

MT CTF Parent Testimonials & Positive Stories

Reporting period: July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018

Alliance for Youth: We have a blended family that first took COS-P and then NP to help them better relate to their children. When they were in the middle of COS-P, they would often verbalize concerns that they doubted they could ever communicate productively in the moment of heightened emotion with their children. They would jokingly ask if the provider could come home with them to help them in the daily struggle. After going through both courses things have changed dramatically. Their youngest son at the start of class was getting behavior slips sent home from the school multiple times per week for his anger outbursts. By the end of the school year last May, he had only one slip sent home the entire month. Both parents have reported that communication in the home now is very different. They family is able to discuss difficult choices the children have made in a calm manner that is teaching and not upsetting. The children are sharing more with the parents and the parents feel they are closer to each of the children. They parents share that they have learned great communication skills and that coupled with nurturing discipline skills, the children are doing much better.

We have worked with a couple in COS-P in which the dad is retired from the military. The family was very behavior focused and did not have adequate understanding of appropriate developmental expectations. This resulted in children who were frustrated since they could not meet these expectations. After completing COS-P, this dad understands what his children are needing from him emotionally as a dad, instead of acting like their drill Sargent. The father and mother are both in agreement on how to meet these emotional needs and are recognizing that the behavior they focused on is driven by needs. As a result, both parents work to meet the children's emotional need first so that the discipline is more effective.

Watching parents learn from one another an open up throughout the course of a Café is truly magical, I had the privilege of watching one family attend multiple cafes. Their commitment to their children was evident, what they were lacking was social connection with in the school community and they were frustrated with what they were not aware of or the communications coming out of the schools. The role of the facilitator is to remain unbiased keep the conversation going in a positive direction and help the parents build on their knowledge and connect their ideas. Through the course of the cafes I watched this family struggle to identify themselves as the experts and advocates for their community. They had so much knowledge and didn't realize it. During our final café they embraced their knowledge, wisdom, expertise and realized they were advocates and that they could help parents that were coming into situations they had once found themselves. They also realized they could be empowered to ask questions and get answers from the school and they realized what their role in the school community needed to be. Watching the progression was amazing, they are strong parents, but the process of the café model made them stronger.

Butte Community Council: These three parent letters give the history each family has experienced with their children, which show how valuable and meaningful Circle of Parents is.

1. I have been married to Bill for 20 years. We have 4 great kids. Each has their own crazy story. It started in 1991 when I had my first son Kelly. I wasn't married, and I was young. Kelly was born 16 weeks early after I had taken a fall and landed on my tailbone. He weighed 1 lb 9 oz and measured 12 inches. He was given a 10% chance of surviving. 88 days in the NICU in Salt Lake he came home! It has been a long road. He had many struggles in school and life. Trying to get him diagnosed with the obvious would take me 22 years. Yes 22 years. I had noticed from a young age that Kelly was struggling with simple everyday tasks and understanding simple directions along with other odd behaviors. I would take him to doctor after doctor. They would say things like "Oh, he was a preemie. He will grow out of it," or "You're a young mom just over thinking things."

It was definitely apparent when I had my second son eight years later that Kelly was developing different. Still, we continued to search for answers. School was extremely hard for Kelly, but without a diagnosis from a doctor, the school could not offer any extra help for Kelly. In 6th grade, we put Kelly in a small private school. Thank goodness we could afford it. When he was in 9th grade, his teacher retired, and Kelly was again struggling and was lost without her. I convinced her to homeschool Kelly with pay. Luckily she agreed and he graduated. It was a pretty big accomplishment.

In the year 2006, Bill and I adopted our daughter Cassondra and had another son three months later. We were told we would be able to have any more children, so Will was quite the surprise. Cassie's birth parents both suffer from mental issues and both are addicted to prescription drugs. Her birth mom is anorexic and a cutter. When Cassie was a baby, it was clear to us that she was showing signs of following in her parents' footsteps. We started bringing her to doctors to get something in writing so when it came time for school it wouldn't be such a struggle to get her the help she would need. Much to my surprise things in the medical field had certainly changed about understanding our concerns. It still took several years to find the right help. But it also lead us to find the right help for Kelly. When he was 22, he was diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disorder, ADHS-inattentive type, Major depressive disorder with distress, and anxiety disorder. Cassie was diagnosed with ADHD, mode disorder, night terrors, reactive attachment disorder, and possible bi-polar disorder.

