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Family Engagement: Identifying and Meeting Family Needs

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Abstract

Family engagement in early education is insufficient. The Early Learning Program is an agency which serves low income families by providing early childhood education and a variety of different services like health and dental screenings for children and nutrition and parenting workshops for the parents and family to do together. The project is aimed to evaluate the agency's Family Strengths and Needs assessment tool and provide updates to better serve families by focusing on areas that are lacking. As a result, the assessment language was clarified and the method of delivery improved so that future assessments will gather more accurate information. This leads to the recommendation of annual updates and planned workshops based on assessment results. Updates in return can help increase family engagement and boost families success while meeting their needs based on the families strengths and needs assessment.

Keywords: Family strengths and needs assessment, family engagement, low income

Agency & Communities Served

The agency is part of the Monterey County Office of Education, and is called The Early Learning Program (ELP). The Early Learning Program works to provide early childhood education to children zero to five years of age. Their Mission states, “The Monterey County Office of Education Early Learning Program, in partnership with the community, is dedicated to providing the highest quality early childhood education for children 3-5 years and comprehensive child and family services” (Monterey County Office of Education, 2021, mission text box). The ELP emphasizes community and uses its local resources to make referrals to meet the needs of their children and families. These needs may fit under many different branches of the services that they offer. For example, childhood education falls under child development services. The agency also provides mental health and disability services which include referrals to agencies that can provide 504 and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) plans to their kids. These referrals can be made to agencies that can provide a behavioral technician that can assist the family and child to achieve basic needs that may come as a struggle to kids with a disability. Another service which is very important is health services. Every year the agency provides health screenings for the kids. According to the results, referrals are made to better fit the needs of the kids. Lastly, another service that the agency provides is healthy and nutritional lunches. The ELP assists the families to meet the nutritional needs of the students as well as providing the families with the knowledge of how to do so at home. A core part of this service is that they are able to provide some snacks and foods for the kids to be able to take home to their families.

The Early Learning Program serves the children ages three to five of Monterey County. However, starting the 25th of September of 2023 the Early Learning Program started serving kids ages zero to three as well expanding the age range to zero to five. The Census in 2022

reported that 60% of Monterey County is made up of Hispanic/Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Almost all students and families that the agency serves are Hispanic/Latinos. Although Latinos hold the highest percentage in Monterey County it is followed by White alone with 28% and Asian at almost 7%. The lowest percentage being Native Hawaiian at 0.6% (U.S. Census, n.d.). In Monterey County, 12.1% of civilians are living under the poverty line (U.S. Census, n.d.). At the ELP making below the median income for a household automatically makes them a higher candidate to receive help from the programs and services. Lastly, one final statistic is education. As of 2021, the percentage of people in Monterey County with a high school diploma was at 73% (U.S. Census, n.d.). The agency, by supporting early education, can provide the resources and motivation needed to encourage the kids and families to continue through school starting at a very young age.

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

Studies show that students from any socioeconomic background are more likely to excel in school if there is parental support involved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, pp. 13-14). As a result of the engagement and support the student is more likely to receive higher grades, pass their classes, and actually attend school. The lack of parental involvement can stem from the schools neglect to engage parents actively. Usually a parent that is involved encourages good grades, attends school events, and is involved in the school development. Typically schools who have a push from the parents to develop tend to do it more urgently and better fit the needs of the students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, pp. 13-14).

With family engagement being the problem, there are some contributing factors that increase the problem as illustrated in the problem model in Figure 1. Poor quality of the program, lack of understanding, and the programs using data incorrectly are factors that help create poor family engagement. As a result of this, child development suffers, support to each family weakens, and child-parent relationship suffers.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Micro Problem	Consequences
Lack of understanding	Family engagement in early education is poor	Child development suffers
Using data incorrectly		Support to family weakens
Standards of parents		Child and parent relationship suffers

Contributing Factors

Lack of Understanding

Many parents here in Monterey County are Hispanic/ Latinos that have immigrated here. They may have some physical, economical, and language barriers that prevent them from understanding the programs and discourage them from being involved. A lot of the time Latino parents work very long hours. Most of them have jobs in agriculture where there never really is a set schedule of hours. This creates the first barrier to being able to understand the program, because they physically cannot be there to support their child's education. This leads into the second barrier, because 12.1% of Monterey counties population lives under the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). They have to decide sometimes to prioritize work and provide for their families. Oftentimes parents cannot afford to leave work for a couple of hours. Lastly the final barrier that contributes to the parents lack of understanding of a program is language.

