

Issue Brief

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Strengthening a Family-Serving Organization

Lessons learned from a partnership between Agape Child & Family Services, Mathematica, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation

In 2020, the Annie E. Casey Foundation brought together [Agape Child & Family Services](#), a community- and faith-based organization in Memphis, Tennessee, and Mathematica, a research and advisory firm, to find ways to continue serving Memphis families during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Since then, this partnership—called REVISE-2G—has flourished through four phases of work, improving Agape’s ability to respond to family and community needs and addressing topics that were key to its family-focused approach to service delivery (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The four phases of REVISE-2G



This brief shares lessons from REVISE-2G that can help researchers, practitioners, and funders better understand how to implement and support family-centered services. The individualized and tailored nature of family-centered services can make it difficult to conduct a traditional evaluation ([Singleton et al. 2025](#); [Baumgartner et al. 2023](#)). A better approach to building knowledge might be through participatory partnerships between researchers, funders, and practitioners, as in REVISE-2G. Such partnerships can build

knowledge for the field while building the capacity of family-serving organizations to improve outcomes for families.

Agape Family & Child Services: A Two-Generation, Family-Serving Organization

Agape is a family-serving organization (Box 1) that seeks to address poverty's effects on whole families. Its integrated service delivery model, called [2Gen](#), includes seven initiatives related to school, work, mental health, domestic violence, faith formation, family strengthening, and basic needs. Together, these initiatives are designed to meet the needs of families in three Memphis communities. Families work with Agape through case managers known as Connectors, who help participants achieve individual and family goals. Connectors act as a coach and a guide, and participants have the final say in the services they participate in. Agape calls this practice Voice & Choice.

Box 1. Defining family-serving organizations and two-generation approaches

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation defines a *family-serving organization* as one that centers caregivers and their children in the services it delivers. Whereas a traditional direct-service organization might focus on one service area, a family-serving organization takes a cross-cutting and holistic view of service provision. It considers how the goals and needs of an adult in a family interact with the goals and needs of the children—and how services can be designed to meet both sets of needs.

The concept of a family-serving organization aligns with a *two-generation approach*, as defined by Ascend at the Aspen Institute. Two-generation approaches are grounded in the recognition that the needs of children and their caregivers are interconnected and interdependent. Organizations with a two-generation approach aim to integrate child and caregiver services to improve whole-family well-being. In doing so, they can achieve stronger outcomes than child or caregiver services alone.

Two-generation and family-serving organizations can shift systems from a services orientation to a family orientation. They center families' voices in the design and delivery of services. By treating families as experts, these organizations gain the necessary perspective to identify and fill gaps in services and help families achieve their goals.

Source: [Boisvert et al. \(2024\)](#), [Ascend at the Aspen Institute \(2025\)](#). ▲

The REVISE-2G Partnership

The REVISE-2G partnership is an innovative example of participatory grant making. The goal of participatory grant making is to shift power from the funder and the researchers toward the provider to make funding decisions more responsive to community priorities. It is an alternative to a more traditional approach in which the funder determines the scope of work and the researchers develop the evaluation plan. The focus of each phase of REVISE-2G emerged from ongoing discussions between Agape, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Mathematica. In these conversations, Agape shared about its progress, priorities, and the needs of the families it served, and the three partners co-developed activities to help Agape reach its goals.

The first phase of REVISE-2G involved adapting two initiatives, Stars and TeamWorks, during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Stars is a school-based mentoring program, and TeamWorks is a job-coaching program intended mainly for parents. Mathematica and Agape facilitated a workgroup that included Agape staff, partners, and families to unpack the root causes of the challenges they were facing. The pandemic made it more difficult for these initiatives to engage participants and meet their acute

needs. Seeing that change might be necessary, Agape and Mathematica decided to examine how these initiatives, which typically worked with caregivers or children, fit under the umbrella of 2Gen and how Agape initiatives coordinated with one another (Box 2).

Stars Connectors tested strategies to improve internal coordination and communication. During the pandemic, staff who were used to working in schools were instead working from home and missed the everyday interactions that helped them work together well. Providing mentoring virtually also meant that Connectors were interacting with parents more than usual, and parents requested Connectors' help with family needs such as getting groceries or paying for utilities.

