

Structuring Effective Peer Support and Social Connections in New Parent Programs

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Introduction

Social connection for new parents is important to family wellness, resilience and infant mental health and development. Peer support can be structured within a programmatic setting to build confidence in new parenthood, **centering social support and community** as goals.

Methods

- 8-16 typically first-time parents and their newborns meet — as a cohort — for 2 hours/week for 12 weeks in participants' homes or community spaces with a trained facilitator
- Meetings have a consistent structure — opening sharing of weekly "highs" and "lows," development activities and a range of topics including newborn cues, daily interactions, routines, work/life, and more, as well as time for socializing
- Facilitation by the leader focuses on peer sharing and support, as well as curriculum and parenting resources
- Parents share about daily frustrations and more complicated concerns like emergent perinatal mood disorders and anxiety

Results

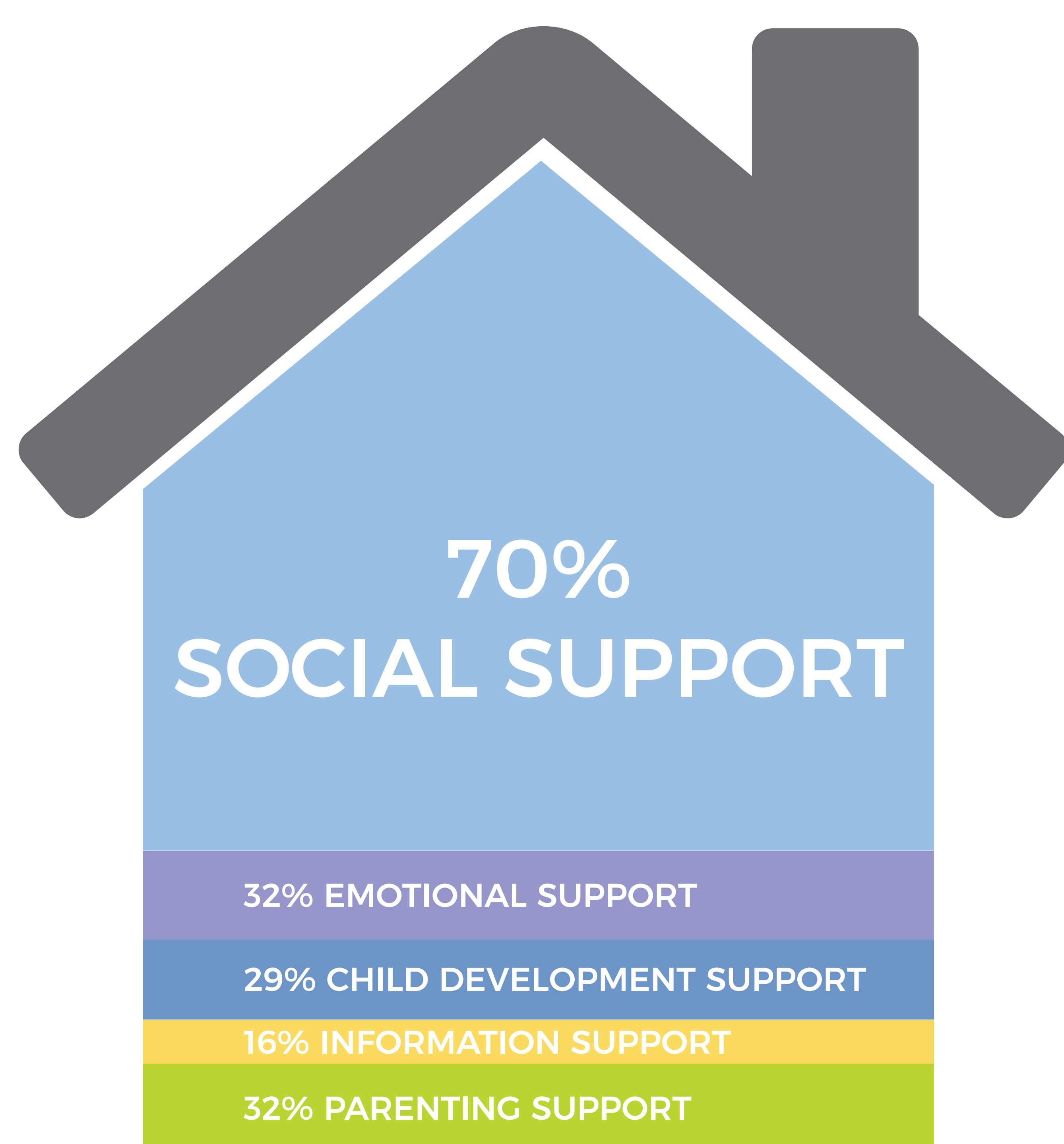
- 2,495 babies and 3,515 parents met in 293 groups in 2017
- More than 1,000 new fathers participated in groups
- Program outcomes are measured by measuring parent perceptions aligned to the 5 Protective Factors of the Strengthening Families™ framework

"My PEPS group was a place I could be honest about everything, from difficulty adjusting to parenthood to issues about going back to work. I found great support from people who were going through similar things at the same time." — PEPS Parent

