

# ANNUAL REPORT 2023



## PARENTING COMMUNITIES

FUNDED BY THE LEELANAU COUNTY EARLY CHILDHOOD MILLAGE

# THE STORY OF PARENTING COMMUNITIES

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Parenting Communities was initially established in the 1990's in response to input from Leelanau County families: They had questions about their children's development and worries about their children and parenting, but no one to talk to; they felt socially isolated as there were no opportunities to connect with other families with young children; there was a lack of information about community resources and difficulty accessing services that were often located only in Traverse City or had complicated application processes.

Funding through Strong Families Safe Children supported Parenting Communities for a few years, but over time on-going funding was eliminated and the program relied on a few short term grants and donations that only provided for minimal services that were inadequate to meet the needs of Leelanau's young children. Then, in 2019, a Leelanau County Early Childhood Work Group was formed to identify the strengths, gaps, and needs of families in our community. After months of reviewing data and collecting input from families, schools, health care providers, and other organizations that served young children, the Early Childhood Work Group made a recommendation to the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners to request a millage to provide sustainable funding for early childhood services and supports that would improve the health and well-being of young children. In November of 2019, Leelanau County voters passed the Leelanau Early Childhood Millage and the Board of Commissioners selected the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department to lead early childhood programming.

Fortified with fresh information about the needs of Leelanau County families and sustainable funding to rebuild a support system for families with young children, in 2020 Parenting Communities was re-established to achieve the **vision of Thriving Children and Families in Leelanau County**.

In an effort to ensure that quality and impactful services were available, **core values** were developed to guide all Parenting Communities initiatives:

**Earlier is better:** Research shows that supporting families and children during the first few years has life-long physical, social, emotional and economic benefits.

**Universal Access:** Opportunities are available to all families in Leelanau County.

**Family-Focused:** The level of support and the type of support is tailored to each family's needs.

**Parents are leaders:** Parents/caregivers determine their goals for participation and also provide input into the services/opportunities funded through millage dollars.

**Evidence and Data:** Evidenced based and evidenced informed frameworks are used to guide initiatives. Qualitative and Quantitative evaluation is incorporated to demonstrate impact.

**Collaboration:** Partnerships with other agencies that support early childhood health and well-being are leveraged to create a seamless system that increases efficiency, avoids duplication, and fills identified gaps.

Parenting Communities is based on the **Strengthening Families/Protective Factors Framework**. Protective Factors are strengths in families that mitigate risks and promote positive well-being and healthy development. **In the following pages, you will read stories about families in our community and how Parenting Communities impacted the five Protective Factors:**

- **Parental Resilience**
- **Social Connections**
- **Concrete Support in Times of Need**
- **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development**
- **Social-Emotional Competence of Children**



**PARENTING  
COMMUNITIES**



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# PARENTAL RESILIENCE

The Superson and Smith Family

**Parental resilience means managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.**

"Autumn and the Early Childhood services provided by BLDHD were invaluable to my experience as a mother with three young children (4 years old, 2 years old, and newborn). Autumn has home-visited me since I had my first baby and has always done whatever it took to support me to reach my goals. She has helped me to find evidence-based information to support my breastfeeding goals when I was faced with chronic illness during both of my postpartum periods. She has always supported my family with sensitivity, wisdom, and respect, and has been our number one go-to person whenever we need support. It has been a running joke, and a source of relief, in our family, "Call Autumn. She will save the day." She always has. Smart, wise, compassionate, and direct with communication. Many times, she has literally saved my spirit during the often isolating and misunderstood time of postpartum recovery and parenting. It has been the most vulnerable time in my and my husband's lives, and we owe part of our coping and perseverance to Autumn's steady, wise support. Thank you so much to Autumn, her team, and to the BLDHD, for supporting young families in our community."

-Jennifer Superson

# SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

## The Pontius Family

**Social Connections means having positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support.**

Jared and Jillian Pontius have been part of the Parenting Communities family since the birth of their first daughter, Dillan (now 3 yrs old). The family has expanded to include Peyton (11 months) and over the past several years have benefited from many Parenting Communities services, including home visits, playgroups, and community events.