Mathematica worked with Stars to pilot (or conduct an initial test of) case coordination meetings. These meetings provided dedicated time for Connectors to troubleshoot problems with engaging parents or students and to streamline contact and services for families working with several Connectors. Through the pilot, Connectors expressed interest in exploring how Stars could better coordinate with staff from other Agape initiatives that were more familiar with the types of challenges the pandemic presented for families, like the Family Connector initiative.

TeamWorks Connectors piloted tools to build relationships and set meaningful goals with participants during coaching meetings. During the pandemic, coaching meetings had changed from in person to virtual, and Connectors reported struggling to build rapport and trust with participants over videoconference. Mathematica helped Agape adapt a structured goal-setting tool and create a conversation guide to enable meaningful discussions about participants' interests and goals. Connectors said they valued the tools, and they mentioned opportunities for greater coordination across 2Gen initiatives. For example, Connectors said many participants set goals related to financial literacy, a topic that TeamWorks was not designed to address.

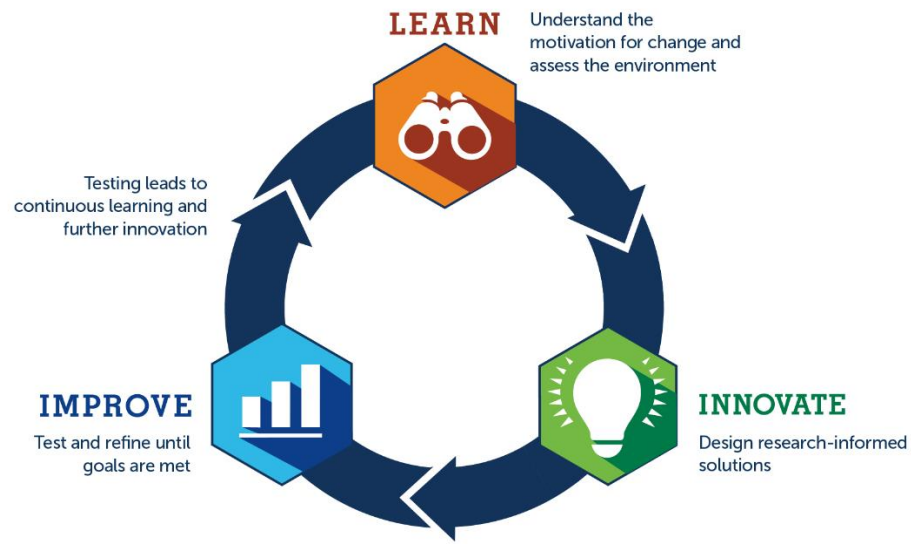
In Phase 2, Mathematica trained Agape staff on Learn-Innovate-Improve (LI²), a human-centered and evidence-informed framework for program improvement, and developed resources to support Agape's adoption of LI². LI² was the framework Mathematica and Agape used to guide Phase 1 of REVISE-2G (Box 3). It emphasizes human-centered design; evidence building and use; and iterative, rapid-cycle testing through three activities (Figure 2). Finding LI² useful in Phase 1, Agape was interested in spreading it throughout the agency.

Box 2. Learning to Adapt

To read more about how Agape and Mathematica worked together to adapt services in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, see [Learning to Adapt](#) (Shenbanjo et al. 2022). ▲

Box 3. Championing Change

To learn more about how Mathematica and Agape used the LI² framework and how other organizations can include it in their own program improvement efforts, see [Championing Change](#) (Shenbanjo et al. 2023). ▲

Figure 2. The LI² framework

In Phase 3, Agape piloted a financial management program using LI². Informed by insights from TeamWorks Connectors about participants' goals in Phase 1, Agape partnered with a local bank to develop and provide a financial literacy workshop and stipend to a group of 11 women. Agape collected data about the pilot and outcomes from the workshop to inform improvements for a future group (Box 4).

Box 4. Piloting a financial literacy program

Agape pilot-tested a financial literacy program that included four financial management workshops, monthly case management, and a stipend that covered basic needs for participants. The workshops addressed credit, budgeting, savings, and banking.

The program focused on three desired outcomes: to help participants (1) save \$1,000 one year after program completion, (2) increase their credit scores by 100 points, and (3) follow the monthly budget they created in the workshop.

Agape gave quizzes to assess participants' knowledge gains after each workshop, provided a satisfaction survey at the end of the workshop series, and held follow-ups with participants six and nine months after the end of the pilot to assess outcomes.