Today they are living their best life. Kelly was told by doctors that he would never be able to hold down a job, take care of his finances, or even live on his own. Today, he lives in a two-bedroom house that he bought with the help of Habitat for Humanity. He has his own bank account and a part-time job. Yes, he still needs help and guidance, but he is doing great. We are so proud of him.

So with all that, I wanted to help other parents find the help they need, and maybe speed up the process. And just because your life may seem hard and unfair, you have so much to be thankful for. It is important to make sure your child lives the best life they can. Never give up. It is okay to feel the way you feel and let them know it is okay to reach out for help, and that they are never alone.

2. I'm writing this letter to tell you about my son Zachary. It's been such a long journey that it's hard to know where to start. My husband and I were over the moon when we found out that we were expecting our first child. I read all of the books, ate the right food, and couldn't wait to hold my beautiful baby boy. But that's not what happened. Zach wasn't breathing when he was born, and he was only a 1 out of 10 on the Apgar score. We almost lost him before we could even hold him, but he was strong and within 24 hours, I was able to hold him. I felt complete.

When Zach was 7 months old, he was put on a life flight to Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake City, where we found out that he had a rare tumor on his heart and that it was cancerous. They removed the tumor and after going to Salt Lake every three months for a year, he was cleared from seeing the oncologist.

At age 4, another tumor showed up on his kidney. We were sent to Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center and Children's Hospital in Spokane where Zach underwent another major surgery. That tumor was not cancerous, so we thought it was just a fluke and we done having issues, but we were wrong. Shortly after Zach's second surgery, he started having "Drop Attack" Seizures. We took him to multiple doctors and we thought we had the seizures under control. Again, we were wrong.

After Zach started school, we noticed that he was having trouble cognitively. I just thought that it was a rough start and that one day something will click, and he'll catch up and be the normal boy that he desperately wanted to be. He was put in some resource classes but still making little progress. He didn't have any friends and kids were very mean to him. His passion is sports, so my husband and I coached everything that he wanted to be part of so that we could protect him. Zach started having behavioral issues at home but not at school. He would lash out, call us names, and go from sweet to very angry like turning on and off a light switch. As his parents, we felt that we were doing something wrong, that we were failing him. We took him to therapy, tried to help him make friends, and tried to advocate for him at school. When Zach was about to start his 5th grade year, we took him to Mary Jo Jeffery's and after working with Zach for 3 weeks, she sat us down and told us that we were never going to have the "son" that we thought we were. She told us that he had sever developmental delays, and that we needed to go home and grieve for our loss. I was angry that she said that because we love our son no matter what! But she was right. We needed to come to terms that someday things won't just click for Zach and he'll catch up and move on with a happy, normal life. That was a very hard summer. It was very hard not to ask *What had he done to deserve this? Why was this happening to him?* The answer is nothing, but it doesn't make you feel any better when you know that your baby won't have the same opportunities that we had and that all of our lives would be changed forever.

Zach graduated from Butte High School on June 1, 2017. He's currently on the waiting list to receive adult services, but he's also between 500-600 on that list. He probably won't receive any help until he's around 24 years old. That's six years! He'll have a huge lack in social interactions, job skills, life skills, and is likely to become isolated. Zach's situation isn't just his; this is happening to every child that "graduates" high school in

our community. I believe in my heart that people in our community aren't aware of this very complicated situation that so many families within our community are facing. Why would they, if they don't have a child with developmental differences or know someone that does. I believe that our community would stand up and offer to help these families in any way that they could. It's time to stand up for those who can't stand by themselves. It's not going to happen overnight, and I know that there is a lot of work to be done, but I also know that it's the right thing to do and that many people within our community would support us.

I want you to just take a moment, close your eyes, and picture your child, sibling, parent, or friend going through this situation. How would you feel? Would you feel hopeless, angry, frustrated, exhausted, depressed, alone, outcast, and defensive or would you feel hopeful, grateful, listened to, rested, happy, supported, included, and understood? Now, what can YOU do to help???

