

FIRST STEPS TOGETHER

FAMILIES IN RECOVERY SUPPORT

NEWSLETTER



FIRST Steps Together's core services are centered around providing parenting, recovery and care coordination support. We believe that all three of these services should happen simultaneously because each service enhances and supports the others.



As a project we are always looking for ways to enhance the parent-child bond, promote attunement and attachment and reflect on and strengthen parents' skills and confidence. These offerings include project wide training and support, such as training for all staff in *Mothering From the Inside Out*; gathering in Learning Communities; and brainstorming, practicing and sharing parent child activities. **In this newsletter we will focus on book sharing, and share examples of how sites are using parent child activities as opportunities for connection, reflection and growth, and space for conversations around big feelings.**

WALKING ALONGSIDE: STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT PARENTING IN RECOVERY

In December, Debra Bercuvitz, Erica Napolitan and Clare Grace Jones presented a national webinar for [NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals](https://naadac.org/), about integrating strategies to support parenting into peer recovery services. While talking about SAMHSA's 4 Dimensions that Support Recovery, Debra emphasized that **"Healthy parenting within the context of a safe and supportive community provides the purpose that helps to achieve and sustain recovery."** She stressed that "addressing parenting is a critical component of treatment and recovery services." The presenters shared from both research and experience and provided a wide range of suggestions on how to recognize the importance of parental identity, facilitate healthy attachment in parent/child relationships, and incorporate trauma-informed practices to support sustainable recovery from substance use among pregnant and parenting people. There is significant power in peer work, especially in the power of parents in recovery working as peers. As Erica stated, this approach makes "the unspeakable, speakable" and that in the speaking there is hope and with hope there is recovery.



You can view the webinar and download the materials here:

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[Walking Alongside: Strategies to Support Parenting in Recovery \(naadac.org\)](https://naadac.org/)

BOOK SHARING AS A WAY FOR FAMILIES TO CONNECT

Sharing books with children has many benefits! But, some parents may not have had the experience of being read to themselves or may feel that they are not strong readers. The good news is you don't have to be able to read to use books as an opportunity for connection or to begin to build readiness to read for children. Incorporating book sharing into home visits can be a great way for the parent-child pair to experience book sharing as an enjoyable, connecting activity while also building the parent's confidence to make book sharing a regular part of their family's routine.

- Clare Grace Jones, M.Ed., CPS

Before the visit

Choose a book and have a copy of the book handy for the activity.

Prepare any additional materials, if needed, such as a related craft or music activity. For some ideas you can look here: [Activities Based on Children's Books - Buggy and Buddy](#). If your visit will be virtual make sure to have a set of materials for yourself as well as one set delivered to the family ahead of the visit.

Plan your objective for the activity. For example, is there a specific activity you want to model, such as encouraging the parent to ask the child questions about the book? Or is the goal to create a space that the parent can feel comfortable letting their small child freely explore the book (which may include mouthing it, hitting it on the table or grabbing at the pages)?



CHOOSING A BOOK

[The Most Popular Read-Aloud Books | Scholastic | Parents](#)

[Selecting Books for Young Children | Ready to Succeed \(ucanr.edu\)](#)

[50 Books All Kids Should Read Before They're 12 | Common Sense Media](#)

[Welcome To Story Hour-100 Favorite Books For Young Readers | NPR](#)

EXPLORING BOOKS

For older kids this may mean letting them look at and think about what's on the cover. Can they make a guess about what the book will be about from the pictures? Wonder with them if there are things they already know about something they see in the book. Help them describe how this book might be the same or different from their own experiences.

For younger kids using a sturdy board book, bath book or book with touch and feel element, this might mean exploring the book by grabbing at it, touching the different textures or putting it in their mouth.

BOOK SHARING AS A WAY FOR FAMILIES TO CONNECT

During the visit

Explore the book together.

Ask questions and help the parent ask their child questions to explore their understanding and make connections with the book.