Parents who are able to attend the school events often lose the whole presentation because everything is presented in English, and schools fail to provide an interpreter or Spanish handouts. This discourages parents from attending any future events at the school. At home, parents are unable to help their children with their homework because it is in English (Tinkler, 2002, p. 10).

Using Data Incorrectly

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and the National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement (2020) refer to the importance of using data with four R's. Specifically, family engagement is increased if the data is being used responsibly, respectfully, and if it's relevant and relationship based. By using the data responsibly their approach uses the data collected to better the program. This also means that the data is being used respectfully. They keep in mind the background of each family and have no biases and don't push any boundaries that the families are not comfortable with. This in the end helps create a better and lasting relationship with the family. When an organization is able to use and collect relevant data they are able to answer specific questions that will help the program be better. This means that the information is valid and reliable and in turn benefits not only the program but also the families as well. Lastly, all of the above falls back to the data being relationship based. If the program and the families do not have trust, respect, and accountability, their relationship falls weak. This can potentially hurt the attempt to better the program through correct data collection (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2019, p. 4-5). Additionally the task of analyzing the data is what matters, being able to understand the data and see trends or areas that are lacking for the program can help them identify where they can make possible changes. .

Standards of Parents

Lastly, the next contributing factor is the parent's perception regarding the quality of the programs. Many parents believe that a child is best taken care of by them or a family member. They dismiss the idea of a stranger taking care of their child at an early age and eliminate the possibility of an early education for their child. Professionals believe that the quality of education that a child receives especially at the early ages defines and produces positive educational outcomes (*Supporting children and families through investments in high-quality early education*, 2015). The perception that a program is not up to the parents standards can also be an effect of culture. In Latino/ Hispanic culture, families are tight knit and have the mentality that working together is most productive. There is typically no room for competition among the family and a lot of cooperation takes place. Tinkler states, "Since most schools focus on an individualistic, competitive approach, Latino children must adapt their stance to be able to do well academically" (2002, p. 10). This in turn can be very discouraging for families to enter or interact in an environment that is very different from their values and culture.

Consequences

Child development suffers

A child's learning and development is at its peak during the ages of birth to five years of age. If a child does not have an opportunity to have an early childhood education they risk the possibility of having a lower or slower development and learning compared to their peers that did receive early education. In "Parental Involvement in Education Among Low-Income Families: A Case Study" the author discusses how typically low income families have little to no parental involvement in the child's education which has a negative effect on the academic success and the child's achievement is low compared to one when the family is actively engaged

(Smith, 2006, p. 44). Additionally, a study comparing where parents were involved and not involved showed that when a parent is involved the student's grades and feedback from the teachers improved significantly compared to the one whose parent was not involved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 34).

Support to family weakens

Many parents in Monterey County are non English speaking. Most schools provide their resources in English which already creates a disparity in the resources that the family can take advantage of. In a study of family support the author states, "Although schools are required to communicate with parents in their native language, translations and interpretations of school-related information proved hard to come by for the parents surveyed" (Advocates for Children of New York, 2004, p. 33). This can lead to parents being completely oblivious to resources or events that the school offers for the parent to be involved in. For example, if the school has a food bank distribution and a family is given a flyer they can not read, they won't be able to take advantage of the opportunity. The support to families can be as simple as a newsletter being sent home to parents with their child. This can have lists of resources and a quick summary of what the shields day or week looked like at school. This facilitates the relationship with the parent and the school while still allowing the door to be open for the parents to remain informed on resources that can benefit their child or family as a whole (Miner, 2022).

