

A Better Life for



the Whole Family

The Two-Generation Approach

by Mari Rich

My personal obsession right now is how disconnected we are from what we really need to be talking about with poverty. We talk about work or training for parents, or we talk about early childhood for kids. But I do not see how we can help the children without trying to help their parents as well. We have to have a serious national discussion about helping families together.

— Paul Krugman
Nobel Laureate and New York Times columnist

The staff and clients at Our House in Little Rock, AR, are engaged in much more than mere discussion of the holistic, multi-faceted method—often called the “two-generation approach”—to which Krugman refers. They are putting it into everyday practice, with heartening results.

A Couple with Entrepreneurial Ambitions

Marie and Omar Rahmaan were struggling to make ends meet despite working long hours: Marie cleaned houses and dreamed of launching her own janitorial company, and Omar served as an assistant produce manager at a local supermarket with hopes to one day set up his own food truck. He envisioned serving breakfast and lunch, accompanied by cups of his special tea, which Marie always described as the best she had ever tasted.

A disproportionately large percentage of their income went to paying the rent on a home big enough for their four children—eight-year-old Lamarcus, six-year-old Jayden, and three-year-old twins Autumn and Amberlee. They might not have minded that fact quite so keenly had their landlord been willing to make desperately needed repairs. The couple had begun to fear for the health and safety of the entire family in the aging and neglected structure.

The Rahmaan Family, pictured here, benefits from the “two-generation” approach offered at Our House. This approach emphasizes the importance of considering a family unit as a whole, accounts for the needs of everyone in the family, and acknowledges that a child’s success is inextricably linked to their parent’s success and stability.

Add to that a vehicle urgently in need of a mechanic’s attention (they had been forced to give up a more reliable car when they could not make the payments), and it seemed like the couple might never be able to fulfill their entrepreneurial ambitions and set their children on whatever individual paths to success they might choose. Each of their offspring, it was apparent, had a distinct talent: Lamarcus possessed a formidable natural intelligence, regularly bringing home report cards that would make any parent proud; Jayden was the artist in the family; and the twins, with their ready grins and propensity to chatter, could charm anyone they met.

Marie, while frustrated and discouraged by the situation, was determined to turn things around. Strapping the girls into their double stroller one day, she set out to walk to Our House, an appealing multi-building campus with a colorful playground and a bright sign proclaiming “Hope for the Working Homeless,” about a mile from her neighborhood. She knew the current living conditions of her family’s home were uninhabitable.

An Organization with an Ambitious Agenda

If it were not for that sign and playground, it would be easy to mistake Our House—with its tidy buildings spread across a seven-acre campus—for a bustling community college. And

like a college, where students can take advantage of course offerings across a range of disciplines, clients at Our House (among them the formerly homeless, currently homeless, and near homeless) have access to a range of facilities and services to meet their needs.

A newly-renovated Career Center can accommodate as many as 120 people a day for job training and employment counseling, and adults seeking to advance their educations can earn GEDs or get advice about college. Some 90 children attend after-school and summer programs geared just for them, and the campus includes Little Learners, an early learning center for the 60 youngest clients. A staggering array of other services is available, including meal programs, a clothing bank, AA meetings, HIV testing, parenting classes, financial literacy instruction, mental health treatment, and more.

“Behind the scenes, we have more than 200 agencies and organizations that partner with us,” Our House’s executive director, Georgia Mjartan, explains. “The services provided by our partners take place on-site and are fully integrated with those provided by our staff so that our clients have a totally seamless experience. We have physical and occupational therapists, social workers, employment coaches, teachers, child care providers, and case managers who meet weekly to coordinate and collaborate. A group of bakers bring birthday cakes for the children. Others contribute gifts that meet both the children’s and their parent’s needs. We are even working closely with two state agencies on pilot quality improvement programs to ensure access to services meant for people like our clients who, in the past, have fallen through the cracks.”