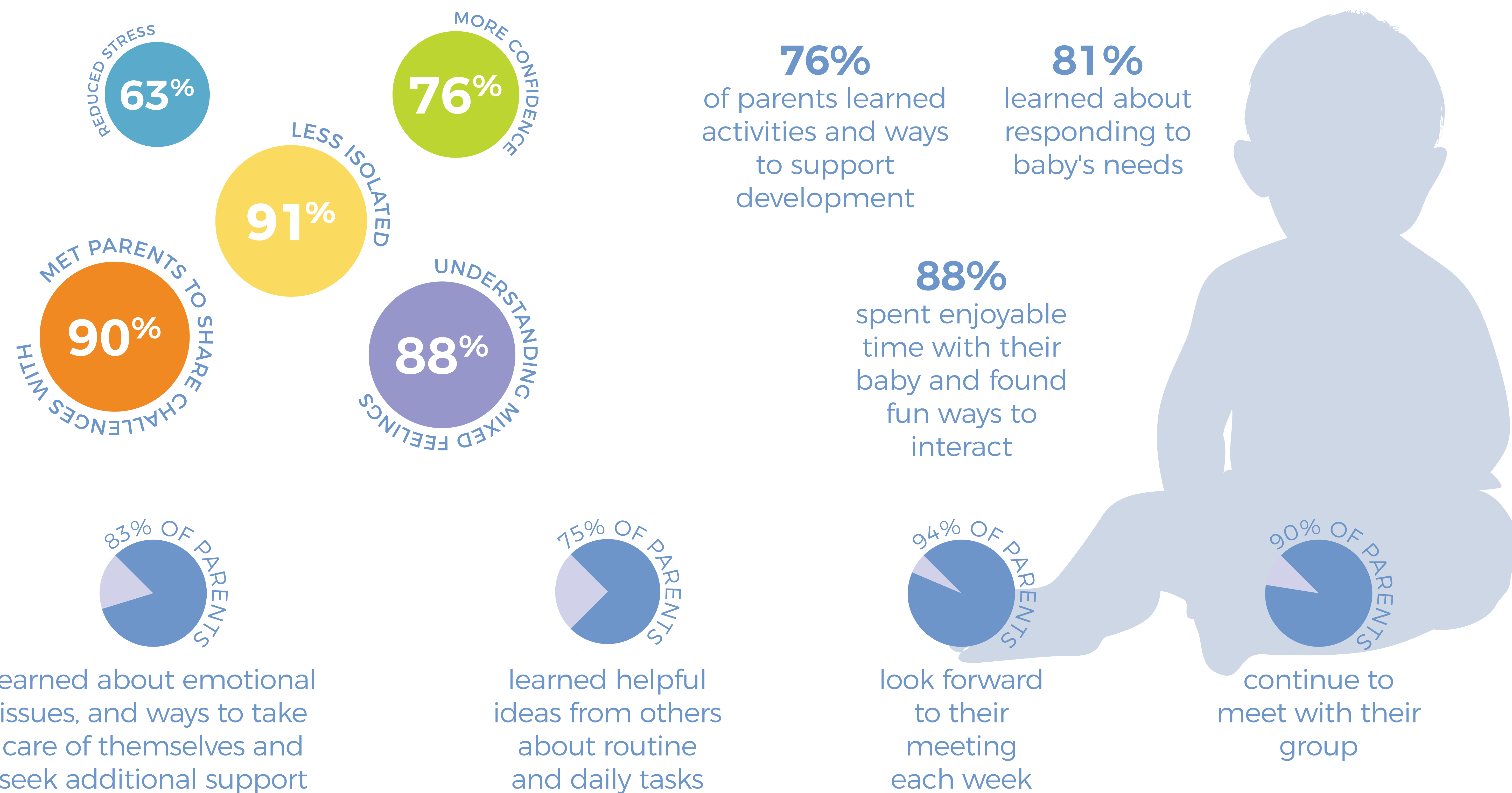
Findings

- Peer support is an effective model for new parents to reduce isolation, increase confidence and build community
- A universal approach to peer support for new parents increases protective factors of family wellness within a context of diverse parenting
- Parental social connection is directly related to family wellness and infant mental health

When asked what type of support they most wanted to find in a parenting peer group, parents choose Social Support.



Supporting parents and family wellbeing during the transition to parenthood. Programs are structured to build confidence in new parenthood, which in turn supports parent-child attachment and parental resilience.



Through partnerships, the peer-support model is reaching new parents.

In 2017, with the coordination of a local agency, the health district and a local high school, a peer parenting group connected new teen mothers as part of their high school experience. Unlike a class or expert guidance, peer support focused on their strengths, self-advocacy and helping each other. Facilitators noted that the new moms subsequently spent more time together as parents — outside of their meeting — for things like tummy time, which might have been a solo activity before. This group has been offered again to new parents, and more partnerships are bringing peer support to other parent communities.

Conclusion

The transition to parenthood and welcoming a new baby increases family stress. All new families deserve support, friendship, and community during what many parents describe as the most challenging transition of their lives. **In the early days and weeks of new child's life, it is especially effective to focus on the family system — the parents — to improve child outcomes.** Good support strengthens resilience for the next milestone, challenge or change, helps create the bond between parents and babies, and shapes a baby's healthy development. **Supporting one another as peers, with a focus on social connection and community, is an effective, universal approach when supporting new families.**