Share tips for when, how and why to share books with young children. Help parents think about how they might want to regularly include book sharing in their day.

Encourage the parent that there is no wrong way to share books! Building connection by taking out a book and looking at it with their child is a great activity, they don't need to have any other expectations!

After the visit

Follow up to encourage continued confidence and to make book sharing a regular practice.

Build on the experience by finding out what kinds of books the parent and child enjoy and helping the parent to have regular access to books.

Plan a visit at the local library. Connect with the librarian to find out what kinds of programs are available for families. Many libraries have regular parent/child programs, read-aloud, family craft activities for a variety of ages, and lots of books, puzzles and developmental toys to borrow.



ASK QUESTIONS

Asking questions while book sharing has multiple benefits for children. It helps connect what they are about to read to their own experiences and builds reading skills like prediction and learning to read based on context such as pictures.

- What do you see?
- What do you think the cover tells us about the book?
- Can you guess what this book will be about?
- What do you already know about this topic/subject?
- What does it look like is happening in this picture?
- What colors/shapes/numbers/letters do you see?
- What sound do you think that makes? What do you think that looks like? What do you think that would taste like?
- What do you think is happening here?
- What do you think will happen next?
- Has something like this ever happened to you?
- Do you remember the time that (this experience) happened?
- What would you do if that happened to you?
- What do you think about that?
- How would that make you feel?
- Would you have made the same choice? Why or why not?

EARLY READING WITH FAMILIES

Helping build parent's confidence in sharing books with children has many benefits! Having books available, learning how to hold them and move through them from front to back and talking about the pictures are great ways to get started! See below for some tips to share with parents and our favorite reading resources.

WHY

- Helps create a special bond
- Introduces children to art
- Enhances children's listening skills
- Introduces children to a wide variety of experiences
- Helps prepare children for learning to read
- Improves and enriches the quality of children's lives
- Provides fun and enjoyment for children and adults

WHEN

- It's never too early! Even babies benefit from book sharing
- Parents can create a time each day that becomes part of their routine
- Home visitors can make book sharing a regular part of their visits
- The parent and child are in a relaxed mood
- To soothe a child who is sick or cranky
- During "waiting" times such as at the doctor's office or in line at the grocery store

HOW

- Find a comfortable place
- Recite or sing rhymes from your favorite books
- Turn off other distractions
- Hold the book so the child can see the pages clearly
- Involve the child by having them point out objects, talk about the pictures, or repeat words
- Read with expression in your face and voice
- Let the child choose books to read
- Reread favorite books

From: [Tips for Sharing Books | Reading Rockets](#)

RESOURCES



National Association for the Education of Young Children

[Read Together to Support Early Literacy](#)
[NAEYC](#)

Nemours

KidsHealth®

[Reading Books to Babies \(for Parents\) - NemoursKidsHealth](#)



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

[Read Early and Often ZERO TO THREE](#)



BOOK SHARING DURING TIMES APART

Many of the families served by FIRST Steps Together have involvement with the Department of Children and Family Services, and due to a number of reasons may not have custody of their children. Book sharing can be one way to promote connection, offer some structure to family time visits, or extend connection when parents can't be physically present with their children.

PROMOTE CONNECTION

Parents can share books with their children to help make sense of a shared or challenging experience or to engage in an enjoyable and entertaining activity.

OFFER STRUCTURE TO A VISIT

Family time can bring up big feelings for both parent and child, and having a predictable structure can be comforting. Parents may try creating a loose routine for each visit that might begin with a familiar hello (a special handshake, hug, dance), doing a favorite physical activity (playing a game, stacking blocks), having a snack, doing a quiet or creative activity (such as sharing a book together), then having a special way to say goodbye (such as a kiss on the hand as described in *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn).

