The Family Portraits Project
(Updated Teen version)
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Research and practice have proven the importance of communication within families. This communication is especially important, but also especially challenging, in the teenage years. Consistent, open communication between caregivers and teens can improve family functioning and reduce risky behaviors among teens.

Given the unique situations of kinship families (families in which children are being raised by their relatives), the need for opportunities to “tell stories” is especially significant for both youth and their caregivers. Unfortunately, however, teens are not always enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts, feelings and intentions with the adults in their lives, especially when these thoughts and feelings involve their birth parents and oftentimes difficult past histories.

Implementing a successful Family Portraits Project series will help to support the development of positive communication and strengthened family dynamics in these families. Teens being raised by their grandparents develop an increased awareness of the complexities of their living situation. They may have questions about their parents’ past behavior and current role in their lives. They may also compare themselves to friends who are not being raised by their grandparents. A typical task of teen-age development is establishing identity and considering one’s role in the context of the family and peer network. This is a tall order for all teens, but teens being raised by grandparents face special challenges. For such teens, the identity-formation process includes thinking through why and how they came to live with their grandparent, what role their parent may play in their lives, and how they tell that story to themselves and to others.

The research highlights the distinct challenges facing teens living in kinship care. The typical teenage difficulties combined with increasing awareness on the part of the teen about their unique living situation highlights a need for projects such as the Family Portraits Project (FPP), a creative family project that naturally opens the channels of communication. The Family Portraits Project is a 6-10 session series using art, writing, photography and computer technology to develop a personal family book. The FPP aims to provide youth in kinship care with a safe, fun and educational way to explore their family dynamics and history while improving communication with their caregivers. The project focuses on the creative process of storytelling as a vehicle for self-expression. Group
discussions during each session provide opportunities for connecting with peers while take-home prompts allow for intentional information gathering at home. Through this process, youth participate in storytelling and create an individual book to take home and share with their family and friends.

(The complete Research Brief which outlines the specific goals and methods of the new Family Portraits Project can be accessed on the Cornell University Parenting in Context website: Kinship Care and Communication by Dr. Rachel Dunifon and Emi DiSciullo)

**Family Portraits Project (third version):** Through this collaborative, intergenerational effort every RAPP family will have the opportunity to create one page to be included in our book about FAMILY. Each family is encouraged to work together in deciding how to express what the idea of family uniquely means to their family. Our goal is to create one book where each page will reflect the individuality of each family that makes our program so rich.

**Additional ideas for working with youth:**

In 2012 CCE-OC hosted an eight session RAPP Teen Leadership Institute. The goal of this Institute was for each teen to develop important life and leadership skills. Through various guest speakers and cooperative activities, teens worked together to improve their natural talents and decision making abilities. The teens were offered numerous opportunities to build positive peer relationships, work with multiple role models and explore a variety of positive youth development topics such as cooking, nutrition, financial management, problem solving, peer pressure, coping skills, safe technology and goal setting. Upon culmination of the Teen Institute, teens have been requested to assume leadership roles within RAPP and provide meaningful contributions to the programs for younger youth.

RAPP worked collaboratively with the regional libraries promoting the *Dream BIG: READ summer reading program*. This initiative was launched at the RAPP Picnic in July and followed up with an eight session program held during the month of July and early August. The youth between 6 and 12 years read a book each session then completed a project or activity complimenting the book. For example the youth read, “Where the Wild Things Are” and then created land boats that they raced at the end of the session. Our goal was to help reduce the academic summer slide that occurs each summer when youth are not engaged in formal school.

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