

# PARENTING COMMUNITIES

*funded by the Leelanau County Early Childhood Millage*



**2024 ANNUAL REPORT**

Growing our Roots

# ..... The Story of Parenting Communities .....

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 first 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. This vision continues to grow thanks to the overwhelming support of voters during August 2024 for the renewal of the Early Childhood Millage. Thank you Voters!

In an effort to ensure that quality and impactful services are 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.

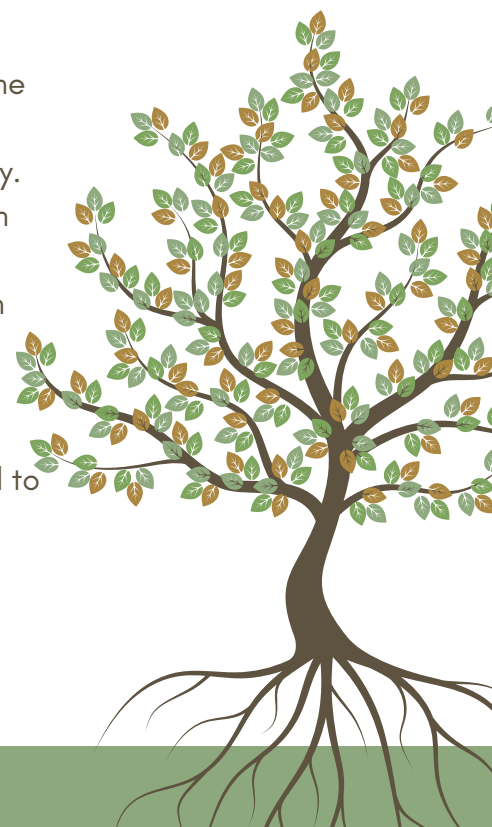
**Universal Access:** Opportunities are available to all families in Leelanau County.

**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.



# Rooted deeply, reaching widely

At Parenting Communities, we believe in the power of connection and the importance of nurturing our roots—not just among families, but across generations and community collaborators.

This year, we partnered with ShareCare of Leelanau and Senior Services to co-facilitate two intergenerational events to bring community members together in meaningful ways. By creating intergenerational experiences for young children and seniors, we're building stronger, more inclusive communities and finding new ways to reach and support families where they are.

Enjoy.Create.Appreciate! event was held in November with lunch and gratitude themed activities.

Like Sunlight and soil, your support helps us grow.

The results of the 2024 August Leelanau Early Childhood Millage election were resounding. Every district in the county voted to support families with young children, through high-quality programming provided by the Parenting Communities team and our collaborators.

Your support means so much to us, and we are excited to branch out even further to make Leelanau County one of the best places for families to grow and thrive!

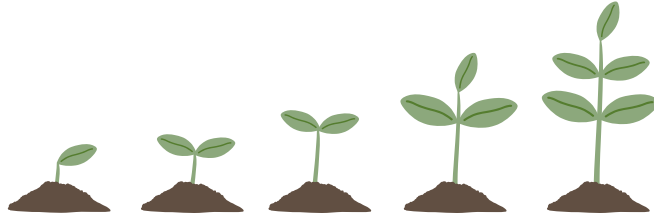


We nurtured our roots with Great Start Collaborative, ShareCare, and Senior Services by co-hosting an intergenerational concert, featuring Miriam Pico. Despite thunderstorms, the community showed up and enjoyed the connection music can provide.

Our team also worked with the Infant Toddler Collaborative to host a dinner for childcare providers and the families in their care. This event facilitated the growth of childcare provider relationships as well as family connection through dinner and fun activities.



# ..... Growing from the ground up .....



Early Childhood Needs & Services, a non-partisan committee of the League of Women Voters of Leelanau County, is a group that works to strengthen resources and advocate for Leelanau families with young children on a statewide platform. In 2024, they invited a Parenting Communities team member to join the committee to make sure that the needs of Leelanau County families are accurately represented by their advocacy regarding legislative initiatives at the state level.