When Dillan was born in 2020, the pandemic was very isolating for new parents Jared and Jillian. Having Parenting Communities staff call to check on the family's well-being helped them feel less alone. And when Jillian was struggling with breastfeeding, the lactation specialist came to their home to resolve latch problems and monitor Dillan's weight to ensure she was receiving adequate milk supply.

When the family expanded in 2023 with the birth of daughter Peyton, Parenting Communities continued to be a constant source of stability and connection with knowledgeable professionals and other parents.

*"We are able to contact Parenting Communities with any questions, not only about our babies but for my mental health as well. I was so excited to know that I had such a great support system in place when I became pregnant with our second child. Parenting Communities has made us feel less alone."*

*-Jillian Pontius*





## CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

The Tuttle Family

**Concrete support in times of need means having access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.**

"The first time I met Nikki in April 2022, my daughter was two weeks old. Nikki was assigned to me after I applied for the WIC program. Although Hailey was my second child, I was overwhelmed with navigating the challenges that come with having a newborn. Nikki was there to support me in any way she could. She introduced me to PC and explained it was a great way to connect with other parents in the area. It was also a way for us to continue home visits, which is the service I took most advantage of. Every month, Nikki came over at a time that was convenient to me. She was there to listen, support, and offer advice in any area she could.

A few months after Hailey was born, we found out my older daughter, Addy, would need surgery on her back. This was a very scary time for our family. We had no idea how we were going to pay for the surgery. During one of our home visits, I explained my worries to Nikki. She patiently listened to all of my concerns. Afterwards, she helped me brainstorm a plan. Nikki told me about Children's Special Health services and explained how Addy might qualify. She set everything up for me and helped me fill out the forms. I will never be able to thank her enough for finding a financial solution so we could dedicate our entire focus to helping Addy heal.

Throughout our visits with Nikki, she has provided our family with countless resources from diapers to food drives to books for the kids. None of this would be possible without PC. We are so thankful for the support PC has given our family."

-Dan and Courtney Tuttle

# KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Fettig & Slaven Family

**Knowledge of parenting and child development means understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.**

Makayla Fettig and her partner, Steven Slaven, are thankful for the support Parenting Communities has provided in the first months after the birth of their son, Aiden, in September 2023. As first time, nervous parents they have relied on the Parenting Communities nurse, Nikki Cleland, to answer questions and guide them through this new chapter in their lives. Nikki provided lots of information about breastfeeding and arranged for a Registered Dietitian to come to the home to discuss specific questions about feeding. Makayla even sent a picture of a dirty diaper to the nurse when she was concerned and the nurse reassured her that all was normal and provided information about what to expect in the coming months.

During home visits, Nikki does a developmental assessment and shares activities that stimulate Aiden's physical and emotional development. Learning about normal child development brings comfort to Makayla and Steven in knowing their son is healthy and reaching developmental milestones.



*"Our experience with Parenting Communities has been amazing! I am so very thankful for everything the program has provided and would recommend it to any new parents."*

-Makayla Fettig



# SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

“Smith Family”

**Social-emotional competence of children means family and child interactions help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.**

Courtney, a Parenting Communities home visitor, was already working with the Smith family (name changed to protect identity) when they learned of the terminal illness of a close family member. Along with an empathetic ear and a safe space for open dialogue, Courtney provided practical resources such as information on end-of-life planning, bereavement groups, and children’s books on grief. After the family member passed, Courtney shared information about how children perceive loss over time and offered tools to empower the parents to navigate their children’s grief journey with sensitivity and understanding. Courtney’s holistic approach in supporting the Smith family is a testament to the importance of Parenting Communities and the profound difference it can make in developing social-emotional competence in children as they face challenges.



# THE TEAM

The Parenting Communities team offers a variety of skills and expertise to meet the individuals goals for each family.