An initial group of 11 women participated in the pilot. Nine participated in follow-up data collection. Satisfaction with the program was high, and all but one woman said they kept to their budget. At nine months, five of nine were on track to raise their credit scores, and four had already saved \$1,000. Others said external barriers kept them from reaching their credit score targets and savings goals.

Based on the pilot findings, Agape identified three key challenges to making the program sustainable: the participants needed more case management support, long-term follow-up with participants was challenging, and the participation stipend was costly. As of early 2026, Agape is continuing to explore opportunities to launch a second phase of the pilot. ▲

The fourth phase of REVISE-2G focused on Agape's efforts to standardize and strengthen the use of Voice & Choice, the core of its practice model. With Voice & Choice, Connectors center the voices of participants and empower them to act on their goals. Adopting a family-centered mindset can be hard for Connectors who come from traditional, more directive approaches to service delivery. It requires them to act as a guide rather than a problem solver and to ask questions instead of simply offering solutions. The

goal of standardization was to provide more scaffolding and support to Connectors and encourage high-quality service delivery across 2Gen initiatives.

As part of standardization, Agape adopted the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix (ASSM), a commonly used needs assessment in human services agencies. Agape also developed guidance, resources, reflection tools, and training to help Connectors across the agency have goal-oriented conversations with participants. In November 2025, Agape and Mathematica assessed use of the ASSM (Box 5).

Box 5. Strengthening the implementation of Voice & Choice

To inform the pilot of Voice & Choice standardization, Mathematica and Agape developed a logic model for the revamped Voice & Choice process. The logic model defined the activities involved in Voice & Choice, the supports Agape provided to Connectors, and short-term outcomes for participants, staff, and the organization, such as participant satisfaction, Connector self-efficacy, and the number of referrals logged in Penelope (Agape's data system). Agape asked participants and Connectors for input in November 2025, about six months after implementing ASSM, and received feedback from about 30 Connectors and 30 participants. Mathematica analyzed the aggregate referral data from Agape's data system, which revealed the following:

- Participants reported high satisfaction with the support they received. Most said they had the final say in choosing their goals, and most had followed through on referrals or intended to.
- Connectors consistently used the ASSM to help participants set goals, but they expressed mixed feelings about its utility to inform referrals.
- Most Connectors participated in training and monthly data meetings, though some reported not being able to access the correct reports.
- Connectors reported moderately high confidence using Voice & Choice, though some supplemental responses suggested that Agape could provide more training and reinforcement for its family-centered approach.
- The ratio of referrals to enrollments improved by about 5 percentage points in the period of April to November 2025 compared with April to November 2024. This change, though not statistically significant, was going in the right direction. It could mean that Connectors were starting to identify more needs in initial participant meetings, when they administered the ASSM. This increase could also reflect more emphasis on entering complete data. ▲

Lessons Learned from REVISE-2G

Lesson 1: Challenges uncovered in one part of a family-serving organization might open organization-wide opportunities for better coordination and integration

In Phase 1 of REVISE-2G, Stars and TeamWorks Connectors raised the importance of coordinating with other Agape family services to meet the needs of participants' families. Agape saw the need to make organization-level shifts to strengthen connections between all its initiatives—not just Stars and TeamWorks—and enable Connectors to better help families address their needs and goals. The Phase 2 training on LI² helped the agency become nimbler in finding opportunities for improvement and innovation in other parts of the agency. The financial management program piloted in Phase 3 reflected Agape's willingness to respond to challenges raised by TeamWorks Connectors in a way that could benefit the whole agency, instead of just developing a workaround or solution specific to TeamWorks. The standardization of Voice & Choice for all initiatives in Phase 4 was intended to ensure the agency treated all participants the same way, regardless of the initiative, and met their needs with appropriate referrals.

Though large-scale, organization-wide change can be daunting, Agape made it manageable by using small tests of change. These tests can take place in a single program, with a small set of participants, or over a short period. They can minimize investment in expensive reforms, fatigue resulting from repeated shifts in direction, or the abandonment of an initiative because of perceived ineffectiveness ([McCay et al. 2017](#)). For example, before making a major investment in a financial management program, Agape used Phase 3 to test it with a small group of women. This small test revealed important challenges related to the intensity of case management and outcome measurement for Agape to iron out before pursuing funding for another round of tests.