Below: Our House offers an array of facilities and services to clients on a seven-acre campus. The newly-renovated Career Center can accommodate up to 120 people per day for job training courses, while the Little Learners facility, an early learning center, provides educational day care to nearly 60 children.

Below right: Whenever possible, programs for both parents and children are coordinated to ensure that all family members are engaged and learning.



Housing options on the campus include two bright, safe dormitories (one for women and children, the other for single men), and an apartment-style residence for families, which is where Marie and Omar now live with their children. Their unit has two bedrooms and a bathroom, and they share a communal kitchen and living room with other families.

“You might have to give up some of the privacy and freedom you were accustomed to,” Marie says, “but in return, you are getting the chance to build an entirely new life for yourself and your children.”

An Approach that Comes from Outside the Box (and Way Outside the Silo)

Ben Goodwin, the organization’s assistant director, says that Marie is hitting upon a key aspect of the two-generation approach when she speaks about a better life for both the adults and the children in her family. “It might seem obvious to consider the family unit as a whole,” he says, “but in reality, most programs focus on either the parent or the child.” He continues, “A workforce training program, for example, might be of great use to a single mother, but if she does not have reliable child care, and the program’s organizers have set it up so that participants must remain until five o’clock each evening, she may not be able to stay. Similarly, if a child attends an enrichment program whose organizers hold parent conferences during the day, those who work at jobs with inflexible hours or attend school themselves might not be able to get there and might, as a consequence, be misconceived as uninvolved or uncaring. Those scheduling pitfalls are evidence that an organization is focusing on one generation only, often to the detriment of the other.”

A two-generation approach, by contrast, takes into consideration the needs of everyone in the family, acknowledging that a child’s potential is inextricably linked to parental stability and well-being.

Unchecked, a snowball effect can occur in struggling families. A parent without reliable child care may miss days of work and lose his or her source of income, necessitating a move to substandard housing. Poor living conditions can cause or exacerbate health problems (such as when an asthmatic child is exposed to mold), making it difficult for the parent, who now has the added burden of frequent doctor’s visits, to look for another job. “It is not effective to place issues in silos, treating them in isolation from each other,” Mjartan asserts. She goes on to describe a survey Our House recently gave to each of its employees, asking them whom they consider to be their primary clients: adults or children. “More than 80 percent of them—whether they are preschool teachers or financial literacy instructors—feel that they are serving both generations equally. That perfectly encapsulates what we are doing here.”

The result is that at Our House, child care providers understand that working parents might not be able to attend every holiday festivity or art show, and job coaches appreciate that the aspiring employees whom they are counseling might need to take their children’s physical, social, and emotional needs into account when choosing a career. (Mjartan recalls one child who, when asked what occupation he would like to see his then-absent father pursue, movingly replied, “a farmer instead of in prison.”) Whenever possible, programs for both groups are coordinated. While an adult money-management course is taking place, for



example, a similar class for children might be held at the same time, so that all family members are learning relevant skills; if a parenting class is scheduled for evening hours, child care or an enrichment activity is made available.

Because Our House staffers are not working in silos, no client does either. Marie points out that while much of her time is spent parenting, the staff members at Our House also have great respect for her as a fledgling entrepreneur. Illustrating that dual role is the fact that among the most valuable classes she has taken recently have been one on becoming an effective advocate for your child and another covering the safety of the cleaning solutions



Marie Rahmaan, mother of four, is also a fledgling entrepreneur. At Our House she was able to take one class on becoming an effective advocate for her children and another class covering the safety of the cleaning solutions she will be using when she launches her janitorial service.

