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07/27/2021

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Utah State University Brigham City Assistant Professor Vonda Jump Norman has been awarded grant funding to support Latino parents in building and maintaining positive parent-child interactions with their children. Juntos Es Mejor, the project parenting program, is aimed to prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACE) in children through providing support, education and fun interaction opportunities for parents with their children.

“Vonda is an amazing faculty member who is engaged in developing students and making our communities better,” said Dan Black, USU Brigham City region associate vice president. “This current project that focuses on adverse childhood experiences with an aim to provide improved parent-child interactions will have a positive impact. We are excited for the parents and children that her work will impact as well as the learning her students will engage in as they help with the project.”

According to the CDC, ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). These could include experiences of violence, abuse or neglect, witnessing violence in the home, having a family member attempt or commit suicide or growing up in a home with substance abuse problems, mental health problems or instability due to parental separation or household members being in prison. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness and substance use problems in adulthood and can also negatively impact education, job opportunities and earning potential. While effective parenting is a challenging task for all parents at some point in time, parents who experienced ACEs when they were children are more likely to struggle with parenting, and to have children who also experience ACEs.

Juntos Es Mejor is the Spanish language counterpart to Better Together, a three-year project at The Family Place funded by the Utah Legislature. Jump Norman developed and oversees that program with her talented team, and she saw the need for Spanish speaking parents in the community to also have the opportunity to take part in the cutting-edge program. The main goals of the program are to facilitate positive experiences between parents and their children, and to support effective parenting strategies. Associated benefits are anticipated to be stronger parent-parent and parent-child relationships, improved knowledge of child development and support of children’s optimal development and improved child development outcomes. Assuming the evidence-informed program is effective in these areas, the goal is to have the program be utilized in Family Support Centers across the state.

“The purpose of the Juntos Es Mejor project is to provide parents and their children fun parent-child interaction activities, education about child development and positive and effective discipline strategies,” Jump Norman said. “The goal is to improve parent-child relationships, decrease parenting stress, increase knowledge and use of effective parenting techniques, and increase child protective factors. An additional benefit is that nine USU alumni and current students are receiving hands-on experience in the development and implementation of cutting-edge parenting programs.”

The Juntos Es Mejor team, hired through a subcontract with The Family Place, holds Zoom sessions every other week for 12 weeks with parents and their children, split into specific age groups (0-2, 3-5, 6-11 and 12-18). Parents and their children check in with each other and engage in Mind-Body Bridging activities as they begin each session. After this, children and parents will then participate in fun parent-child relationship building activities. A recent example was a sensory-focused week that involved parents and children learning more about each other’s touch needs, an adventurous taste test experience, daring to walk on eggs and trying to guess sounds and objects they could not see.

“That was probably the most powerful session we had,” Jump Norman said. “It was amazing to watch children who often had “behavioral” issues due to trauma melt with their parents during the touch portion in particular. A
few months afterward, one parent said that it had totally changed her interactions with her eight-year-old son, as he learned the type of touch that she liked — firm — and he stopped coming up and touching her lightly on her arm, but now touches her much more firmly. She said it made a huge difference in her relationship with him."

The last part of the program involves parents watching videos in targeted areas (brain development, self-regulation, social development, language development, cognitive development, physical development and friendship development/healthy friendships). After learning about normative development for their child’s age, parents learn about the impact of trauma on that sphere of development and ways they can support their child’s optimal development. Parents respond to class prompts, share experiences and provide support for each other’s successes in the online and confidential class platform. These activities occur during the off-week of the program.

The other aspect of the funded project is educating local family practice doctors about ACEs and their long-term impacts on health and well-being. The goal of this part of the project is to support the physicians in helping their patients understand more about ACEs and their impact on them so they can work together to improve health outcomes. The potential of this mode of intervention is great, as patients will be empowered to take control of their health in partnership with their physician.

“USU Statewide Campuses is immensely proud of Dr. Jump Norman’s funding success,” said Larry Smith, USU vice president for statewide campuses. “Her work based out of the USU Brigham City campus will make positive impacts on childhood development and improve family life across Utah.”

The Juntos Es Mejor grant is funded by the National Association of County and City Health Officials. The Better Together program that the Juntos Es Mejor program is adapted from is funded by the Utah Legislature through The Family Place.