3. My name is Annie Boyd, and I have 3 beautiful daughters: Havyn, Brooke, and Hailee. Havyn is 14 years old and Brook and Hailee are twins, 12 years old. My twins Brooke and Hailee have Cystic Fibrosis. Cystic Fibrosis is a rare genetic disorder that affects mostly the lungs but also the pancreas, liver, kidneys, and intestines. As my girls get older and the CF progresses, it will affect all of their organs. CF is terminal and currently there is no cure. The average life expectancy is 37 but only about 50% of people with CF make it to that age, depending on the severity of their CF.

Brooke and Hailee look healthy. If you saw them on the sidewalk, you would never know that they have a disease killing them slowly. They call CF an invisible disease, but at times it becomes very obvious that they have something wrong. Brooke and Hailee are 12 years old, but look around 9 or 10, they are thin due to the CF. It is very hard to get them to gain weight and every time they eat any kind of fat, they need to take six pancreatic pills. They accumulate thick, sticky mucus so they cough, grunt, and spit up a lot of mucus. They both do chest therapy two to four times a day depending on how they are feeling. Chest therapy involves them sitting in a vest that vibrates their chest for 20 to 30 minutes at a time. While doing that they also do nebulizer treatments and even more if they have an infection in their lungs. They both take around 50 pills a day, some days more. When the twins were ten, we found out that they both have two types of Diabetes. Cystic Fibrosis Related Diabetes and MODY (maturity onset diabetes of the young). On top of this, the twins both have depression and anxiety. Hailee's anxiety has been so bad lately that she started having panic attacks. Last but not least, Brooke has ADHD, ODD, and learning disabilities.

When I first learned about Circle of Parents, I didn't know if I would like it. I thought to myself, *I will try it once and see how it goes*. I had never been to any kind of group before, so I was stepping out of my shell. From the first day, I fell in love with this group. I felt connected. I felt like I wasn't alone. I love my kids, but somedays life can be so hard and overwhelming that feel so alone. I finally found a place where they understand my hard days, and I can relate to these families. I have built a bond that feels like home.

When I felt like my life was full of twists and turns, ups and downs, and that I couldn't digest anything else, Circle of Parents showed me an open hand and gave me a safe haven. I have learned so much from Circle of Parents. I have been given ample information that will help my twins down the road to make a better life and I have learned about more doctors that they can see. The information is endless. If you don't know something or where to go to get information there is always a parent that has the information you need. When Heather asked me to be a parent leader, I jumped on this opportunity. I wanted to help other families feel as comfortable with this group as it had done for me. I feel like I'm helping others. I feel like I am a part of something so big and so amazing. We all have this amazing safe place together and we understand each other. Circle of Parents help parents like me survive our hectic, chaotic days. This group is an outlet that can't be replaced.

Circle of Parents is not just any old group. It is a lifeline, it is home, it is family, and it is a piece of my heart. I can't say thank you enough for how it has changed my life.

Some of the feedback we have received from parents includes:

- "With being in this group I feel like I'm not alone. We share ideas and stories on what works, doesn't work to help our children grow and for me to grow as a parent. My children's behavior has improved, and I received new ideas on how to be a better parent and get services to help my children."
- "It helps to know I'm not the only one going through this alone."
- "I only wish there would have been a group when my son was younger, having help like this would have been a huge help. My son is grown but it's been a great support."

Dawson County Health Department: A Parents as Teachers client, a single mother of one boy, who has had past issues holding a job, moved here with no support and no driver's license received her GED, has held a job for almost 9 months and has passed her test for a learner's driver's license. She credits PAT for helping her achieve these goals. She had to take the bus to take her son to daycare then onto the college to study and then back home. It took her many months, but she stuck with it and ended up passing the test. She has had much turmoil at work, but we used the PAT curriculum to work thru many of the issues and she has learned to take a breath or even a day before reacting to situations. Although she gives us much credit for the support provided, I truly think her self-determination has also propelled her forward.

Another positive story was a single father of a two-year-old who thru screening was found to be behind was referred to DEAP, the father fought accepting DEAP's help but after many conversations finally allowed them to visit and now the little girl who is 3 is in special education pre-school.

Family Support Network: One of the families reported instituting a list of family rules and incorporating the children's choices and opinions in making the rules, consequences and rewards. The parents were impressed with how well their children were willing to follow the rules and how one of their children reminded dad that he was part of the family and since one

of their rules was that the family sat together to eat dinner at the table, then dad had to eat with them and not sit by the television. Dad joined them at the table.