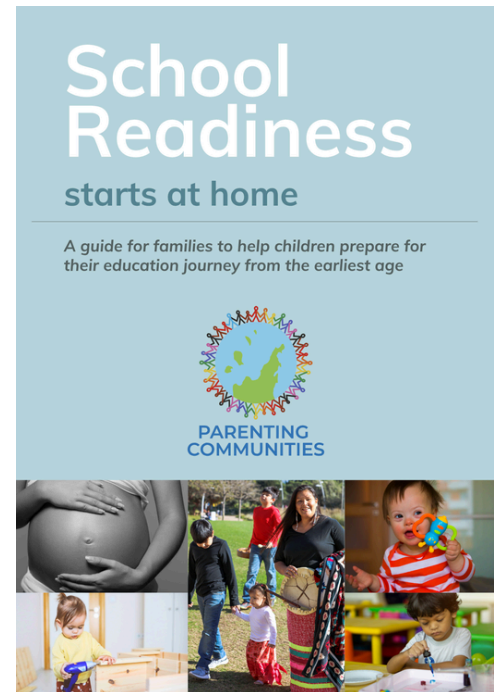
Being a voice on the committee is mutually beneficial. While we provide insights to help the group better represent the needs of Leelanau County families, we're also gaining valuable knowledge from ECNS about current legislative developments that impact our community. This exchange allows us to anticipate future needs and strengthen our support for local families.

In 2024, Parenting Communities deepened its roots through expanded collaboration with the Great Start Collaborative (GSC)—a statewide network of parents, community leaders, and organizations working together to ensure that every child in Michigan, from prenatal to age 8, has the opportunity to thrive. Grounded in local voices and needs, GSCs nurture stronger early childhood systems across the state.

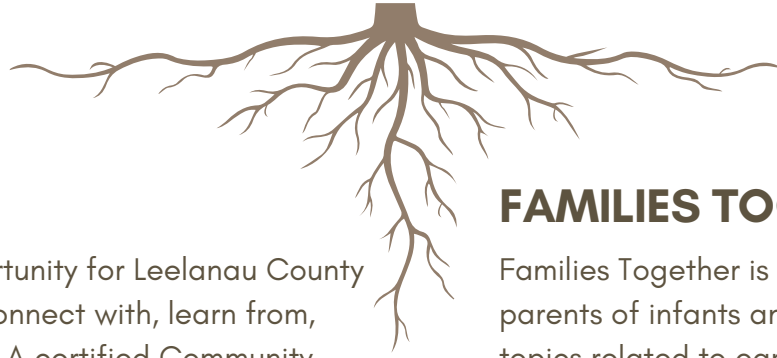
This year, our partnership with GSC grew in several meaningful ways. One of our team members joined the Kindergarten Readiness Advocacy Committee, helping to bring the unique perspectives of Leelanau County families into broader conversations about school readiness—ensuring both schools and children are prepared to grow and thrive together.

In another exciting development, GSC recognized the impact of our booklet, *School Readiness Starts at Home*. Seeing its value, they offered to fund printing so the resource could branch out beyond Leelanau County and support families throughout the region.

Finally, GSC invited Parenting Communities to pilot a collaborative effort using the Help Me Grow electronic system. This tool will help us more effectively gather and share developmental screening data collected by the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department. In addition to the use of screening results to work one-on-one with families to support their children's growth, the data will be used to better understand where children in our area are developmentally, and to ensure that services and supports are growing in the right direction to meet families' needs.



# Our roots, our reach



## 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 2024, 126 playgroups were held, serving 114 children in 77 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 the Harvest Festival, a Holiday Gathering, the Community Baby Shower, and the Family Street Fair.

**In 2024 the Street Fair gathered 105 children from 64 families. The Harvest Fest was another hit with 64 children from 39 families enjoying the fun.**

## 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.

**Throughout the two seasons of Families Together in 2024, there were 17 children from 11 families participating**



## 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 2024, 414 home visits were conducted, serving 96 children in 65 families.**