- **Community Health Worker (CHW):** Community Health Workers are specially trained professionals with knowledge of child development, parenting, and community resources.
- **Nurse:** Nurses offer assessment and information about medical needs, including immunizations, preventive health care, and referrals and follow-up for health needs.
- **Registered Dietitian:** The Registered Dietitian shares information about nutrition, assesses strengths and gaps in individual children's diets, and offers strategies for improving overall nutrition.
- **Social Worker:** The Social Worker supports emotional and mental health needs of parents that impact a parent's capacity to be attuned to their children's physical, emotional and developmental needs.
- **Breastfeeding Specialist:** A breastfeeding specialist provides individual assessment, assistance, and information to help parent's achieve their breastfeeding goals.
- **Volunteers:** The Parenting Communities volunteers are a vital part of our team. They help set up and run events and provide child care so that parents can more fully participate in parenting programs.



# SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

## PLAYGROUPS

Playgroups are an opportunity for Leelanau County parents/caregivers to connect with, learn from, and support each other. A certified Community Health Worker facilitates each group to share information about health, nutrition, parenting, and other relevant topics.

**In 2023, 170 playgroups were held, serving 144 children in 107 families.**

## COMMUNITY EVENTS

Community events are held throughout the year, based on input from Leelanau families, and provide additional opportunities for families to connect, learn about community resources, and experience Leelanau County's community spirit. Examples include a Harvest Festival, Holiday Gathering, Grandparent's Day brunch, and a Family Street Fair.

## FAMILIES TOGETHER

Families Together is a monthly gathering for parents of infants and young children to explore topics related to early childhood development, parenting, and overall well-being. Led in partnership with local infant mental health specialists.

**Families Together started in January, 2023. 40 children from 26 families participated in Families Together in 2023.**

## HOME VISITS

Home visits are an opportunity for families to receive individualized support that meets their unique needs. Home visit services may include developmental screenings, parent education, connection with resources, support managing stress or other ups and downs of parenting.

**In 2023, 348 home visits were conducted, serving 90 children in 48 families.**

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**IN 2023, 377 CHILDREN IN 212 FAMILIES WERE ENROLLED IN PARENTING COMMUNITIES.**

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## BEHIND THE SCENES

Throughout the year, Parenting Communities staff collaborate with schools, health care providers, day care providers and other organizations that serve young children to build a robust system that supports all Leelanau County families in their parenting journey.

# EVALUATION

Avenue ISR, an independent research and strategy consultancy, is contracted to examine data collected from Parenting Communities participants and relevant historic data for the purpose of evaluating the impact of Parenting Communities. After extensive review, 2023 evaluation highlights are as follows:

- The underlying stressors on parents/caregivers remains significant.
- Parenting Communities may be having a direct impact on the mental health of parents and caregivers.
- Parenting Communities participants agree that being involved in Parenting Communities helps them feel less isolated; helps them navigate the ups and downs of life; helps them learn about resources to help them as parents/caregivers; makes them better parents/caregivers.
- For those who are receiving home visiting services, participants report receiving both tangible and intangible supports such as learning about child development; getting help from community resources; obtaining medical, dental or mental health care; and finding ways to improve their family's financial situation, all of which create pathways for improved family circumstances.

“They have made such an impact on us and my family. I can’t imagine how many other families they have made an impact on and touched. I believe they are building a better future for our children and helping families in general to cope.”

- Parenting Communities Parent/Participant

Read the full 2023 Parenting Communities Evaluation Report [HERE](#) or go to:

[https://bldhd.org/media/uploads/Parenting%20Communities/Program%20Evaluations/2023\\_parenting\\_communities\\_evaluation\\_report.pdf](https://bldhd.org/media/uploads/Parenting%20Communities/Program%20Evaluations/2023_parenting_communities_evaluation_report.pdf)