Just before the family event in Crow Agency, the facilitator had to stop at the local mercantile to pick up some items for one of the games. Two little girls who had participated with their family in the fall sessions recognized her and asked what she was doing. She told them of the family celebration activities in the park. The little girls ran home and brought their dad to the park, so they could join in the activities. During the family activities two smaller toddlers wanted to join some of the children in one of the activities but didn't quite understand the way the game was played. Their mothers helped them use their feet to "fish" for the toys floating in the pool. One of the relays required each team member to take a turn as rider in the blanket pull. One mother looked at the dad the children had chosen to participate and whispered that they might want to recruit one of the smaller dads. The children managed to pull the dad with a lot of cheering from the sidelines. Parents reported that they were surprised with how much fun they could have with their children without having it cost much. Parents were good about assisting all the children and several dads and moms stepped up to substitute for grandparents who were unable to physically participate in some of the events.

Gallatin Early Childhood Community Council: Our most positive story from this grant period is the success of our outreach activities during the Week of the Young Child in April. We hosted six ECCC-sponsored events that week in Bozeman and Belgrade and reached 492 community members with many of these participants from minority groups. The highlight of the week was when Bozeman Mayor Cindy Andrus read a proclamation at the Bozeman movie night to over 30 young children declaring it the official week of the young child to their cheers and applause.

Head Start, Inc.:

- "The Incredible Years program has given me different ways to approach my children individually and act on their individual behaviors in a more positive way. I love learning how to be a better mom, it's always educational."
- "The Incredible Years program helped my husband and I practice better parenting by working together, using vital lessons learned from the class."
- "The Incredible Years program helped develop me as a parent, so I can apply age appropriate methods to parent a 4-year-old."
- "The Incredible Years program lessened my child's bad behaviors and increased prosocial behaviors. We learned a lot of is behavior is normal and that bad behaviors are easily changeable."
- "I think praising has had the most effect on our child. It focuses him on positive actions and diminishes the focus on when he has done something wrong."

Healthy Start Missoula:

Respite Testimonials

A few months ago, we started working with a family of seven. Five children, including two young boys on the autism spectrum, have since then been attending respite care one or two

times a week. The first few evenings, the children had a hard time adjusting to the new space. Gradually increasing their time spent here with and without their parents, we were able to help them successfully adjust to our staff and facility. Now, the children show up and will run up to staff to tell them about their days or show us things they learned at school or gymnastics. Their parents have told me repeatedly that they feel confident bringing their children here because our staff is trained to work with high-needs children and our facility has recently adapted to cater to the needs of children with sensory issues.

For six months, we worked with separated parents and their daughter. She attended respite care two times a week consistently. Her parents shared that we were a necessity in reducing stress by giving them a break and giving them a safe way to conduct a custody exchange. At the end of the six months, the mother's Bipolar Disorder surfaced. She showed up to pick up her daughter emotional, distraught, disoriented, and hysterical. Our first priority is the safety of the children. We were concerned for the child and in turn, ended up reporting this incident to the local authorities and Child and Family Services. We lost contact with the family and went about six months without hearing from them. Recently, we got a call from the mother who informed us she received a Bipolar Disorder diagnosis, is being medicated, and is attending personal therapy. She looks at respite care as such a necessity for her and her family that she will be starting to use our services once again.

Outreach Testimonial

HSM staff provided outreach materials at the annual Project Community Connect event, which aims to connect homeless individuals with clothing, employment, documentation, and service resources. The home visiting postcard had just been finalized, and this was the first opportunity to distribute it to the community. At this event, a woman seeking services looked at the home visiting postcard and recognized the branding as being associated with the respite program. This demonstrates that vulnerable populations are seeing and remembering the respite ads. It also shows that branding efforts to connect Healthy Start outreach materials are being successful.

Montana State University Extension: Anecdotal success stories are continually shared by Extension Agents working with grandparents. This year, one grandmother stated that when she joined her support group two years ago she did not know what she was capable of. At the end of 2017 she had represented grandparents at our state GRG partners meeting and was accepted into the national Generations United Advisory Group representing Montana. Generations United is working with her to attend the national Grand Rally in 2018 in Washington DC. This is a true impact in that the grandmother who cared for her grandchildren and her husband who was in ill health can go from a state of crisis to advocacy.