Child and Parent Relationship Suffers

When parents are not actively engaged in their child's education, it can strain their relationship in numerous ways. The absence of involvement may lead to a lack of communication and understanding between parent and child regarding academic progress and challenges. This form of involvement starts from home by the parent asking about their day at

school, helping with homework, or simple encouragement. This can help the student feel supported and continue to do better in school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 36). However, if the family has a communication gap, it can breed frustration and resentment on both sides, as the child may feel unsupported and the parent may feel disconnected from their child's life. Moreover, without parental involvement, the child may miss out on crucial support and guidance, hindering their academic success and exacerbating feelings of alienation within the family dynamic. Thus, the lack of parental engagement in a child's education can significantly undermine the strength and closeness of their relationship. Friedman discusses the study made to see the effects that the parents' time spent at work affects the child. Oftentimes it is seen that parents spend time with their child but prioritize their work rather than their family. This has shown to have negative effects specifically, a child's emotional health was shown to be higher when their parents prioritized the family. Additionally this increases when a parent can physically be present with their child (Freidman, 2018).

Project Description and Implementation Process

Project Description

The capstone project's focus on assessing family engagement based on the strengths and needs of the family as a whole is commendable. By understanding the unique dynamics and requirements of each family, the project can tailor its approach to effectively support and engage them. The activities provided to parents during the workshops serve as valuable opportunities for families to come together, bond, and connect with the program in a meaningful way.

These activities are thoughtfully designed to foster a sense of community and promote learning, which is essential for building strong relationships between families and the program.

Through these activities, parents not only spend quality time with their children but also have the chance to interact with other families, share experiences, and learn from one another.

Assessing family engagement based on strengths and needs allows the project to identify areas where families may require additional support or resources, ensuring that all families feel included and supported in their journey. By focusing on building a supportive community and providing opportunities for learning and connection, the project can effectively enhance family engagement and create a positive and enriching experience for all involved.

Project Justification & Benefits

The goal of the project is to foster family engagement and create a platform where parents can actively participate in their child's development by attending workshop nights. These workshops are designed to provide opportunities for parents and children to engage in activities together, strengthening their bond and creating meaningful experiences. By offering activities that cater to both parents and children, the project aims to create a supportive environment where families can learn and grow together. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance the overall well-being of families and promote positive parent-child relationships.

Addressing parents' lack of understanding of the program is crucial for fostering their involvement. By attending workshop nights alongside their children, parents have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the program's objectives, curriculum, and the activities their children are engaged in. Moreover, connecting with other parents and teachers during these workshops facilitates the exchange of information, experiences, and insights, which can help parents feel more comfortable and confident in their role within the program.

Building trust through these interactions is essential for encouraging sustained involvement from parents. As parents become more familiar with the program and develop

relationships with teachers and other parents, they are likely to feel more empowered to actively participate and contribute to their child's educational journey. This increased level of involvement can have numerous benefits, including improved communication between home and school, better support for children's learning and development, and a stronger sense of community within the program. Overall, by addressing parents' lack of understanding and providing opportunities for meaningful engagement, the project can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for families.

The strength and needs assessment has been a key factor in deciding where the agency decided to put more resources and services for the families. Although it had not been updated in some time it was still a very important tool at the agency. After reviewing the tool and being able to assess where the questions could be worded differently or if they were able to be conjoined, the ability to address the families needs increases. The update not only will allow the parents to understand the questions better but will also assist the agency by having fewer and to the point questions that the family feels comfortable answering honestly about what their strengths and needs are.

Expected Outcomes & Assessment Plan

The activities implemented serve as outlets for families to connect, bond, and learn together. Through these activities, families not only spend quality time with one another but also develop stronger connections to the program. Additionally, the connections forged during these activities provide families with the support and resources they need to continue engaging with the program beyond the workshop nights. Increased family engagement can lead to improved academic outcomes for children, better communication between home and school, and a stronger sense of community within the program. Overall, the activities implemented in the project serve

as powerful tools for encouraging and fostering greater family engagement, ultimately contributing to the overall success and effectiveness of the program.