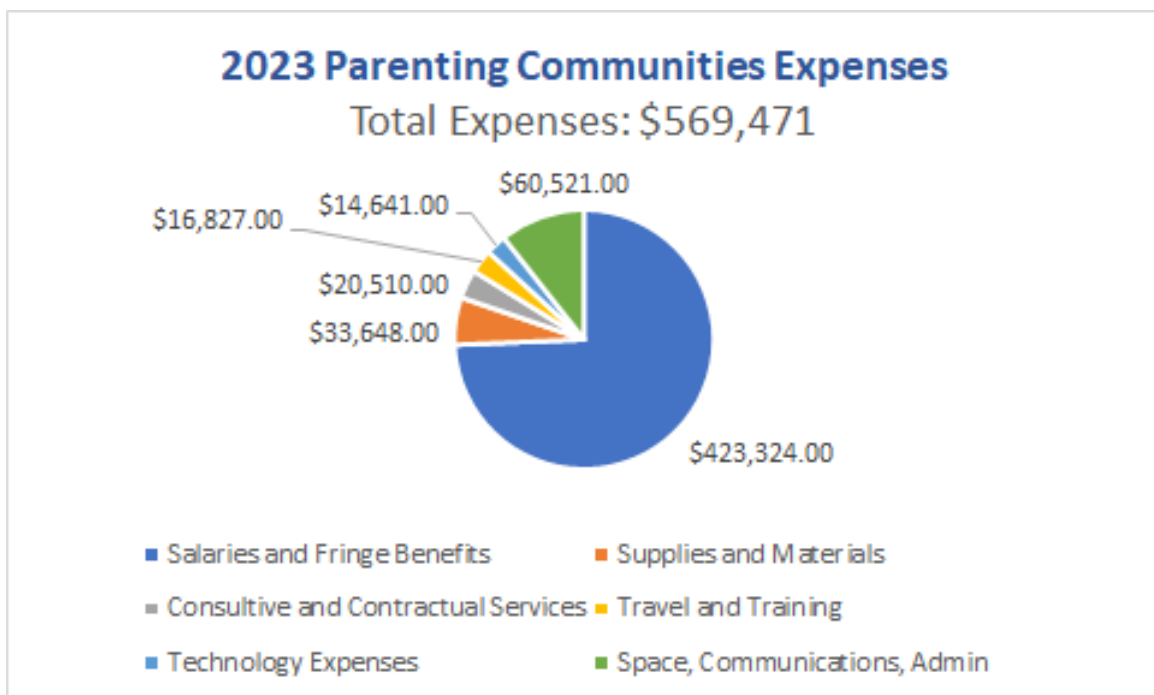


# PARTNERSHIPS

The Parenting Communities team is thankful for the many partnerships and volunteers that help support Leelanau County families.

- Five Loaves, Two Fish
- Leelanau Children’s Center
- Dolly Parton Imagination Library
- PoWer! Book Bags
- Leelanau Christian Neighbors
- Suttons Bay Bingham District Library
- Glen Lake Community Library
- Leland Township Library
- Leelanau Township Library
- Glen Lake Community Reformed Church
- Healthy Futures
- St. Mary’s School
- Northport Public School
- Glen Lake Community Schools
- Suttons Bay Public School
- Leelanau Montessori
- Leland Public School
- Benodjenh Child Center
- 5toONE
- Local Childcare Providers
- And you!

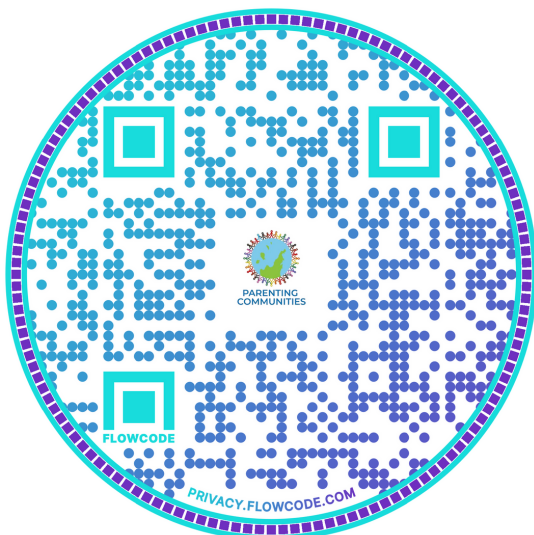
## FINANCIAL INFORMATION





# PARENTING COMMUNITIES

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**



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