of the evening, particularly for

those who have difficulty moving from one activity to the next.

Community involvement plays an integral role in *Suppers at South*. South Eugene High School donates the use of facilities. Both the South Fork catering and Child Development programs at South Eugene High School play a large role in planning and preparing each monthly event. These dedicated students volunteer their time to plan each month's activities and ensure their success. The local *Boys and Girls Club* serves as the nonprofit umbrella for the grant that funds *Suppers at South*. The *Boys and Girls Club* offers free scholarships to *Suppers at South* families, waiving their annual \$15 fee. Members of the *Boys and Girls Club* also come to *Suppers at South* to learn how to work with children with emotional and behavioral challenges. Beyond our key partners, many other community members are also involved. Employees from *Home Depot* have shown children how to put together birdhouses. Local celebrities have paid visits to entertain. Area businesses continue to donate food and activity coupons, as well as craft supplies and other materials. The professionals who donate their time to the parents' group both share and learn information.

It is important to note that in the partnership process, volunteers and donors gain much more than a tax write off, school credits, or even the sense of a job well done—they learn about the challenges families face when children have emotional or behavioral disorders. It is through that informal education that we hope to impact how community members relate to and include children with special needs in the future.

Communities who wish to truly honor diversity need to encourage and support efforts to raise awareness about the challenges faced by families of children with emotional and behavioral disorders (Adams & Nelson, 1995). This is important not only for child-serving professionals, but for members of the general public as well. Through community education and partnerships, we can pave the way for our children to be included in community activities, so they will be able to play on a local baseball team or even have the opportunity to do something they have not been able to try due to lack of funding related to the added cost of care. *Suppers at South* is one example of an effort to engage the community and educational system in combating family isolation and ending the stigmas attached to children with emotional and behavioral disorders.

Bibliography

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