The expected outcomes for the update on the strength and needs assessment are for the families to be able to understand the questions and be able to answer honestly. Additionally the tool will also help better understand where the family is and where they can use extra help and where they are already excelling in. This facilitates the agency's planning of future workshops like the “Daddy and me night,” and the “Holiday Lights” night. Having workshops based on the actual needs and strength of the families can increase the family engagement with the agency as well as the families success while also helping them understand the program better.

The project expectations were assessed by my mentor who gave me oral feedback on if I met the project expectations. In her report of my result she told me that she was very impressed with the review of the tool and my hard work in the workshops I helped facilitate. She further told me that she would implement a yearly review to better the tool and work on those targeted workshops.

Implementation Process

Beginning the Fall of 2023 the goal from the agency was to provide the parents with fun and interactive workshops for the families to do and attend together. These activities were planned and facilitated by the faculty and myself and another intern. One of the bigger events last semester, with over 100 parents attending was the “Daddy and Me Night,” this was an attempt to involve the father figure in the child's life who is usually the least involved in a child's education. The planning meeting took place November 29th, 2023 in which the faculty and intern met to be able to plan activities such as painting, planting, and playing soccer. The teams

were decided by my mentor and materials were also listed and ordered once they were decided by the teams. The day of the event which took place December 7th, 2023 the teams of faculty and interns were able to implement the activities with the father and child by giving them direction and assistance if needed. The area in which I implemented the activity was called the “Free Play area” in which there was an assortment of board games like Tic Tac Toe and Mix and Match. These games allowed the father and the child to play one on one and connect through following directions. Throughout the games the fathers were able to guide the child and most of the time allow the child to win so they could both celebrate together.

A similar event which was also one of the biggest planned and implemented was the “Holiday Lights Night.” Similar to Daddy and Me Night, the Holiday event was planned and implemented by the faculty, mentor and intern. The planning meeting took place December 7th, 2023 in which the teams were decided, activities were created and materials were listed. During this planning meeting, I was assigned to transfer a Google doc list of materials needed for the activities along with a matching link to a spreadsheet which would then get passed to a superior to be approved and ordered. The actual event took place December 14th, 2023 in which I was able to implement a Santa Claus Card making activity. The children along with the parents were given the simple task of creating a blank card for their child to use to write the letter to Santa. They were given glue, paper, stickers, gems, glitter, markers among other craft supplies to decorate the card together. Each child was able to complete multiple cards and some were even joined by their siblings who are not a part of the program. As a family they are all delighted and enjoying a simple activity as a family.

Another part of the project is the strengths and needs assessment which can be found under Appendix B. To begin, there was a planning meeting with my mentor to ensure we both

understood my plan. Then the Compliance Monitors, teacher, and site supervisors delivered the assessment to parents for the beginning of the school year. Following that, the questions will be revised and notes will be taken to suggest possible changes. I reviewed the questions and made suggestions. I led a meeting with the compliance monitors who ensure that the assessment is given to the families to gather more input regarding changes. At this meeting together we analyzed the data from the assessment given at the beginning of the year. We noticed some trends where families strengths were lacking in areas like Family well-being which had an average of 3.3 and Families as learners which had an average of 3. The data can be seen in Appendix C.

Project Results

When discussing the outcome of the workshops with my mentor she emphasized the importance of my help and assistance during the workshop nights. Not only did I serve as an extra set of hands but my ability to connect with the families showed. My mentor along with the staff that also participated in the family workshops recognized this. The engagement of the families was my first priority these nights. Maria, one of the site supervisors really encouraged me and recognized my ability to engage and think quickly on my feet when a child was frustrated or when a parent was beginning to lose patience and wanted to hurry along the activities to finish fast and go home. When I was able to discuss the review of the strength and needs assessment with my mentor she added that she has been wanting to do this for a long time now and how the changes can be vital to better serving the families at the agency.

As a result of my project the compliance monitors and I were also able to identify areas of the Strength and Needs Assessment that can be improved. For example we were able to identify questions that could be eliminated and see where we were able to incorporate simple words instead of using very scholarly words. The compliance monitors were also able to identify

a better way of giving the families the assessment. After speaking at the review meeting they discovered that the teachers were most likely giving the families the assessment to take home and answer the assessment, when it is supposed to be done one on one with the teacher and parent to be able to answer any questions and also encourage them to answer truthfully. Moving forward they decided they wanted to enforce this.

