

Identifying and Addressing the Needs of New Residents

Jamie Hartley is the director of the Methodist Day School (MDS) in Portland, TX, which is a ministry of First United Methodist Church of Portland. The school was formed by the Education Committee of the church in 1990 to meet the needs of families and young children in the community. It operates during the school calendar year and serves children who are 18 months to 4 years old.

CHALLENGE

After an increase in industrial jobs in our area, many young families moved to our community in a short period of time. The families were unfamiliar with the area and isolated while their partners worked long hours. We wanted to step in to help families get to know each other so they could build friendships in their new locale. Family members also had questions about their children, including how to handle challenging behaviors and general questions about child development. Finding a way to meet both needs was important to us.

STRATEGY

Dana, a member of First United Methodist Church was instrumental in developing this group. She came up with the name (e)Mpower and designed it to be a group of 10 to 12 family members who gather each week to share the joys and challenges of parenting. In the second year of operation, a parent offered to be the regular facilitator, and group members take turns providing snacks. The family members, mostly mothers, appreciate being able to gather in a comfortable environment to establish friendships, exchange ideas, and discuss parenting challenges.

RESULTS

An unanticipated outcome was that the group members volunteered to organize school events such as Western Days, a two-day event through which children learn about Texas Independence Day. A parent committee plans the event which includes art, music, cooking, and outdoor activities focused on the state's history. This committee also organizes the MDS booth at the community Book-a-Palooza to promote reading for young children.

UPDATE

Our school now uses a curriculum as the foundation for the meetings and suggests resources for families to review on their own.

Since many of the family members have younger children, we now include the cost for child care and snacks in the school's annual budget, making it easier for family members to attend the meetings. In addition, we reserve the meeting space a year in advance to make sure there is always space for our group to meet. We now have anywhere from 15–17 parents attending each week, as well as three parent facilitators for (e)Mpower. Year after year, it continues to grow, developing lasting friendships, offering support and encouragement, and empowering families to be their best.