Stories after participating in GrandCares classes:

One participant was having a hard time getting an IEP meeting set up with her granddaughter's school. After several ineffective meetings and feeling like her concerns for her granddaughter were not being heard we had the Akido and DESC communication lesson. She returned the following week and had this to say, "I used appreciation statements, I statements and made sure not to put blame on the teachers or administration and as a result I have a daily email from each of my granddaughter's teachers. I used the DESC strategy to get help for my

granddaughter with hopes of getting an IEP set up for her by using the Akido and DESC tools. Thank you!"

In reference to her action plan of reading one participant said "I read a book as my action plan, and I had to start the book over because it had been so long but, I forgot how much I love to read! First time I have finished a book started caring for my grandkids almost 10 years ago."

"I feel prepared to talk to lawyers, social workers and teachers who work with my daughter. I have a list of resources that I can share with them that may help me get the parenting plan where my daughter can visit me."

"Respite is so very important for us. Since taking this class, we have worked out a schedule with our son takes the grandchildren to stay with him on the weekends."

Thrive: I first met Kate in April of 2017. Her daughter was 6 months old at the time. Kate's referral only stated "post-partum depression". During our first few visits, I began to better understand that Kate had been struggling with depression for quite some time, and that things had only become more difficult after giving birth to her daughter. Kate shared that she felt immense stress daily, as well as feelings of being overwhelmed and not necessarily enjoying the aspects of motherhood. She continued to share that she felt socially isolated and didn't feel that had anyone to talk to or relate with. Kate had been seeing a therapist, but since she had to quit her job to stay at home and care for her daughter (childcare was too expensive for their family), she no longer qualified for insurance. Kate's husband made \$40 over the income limit for Medicaid; Kate felt she had nowhere to turn to get support for her mental health.

Throughout the next couple of months, Kate and I met, and she began to open up more and more. We discussed other resources, including the food bank, CHP, etc. However, a majority of our visits were focused on Kate's depression and her feelings of hopelessness. Kate became connected with CHP and was hopeful that she may be able to meet with a counselor. Unfortunately, bills from CHP's sliding scale continued to pile up and Kate's stress over finances only deepened her depression.

Kate began to have severe nightmares and started hearing voices. These voices encouraged her to not care for her daughter; they told her to leave her daughter in her crib crying alone, or to avoid feeding her. At this time, Thrive was given a grant to support families in need of mental health services. I was able to offer paying for a few sessions with Kate's past counselor, as well as childcare for Kate's daughter while Kate was at therapy. This was HUGE for Kate.

Things got a little better for Kate after she was able to start going back to counseling. However, she still had this nagging feeling that her medication to treat her depression wasn't quite right. She still wasn't getting good sleep and the voices in her head would return off and on. During these difficult and dark periods, Kate and I had deep conversations about the stresses in her life. Kate would often text or call me late and night sobbing and frightened. We would immediately make plans for another counseling session and ensure that Kate knew what her resources were in times of emergency.

When Kate was feeling at her best, we discussed positive self-talk, journaling, exercise, future goals, healthy cooking, self-care... anything and everything to think about a positive and bright

future. Things were going really well, and then a few big family circumstances arose and the weather started to change to winter.

Kate had hit another dark place in her depression. The voices had returned, and this time they seemed worse. Kate shared concerns for other mental health diagnosis and her wonder for if these things ran in her genetics. Kate also continued to have concerns about her medications. It was time to seek a deeper level of support.

With much encouragement, Kate made an appointment with a psychiatrist. Once again, a grant for supporting mental health came to the rescue. Kate was able to meet with a psychiatrist and not only adjust her medication to proper doses and types, but have questions answered related to her family's history with mental health struggles.

Fast forward to Spring 2018 and Kate is doing so well! She is getting good sleep, the voices have left, and she has an incredibly positive outlook on her future. She is maintaining a part time job, practicing self-care regularly, and beginning to open up more with others about the struggles related to post-partum depression. She knows that post-partum depression may return if she decides to have another child, but this time she feels better prepared. Kate feels confident knowing more about herself and her mental health. She has shared that Thrive and its access to mental health grants saved her. She is ready to move forward in life with more confidence and a stronger grasp on her mental health.