In Appendix D all the changes are listed that were discussed in the review meeting. Some were minor changes and some were a little bigger. For example, the compliance monitors and I came to the conclusion that using the word “use” instead of “utilize” can simplify a question giving all parents a better understanding of what the question was asking. For example question 16 which had the lowest average response we decided to combine with questions 20 and 22 and clarify it by simply asking, “I participate in community and school events.” This low average could have been caused by confusion from the parents not understanding the old question. The end goal of the meeting was to create a simple and updated assessment that can help the parents answer honestly and understand what they are answering, but also give the agency an improved understanding of where they can better help the families. To conclude the meeting, a new and updated assessment was decided upon by the compliance monitors and myself.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The strength and needs assessment is a tool that helps the agency better serve the families by creating these resources and workshops that help the families but also boost their family engagement. My recommendations for the agency would be to update the strength and needs tool annually to be able to identify new areas where it can be improved. This in return will help the families but also help them create fun and engaging ways to help the families succeed and understand the program a lot better.

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Appendix A

Project Implementation Plan

Tasks	Timeline/ Deadlines	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Deliverables
Planning meeting for Daddy and me Night	November 29, 2023	intern , mentor, compliance monitors, faculty	Computers, Salinas Child development center (SCDC) room	Plan of activities, teams, materials needed for the daddy and me night
Daddy and me night	December 7th, 2023	Faculty, intern, mentor	Materials planned in planning meeting, SCDC multipurpose room, tables	A fun night for father figures and children to participate in activities
Holiday Lights planning meeting	December 7th, 2023	Faculty, intern, mentor	Computers, Salinas Child development center (SCDC) room	Plan of activities, teams, materials needed for Holiday Lights
Holiday Lights workshop	December 14th, 2023	Faculty, mentor, intern, parents and child	Materials for activities, SCDC multi purpose room, tables	A fun night for parents to collaborate with child and program faculty
Planning meeting for the assessment review with mentor	March 13th, 2024	Intern, and Mentor	Strength and needs assessment, computer, office space	Expectations and areas where she wanted me to focus my discussion during the review with the compliance monitors
Intern and Compliance Monitors review questions and adds notes	March 15th, 2024	Intern, compliance monitors	Strengths and needs assessment, conference room,	Changes that could be made
Present the change idea to mentor	March 16th, 2024	Intern and Mentor	Strengths and needs assessment	Finalized changes with the help of mentor and her approval

Present the new questions to parents	March 20th, 2024	teachers , site supervisors, compliance monitors	Strength and needs assessment	Results for new assessment
Review results	March 28th, 2024	Intern and mentor	Strength and needs assessment	New assessment questions for the site

Appendix B

Strength and Needs Assessment

Scoring Legend: 4 = Always 3 = Sometimes 2 = Rarely 1 = Never			PS 1302.52(b)	
Assessment Item	Start of Year Score	End of Year Score		
Family Well-Being				
1. My family health, dental, and nutritional needs are met.				
2. I have access to transportation.				
3. I feel safe in my home.				
4. I feel safe in my community.				
5. I am satisfied with my skills in: budgeting, credit scores, savings, etc.				
Positive Parent-Child Relationship				
6. I know how to help my child remain calm when he/she is upset.				
7. I spend time with my child doing things he/she enjoys.				
8. I have a good relationship with my child.				
9. I understand that my child is communicating with me through his behavior.				
Families as Lifelong Educators				
10. I allow my child to learn by exploring the environment.				
11. I read books, magazines, newspapers or tell stories to my child every day at home.				
12. I look for information to help with my child's development.				
13. I believe that daily routines are important.				
Families as Learners				
14. I am satisfied with my education/life goal.				
15. I am satisfied with my current career status.				
16. When possible, I participate in community events. Example: workshops, forums, etc.				
Family Engagement in Transitions				
17. I am aware of my role in my child's transition into school.				
18. I understand the social and emotional impact of transitions on children.				
Family Connections to Peers and Community				
19. I have family members and/or friends who I can ask for help when I need it.				
20. I like to participate in my community with my family. Example: library, festivals, etc.				
21. I utilize agency supports and/or services when I need to.				
Families as Advocates and Leaders				
22. I know how important it is to participate in school committees, events, etc.				
23. I am comfortable speaking up for my child and family.				
24. I am able to research information to support my family's needs.				
25. I look for opportunities to better myself and my family.				