Lesson 2: Leaders in family-serving organizations should empower staff, participants, and community partners to work collectively to achieve their goals

Family-serving organizations are often deeply embedded in the communities they serve. They design and deliver services to fit the needs of families and the communities where they live (Boisvert et al. 2024; [Baumgartner et al. 2023](#)). Driving these organizations are foundational values that prioritize relationship building and helping families act on their goals (Baumgartner et al. 2023). Voice & Choice is one example of an approach grounded in these values.

A top-down approach to organizational leadership isn't compatible with community-driven service delivery. Instead, Agape leaders use facilitative leadership, which is characterized by regularly gathering and using feedback from staff, participants, and other interested parties ([Active Implementation Research Network 2024](#)). They then engage those stakeholders in developing ways to address "wicked" challenges—problems that don't have easy solutions ([Head 2022](#)).

Agape leaders empowered the staff closest to the families served to shape program improvement. Using LI² prepared Agape to be more responsive to the communities it serves because the framework asks program leaders to intentionally seek many perspectives when identifying problems and opportunities for innovation. One feature of LI² is the designation of improvement teams, which bring program managers, supervisors, and front-line staff together to lead program improvement. For Agape's financial management pilot in Phase 3, Agape leaders identified an internal champion and improvement team to lead the work instead of overseeing it directly. The pilot was responsive to participant needs and the result of a staff-led initiative: The seeds of the pilot were sown from the insights of TeamWorks Connectors and sprouted through group brainstorming during the LI² training.

Agape's work on Voice & Choice in Phase 4 of REVISE-2G demonstrates facilitative leadership. The focus of the work took shape after the Annie E. Casey Foundation convened Agape, Mathematica, and other researcher-practitioner partners to learn more about two-generation and family-serving organizations (Box 6). Through this event, they saw that measuring and understanding how Voice & Choice went from principle to practice was a wicked problem common to family-serving organizations, as well as an implementation question central to Agape's 2Gen model. Working on the problem could bring benefits to Agape and the field. To address this problem, Agape leaders sought input from Connectors and other staff on the support they needed to implement Voice & Choice successfully, resulting in an approach to assessing implementation grounded in Connector and participant feedback.

Box 6. Bridging insight and action

To read lessons and insights from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's conference on knowledge, partnerships, and pathways for two-generation and family-serving organizations, see [Singleton et al. \(2025\)](#). ▲

Lesson 3: Developing individualized, tailored, and relationship-driven services requires the ability to combine many types of information

To build an organization that responds well to family and community needs, an organization must be able to identify those needs accurately and assess its response to them. To do this, Agape worked to deepen several aspects of its *evidence capacity*, or the “knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency’s ability to build and use evidence to make decisions and inform its work” ([Mastri et al. 2022](#)). *Evidence* is a broad term encompassing information systematically collected and used to understand or improve an organization’s work.

Throughout REVISE-2G, Agape upgraded its data system to make it more useful for integrating services and program improvement. Just before REVISE-2G began, Agape acquired a data system called Penelope to store and manage its data (Shenbanjo et al. 2020). Though well-suited for storing data and producing outcome reports for funders (Shenbanjo et al. 2020), Agape and Mathematica initially had trouble using Penelope for program improvement. In Phase 1, for example, Agape and Mathematica could not generate reports to see whether the strategies they tested affected participation in Stars or TeamWorks. By the fourth phase, Agape was able to prepare data visualizations to monitor referral provision and create reports that supervisors could review with Connectors in monthly data-driven conversations.

REVISE-2G activities helped Agape build its capacity to use multiple types of evidence and answer questions not easily answered by the data stored in Penelope. The coordination strategy Stars tested in Phase 1, for example, included a structured meeting agenda. The notes from those meetings became evidence Agape could use to set future priorities for REVISE-2G.

In Phase 3, Agape largely used evidence coming from outside Penelope to assess its financial management pilot. Agape gave participants quizzes at the end of coaching sessions to assess knowledge gains and follow-up surveys to track participants’ satisfaction and outcomes. In Phase 4, Agape combined feedback from staff and participants with referral data from Penelope to assess the use of Voice & Choice. Instead of adding fields to Penelope to track the use of referrals or analyzing qualitative case notes, which would have been burdensome for Connectors and performance management staff, Agape gathered this information through a participant survey. Recommendations for future evidence use after Phase 4 included testing artificial intelligence tools to analyze qualitative notes and designing a process to conduct an in-depth review of a random sample of cases.