**IN 2024, 407 CHILDREN IN 301 FAMILIES WERE ENROLLED IN PARENTING COMMUNITIES.**

# Branching out with purpose

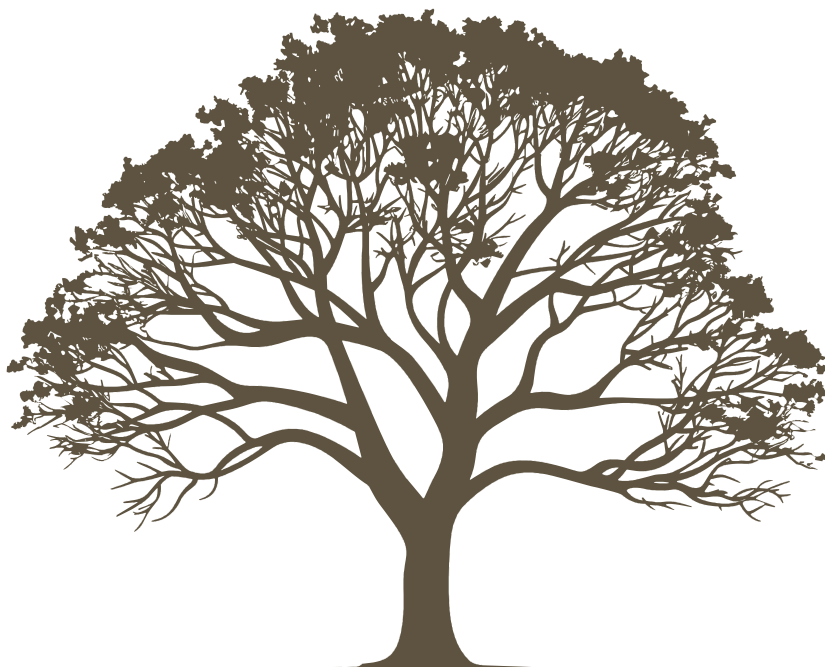
As we worked to reach our goal of reaching every family in Leelanau County with information and supports that are uniquely relevant to them, we became curious of how to connect with those not participating and what barriers may be preventing families from taking advantage of our services. In November 2024, after extensive discussion and planning, we launched the Parent & Caregiver Survey, targeted at families who have limited or no knowledge about Parenting Communities. Here is what we have learned:

Based on the Parent & Caregiver Survey results, Parenting Communities (PC) appears to be relatively well known among families in Leelanau County, even among those who have not participated in any PC programs. Half of the non-participating respondents indicated that they are at least “somewhat familiar” with Parenting Communities, suggesting that outreach efforts—such as collaboration with programs like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library—have been effective in raising basic awareness. However, the data also reveals that not all families are fully familiar with PC, signaling an opportunity for expanded or more tailored outreach efforts to ensure that every family with young children is aware of what Parenting Communities offers.

Importantly, the survey helped clarify that lack of engagement is not primarily due to negative perceptions. Most non-participating families still view PC programs as fun for both children and adults and believe they are welcoming and beneficial for a broad spectrum of families—across income levels, ethnic backgrounds, and family roles such as moms, dads, and grandparents. Yet, some perceived barriers do exist, particularly related to scheduling. Several respondents cited difficulty attending in-person events due to work or family logistics, especially for programs offered during standard business hours. In addition, misunderstandings about services like Home Visiting and Developmental Screenings—such as assumptions they are only for families in crisis or with very young children—highlight a need for better communication around the inclusive, non-judgmental, and universally supportive nature of these offerings.

Encouragingly, the survey indicates a strong latent interest in Parenting Communities programming. Many families who haven't yet participated expressed enthusiasm for future engagement, especially with offerings like Families Together events. This points to a clear growth opportunity: by clarifying misconceptions, maintaining a flexible approach to scheduling, and continuing strategic outreach through trusted information channels, Parenting Communities can deepen its roots in Leelanau County and engage an even broader cross-section of families.

\*\*Details about this survey and more can be found in our annual programmatic evaluation, which you can find on our website: [parentingcommunities.org/community-impact-2/](https://parentingcommunities.org/community-impact-2/)



# ..... Spreading our canopy of care .....

As Parenting Communities continues to grow, so does the support we offer to families across Leelanau County. Families are at the heart of everything we do, and their voices remind us why this work matters. Here, they share what being involved in Parenting Communities has meant to them.

I have only good things to say when it comes to Parenting Communities. They offer great events, playgroups and more! I personally have known Autumn for a handful of years, and after having my first baby, I often contacted her with questions relating to breastfeeding. She was always so quick to reply knowing that I was in need.

When I was struggling with postpartum depression and anxiety after having my second baby, not knowing what was happening to me, thinking I was going crazy, I called Autumn from my hospital room. She had all the right things to say and gave great advice. What's more - she listened. I am very fortunate to call Autumn my friend.

When I was in a hard spot in my third pregnancy, needing guidance and an ear to listen, I called Autumn. It was then that she connected me with her coworker, Courtney, whom my family loves dearly. Courtney comes into my home once a week and just talks with me. She mostly listens as I ramble on while my kids think she comes over to play with them specifically. She has been one of the greatest additions to my postpartum mental health recovery.

Having kids of any age is hard- it's reassuring to know that we belong to a community who cares and chooses to put families first, connecting parents and children of different backgrounds, and giving mothers tools to help with physical and mental postpartum recovery. I cannot recommend Parenting Communities enough. They have saved my life.