Assessment Notes:

Appendix C

Family Outcomes- Analysis

Family	Families	Assessment	1. My family member/ta	2. I have access to safe (C	3. I feel safe in my home	4. I feel safe in my comm	5. I am satisfied with my s	6. I know how to help my	7. I spend time with my ch	8. I share affection openly	9. I understand that my ch	10. I allow my child to lear	11. I read books, magazin	12. I look for informatio	13. I believe that daily rou	14. I am satisfied with my	15. I am satisfied with my	16. When possible, I parti	17. I am aware of my role	18. I understand the socia	19. I have family member	20. I like to participate in	21. I utilize agency support	22. I know how important i	23. I am comfortable spea	24. I am able to research i	25. I look for opportunities	TOTAL
MCOE Early Learning Prog	554	1	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.3	3.5	3.7	3.9	3.7	3.7	3.2	3.5	3.8	3.4	3.5	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.2	3.1	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.7	89.2	
Report Average																												
Families w/ complete asse	554	1	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.3	3.5	3.7	3.9	3.7	3.7	3.2	3.5	3.8	3.4	3.5	3.8	3.6	3.6	3.2	3.1	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.7	89.2	

Appendix D

Reviewed Strength and Needs Assessment

Child's Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____
 Date Completed: _____ Staff: _____ School Year: _____

Scoring Legend: 4 = Always 3 = Sometimes 2 = Rarely 1 = Never PS 1302.52(b)

Assessment Item	Start of Year Score	End of Year Score
Family Well-Being		
1. My family health, dental, and nutritional needs are met. <i>Where's</i>		
2. I have access to transportation. ✓		
3. I feel safe in my home. ← <i>Combine</i>		
4. I feel safe in my community. ← <i>Combine</i>		
5. I am satisfied with my skills in: budgeting, credit scores, savings, etc. ✓		
Positive Parent-Child Relationship		
6. I know how to help my child remain calm when he/she is upset. ✓		
7. I spend time with my child doing things he/she enjoys. ✓		
8. I have a good relationship with my child/ <i>children</i> .		
9. I understand that my child is communicating with me through his behavior. ✓		
Families as Lifelong Educators		
10. I allow my child to learn by exploring the environment : <i>a safe environment.</i>		
11. I read books, magazines, newspapers or tell stories to my child every day at home . <i>frequently.</i>		
12. I look for information to help with my child's development. <i>* See below</i>		
13. I believe that daily routines are important. <i>I follow daily routines.</i>		
Families as Learners		
14. I am satisfied with my education/life goal. ↗ <i>combine</i>		
15. I am satisfied with my current career status. ↗ <i>combine</i>		
16. When possible, I participate in community events. Example: workshops, forums, etc. <i>Combine w/ 20 & 21</i>		
Family Engagement in Transitions		
17. I am aware of my role in my child's transition into school . <i>TK / Kinder</i>		
18. I understand the social and emotional impact of transitions on children . <i>on my child.</i>		
Family Connections to Peers and Community		
19. I have family members and/or friends who I can ask for help when I need it. ✓		
20. I like to participate in my community with my family. Example: library, festivals, etc.		
21. I utilize agency supports and/or services when I need to. <i>* See below</i>		
Families as Advocates and Leaders		
22. I know how important it is to participate in school committees, events, etc.		
23. I am comfortable speaking up for my child and family. ✓		
24. I am able to research information to support my family's needs. ↗ <i>combine</i>		
25. I look for opportunities to better myself and my family. ↗ <i>combine</i>		

Assessment Notes:
 12. I approach teachers about my child's development.
 16. I participate in community & school events.
 21. I use community agencies like library, WIC, resource centers when I need to

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