Lesson 4: Maintaining high-quality family-centered services requires ongoing attention to several aspects of implementation

Assessing the implementation of Voice & Choice, like other family-centered approaches, is nuanced and challenging because the practice model is grounded in building relationships with participants. Quantifiable metrics, such as the number of referrals provided, the number of assessments given, or participation in follow-up meetings, aren’t enough to assess such a tailored and individualized approach. Agape’s assessment strategy incorporated low-burden surveys to shed light on questions not easily answered with Penelope data, such as whether Connectors felt confident guiding goal-setting conversations and whether participants felt empowered and supported to act on their goals.

Findings from the pilot Agape conducted in Phase 4 underscored the ongoing focus and support needed to implement a family-centered approach well. By many metrics, the ASSM helped Connectors identify participants’ needs and empowered participants to set goals they wanted to work on. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experience. But some staff in initiatives geared toward a single

generation continued to report that addressing holistic family needs was outside their scope of work. Others noted problems explaining the approach to participants. Some newer staff also said they were unfamiliar with Agape's 2Gen approach. These findings suggest that staff need ongoing reinforcement to understand how their work fits into the overall family-centered, two-generation approach—an understanding they need to successfully use Voice & Choice. The findings also suggest that regular reviews of data, combined with observation, active supervision and coaching, and intentional gathering and use of feedback, can help Agape continue to improve.

Conclusion

Agape's experience building its evaluation capacity and refining its program model in REVISE-2G offers important insights for other family-serving organizations, researchers, and funders. Through REVISE-2G, Agape continually developed the knowledge and skills of its staff to use evidence. Agape also addressed topics that are fundamental to the mission of centering and enabling families to achieve their goals, including making organizational changes to empower staff, leading a nimble and innovative organization, becoming evidence driven, and measuring family-centered service delivery.

- **Practitioners** in family-serving organizations can look for opportunities to examine their own improvement efforts: How does the organization identify the holistic needs of the families and communities it serves, and how does it respond to them? What roles do families and the staff closest to them have in identifying problems and solutions? Who is responsible for leading improvement and learning, and do they have the time and resources to prioritize it? How does the organization know if what it does is working? What skills must the organization build and what infrastructure must it provide to have both a successful improvement process and high-quality family services? Agape's experiences show that the two are linked: Without defined processes for regularly gathering, analyzing, and acting on evidence and data, organizations will struggle to become more family centered.
- For **researchers**, these lessons underscore the importance of understanding what it takes to enhance the quality, intensity, and intentional integration of services for caregivers and children ([Sommer et al. 2024](#)). Working together, researchers and practitioners can develop approaches to measurement, evaluation, and evidence building that tell the story of how family-serving organizations work with their communities and improve outcomes for families. To do this, researchers must consider what methods are appropriate, given the organization's evaluation readiness and the questions it wants to answer, and how their research methods might result in different types of knowledge and evidence ([Mosle and Sims 2024](#)).
- **Funders** might consider how to embed participatory approaches in their grant-making processes and how to scope grant activities to mirror the way family-serving organizations engage with communities. The innovative, participatory grant-making approach in REVISE-2G maximized the work's value for Agape because the Annie E. Casey Foundation gave Agape the agency to shape the grant funding it received. REVISE-2G shows that participatory partnerships can focus on the specific interests and goals of a single organization while also building evidence for the field on how family-serving organizations can make systems of support more family centered.

Throughout REVISE-2G, Agape continued to evolve and grow its role as a convener and steward for collective action in the Memphis community. In late 2025, Agape launched two place-based systems change efforts. In partnership with the mayors of Memphis and Shelby County, Agape acted as the backbone agency for a collective impact initiative to align education, nonprofit, government, faith, and philanthropic partners on a [common framework](#) for improving child and family well-being. Agape was also selected as one of three sites for the Tennessee Department of Human Services' [Human Flourishing Initiative](#) to coordinate public and private service providers to address families' interconnected needs. Through the initiative, Agape planned to showcase 2Gen as a template for person-centered and two-generation service delivery. Agape's leadership cited the REVISE-2G partnership as vital for catalyzing Agape's role in bringing organizations together to improve outcomes across Memphis.



Agape's partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Mathematica has been truly transformational for us.... We fundamentally changed how we listen, learn, and lead. By centering the voices of families and staff, we strengthened our two-generation work and built a culture of continuous improvement that now shapes every part of our organization.

David Jordan, President and Chief Executive Officer, Agape Child & Family Services

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