-Brooke Mikowski, Suttons Bay

I am very grateful to and proud of our county and community for this program and for the quality of Parenting Communities on a whole. You guys do an amazing job and we need all the support we can get to help raise the next generation of awesome, well adjusted kiddos!

Thank you!

-PC Parent



I truly believe in this program. I would have struggled so much being a new mom and breastfeeding for the first time, on top of all of the other new challenges being a new mom brought on. I thank everyone that has been there for me through this first year from the bottom of my heart.

-PC Parent

# .....Roots, trunk, branches, and leaves .....



## WE ARE PARENTING COMMUNITIES

**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.

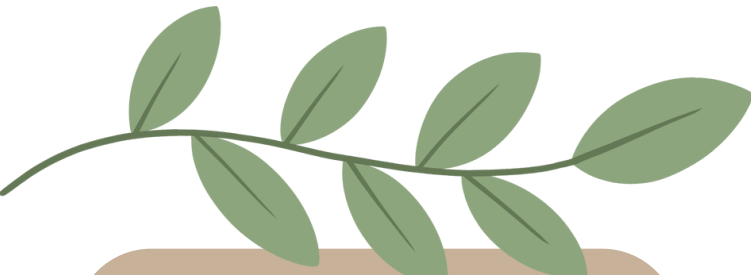
"I am grateful and thankful for the people involved in helping us as parents. I can sense the genuine desire to help out in any area possible." -PC Parent

# Fueling the forest

Behind every service we offer is an investment of capital and community that helps our roots grow deeper and our branches reach farther.

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
- ShareCare
- Keswick United Methodist Church
- Great Start Collaborative
- 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
- Northport Art Association
- Leelanau Senior Services
- MI-AIMH
- And you!



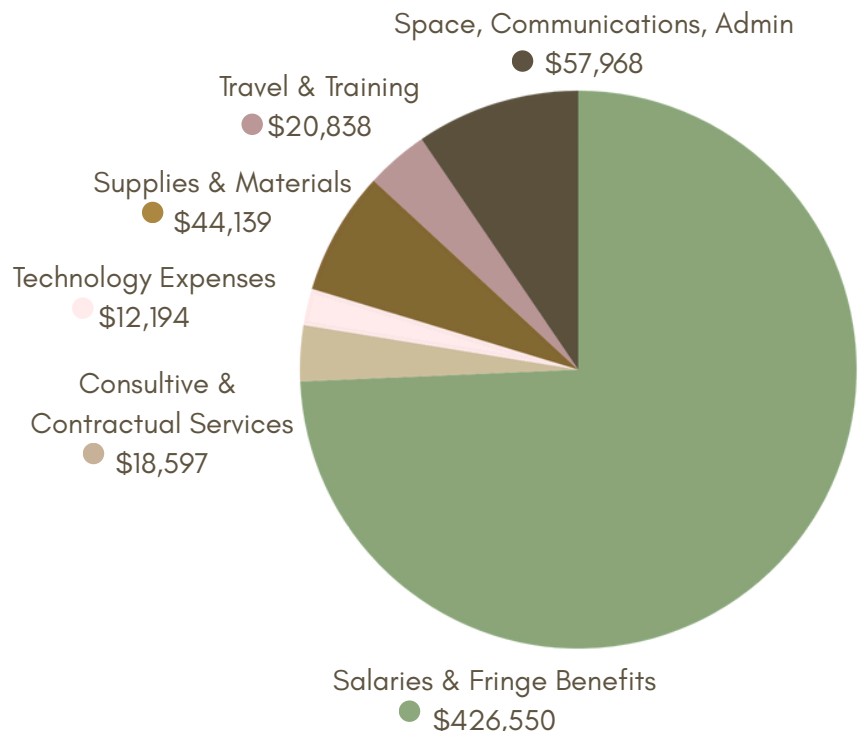
"I was a Parenting Communities home visitor about 10 years ago, and I have seen the ripple effects of the program across the county firsthand! Parenting can be a pretty lonely endeavor, and Parenting Communities provides space, time, and resources for parents in the county... Parenting Communities connections mean that I'm never alone in the hard parts of parenting."

-Shelagh Fehrenbach, Leland Public School Principal

## Financial Information

2024 Parenting Communities Expenses

Total Expenses: \$580,286





## **PARENTING COMMUNITIES**

**For more information & our  
community calendar of events visit:**

**[parentingcommunities.org](http://parentingcommunities.org)**