The Key Points

In 2011, the Aspen Institute, an educational and policy-studies organization that aims to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues, launched its Ascend program, meant to promote the two-generation approach throughout the country. Those on the front lines, they asserted in a 2014 publication, should try to follow a core set of bedrock principles that acknowledge the importance of:

- Objectively measuring and accounting for the outcomes of both children and their parents, as well as following up to ensure that the intergenerational cycle of poverty has been broken;
- Engaging with and listening to both parents and children so that their perspectives and experiences inform program design;
- Paying attention to prior evidence-based research in order to build upon what has worked for families, but recognizing that innovation is required to develop even better ways to meet families' needs;
- Aligning and linking systems and funding streams whenever possible in order to use those resources with greater cost-efficiency and seamlessness;
- Making intentional implementation a priority, since careful consideration of possible outcomes, close attention to the level and intensity of services, and effective use of data are all critical to ensuring that child and parent outcomes match a program or policy's intent;
- Avoiding gender and/or racial and ethnic disparities in the ways that programs provide services and assistance and making sure to reflect the demographic realities of 21st-century American families, where one in four U.S. children is growing up in a single-parent household, many headed by women, and where children and parents of color are disproportionately low income.

she will be using when she launches her janitorial service. (Additionally, she and Omar are valued volunteers in the Our House community, pitching in to sort donations to the clothing bank and do other needed tasks.)

“When you are asked what is important to you and what your goals are, it is natural for parents to immediately think of what they want for their children—for example, for them to do well in school and have good lives and careers,” Marie and Omar say. “But we have come to understand that our goals are just as important, because if we are not focused and successful, it will be much harder for them to grow into focused, successful adults.”

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Organizations across the country are beginning to see the wisdom of taking a two-generation approach. Many are members of the Aspen Institute's growing Ascend Network (see sidebar), which serves as a hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security.

While not every group is able to provide services as comprehensive as those at Our House, they are endeavoring to expand their traditional missions to encompass two-generation practices. The Connecticut-based All Our Kin focuses on the child care sector, but does so in a way that benefits participants at every level: the organization trains and licenses child care providers, resulting in much higher pay to help them build better lives for their own families. (A significant number go on to earn college degrees in early childhood development or related areas.) Children, in turn, gain access to a stellar level of care and have demonstrated a marked increase in school readiness. Each provider trained and licensed by All Our Kin makes it possible for four to five parents to return to the workforce. The providers supply high-quality, flexible child care, and the program as a whole is said to generate more than \$7 million per year in macroeconomic benefit to the New Haven region. Another Ascend Network member, 2Gen Equity, directs its energies towards young, single mothers in the San Francisco Bay area, inviting them to take part in an intensive 24-month career and life development program and assigning them a family “coach.”

While colleges are not typically thought of as doing the job of social service agencies, some are now acknowledging that struggling young parents comprise a segment of their student body and are taking steps to establish a two-generation approach at their institutions. Hostos Community College located in the New York City borough of the Bronx and a member of the Ascend Network, recently launched a program for low-income student-parents to accelerate the completion of their degrees through free summer courses (which are often not covered through financial aid), while inviting their children to attend an on-site learning center and summer camp.

By the Numbers

Mjartan and Goodwin are firm believers in objective measurements and hard data. The resulting figures are impressive. A recent study found that 72 percent of the clients in their housing programs leave with money in a savings account; each year some 500 homeless and near-homeless adult clients find full-time jobs with more than 275 different central Arkansas employers; 88 percent of the school-age children in Our House’s enrichment programs show improved grades in math and

English; and 98 percent of those taking part in the early childhood education programs meet expected developmental milestones.

That kind of progress admittedly requires many resources. Our House has an annual budget of \$2.5 million and benefits each year from \$1.6 million in donations of goods and services and the work of 3,000 volunteers, who collectively contribute more than 24,000 hours.

The members of the Rahmaan family might argue that the results are priceless. Lamarcus was recently accepted into an Our House leadership development program, and Jayden has had his paintings displayed in a show for young artists. A lucrative janitorial service and gleaming new food truck seem like distinct possibilities, rather than mere dreams. It could be that residents of Little Rock may soon get to taste Omar’s tea for themselves. “Really, it is just a matter of getting the proportions of honey and lemon right,” he admits. “Marie probably thinks it tastes so good because she knows I make it with love.” ■



Our House offers a wide range of services for all members of the family. These services include parenting classes, after-school and summer programming, financial literacy instruction, and an early learn center.