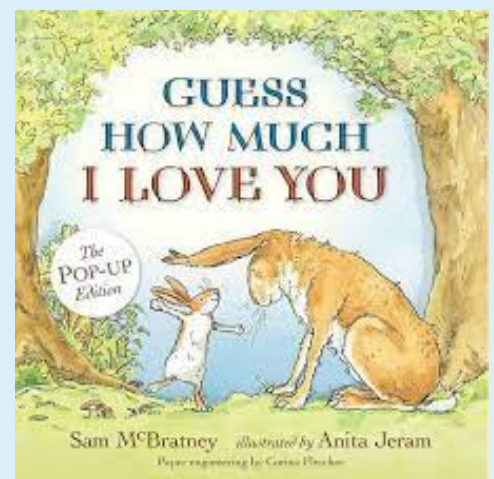
EXTEND CONNECTION

A parent can record themselves reading a story or share a book over video between in person family time visits. If connecting by video, parents may want to give their child a copy of the book so they can each look at the same book while sharing the experience. We know that "neurons that fire together, wire together" so adding sensory elements such as those that both family members can touch, smell, taste or see, can strengthen the connection they are making in that shared moment. Examples might be holding a book or a stuffie or having something with a familiar smell, such as a lovey or piece of clothing.



*"When I was separated from my children for a time, it was suggested to me that I record myself reading our favorite book, *Guess How Much I Love You*. By doing this my children were able to read with me even when I wasn't physically present. This helped soothe them during a difficult time and it **made me feel like I was still able to contribute as a parent in a meaningful way. The small act of recording myself reading helped us stay connected and reminded my little ones that they were still loved even though we were apart.**"*

- FIRST Steps Together Staff Member



USING BOOK SHARING ACTIVITIES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT AND BUILD ON PARENT STRENGTHS

Square One regularly incorporates books, music and crafts into their visits with families. They use these parent child activities as an opportunity to help parents reflect on their strengths. One way they do this is by pairing use of the PICCOLO with their parent child activities. According to Shalonda Mabry, Program Coordinator, doing this allows the parent to actually see how they have been making progress. For example, "The first part that is looked at is *affection*, if it is *absent*, *barely*, or *clearly* there. Documenting their reflections helps parents to see that over time maybe their interactions moved from *absent* to *barely* in *affection*. They can see that they made a change. Maybe before they noticed about themselves that their tone seemed harsh but now they have worked on that and can see that something changed as they have moved from *absent* to *barely*. Now they are thinking about how they can move to *clearly* in the *affection* domain. Then we can help them plan their goals around that and we can plan activities around helping them reach their goals."

Using the PICCOLO "Helps parents set the tone. For parents in recovery, visits can feel fast paced and this brings something in for reflection."



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The PICCOLO

According to the publisher, the PICCOLO encourages positive parenting interactions.

"The **Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO™)** is a checklist of 29 observable developmentally supportive parenting behaviors in four domains (affection, responsiveness, encouragement, and teaching). It is a positive, practical, versatile, culturally sensitive, valid, and reliable tool for practitioners that shows what parents can do to support their children's development.

PICCOLO helps practitioners observe a wide range of parenting behaviors that help children develop over time—an approach known as developmental parenting. Parenting strengths—what the parent already believes is important to do and is comfortable doing with his or her child—are a valuable resource for increasing the developmental support available to young children.

Benefits

- **Assess positive parenting behaviors** that predict good child outcomes
- Guide **individualized positive parenting interventions** with families
- **Track positive parenting outcomes** of a parenting support program"

For more information visit:

[PICCOLO™ - Brookes Publishing Co.](https://www.brookespublishing.com/piccolo)

USING BOOK SHARING ACTIVITIES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT AND BUILD ON PARENT STRENGTHS

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We had one parent that regained custody. Their two older children came back home. We planned the visits so that we can incorporate a song and a book- music can be adjusted for all ages- that can support development, show what they can do, and includes the whole family as they establish their new dynamic. This provides an opportunity for trying things that may feel less familiar or uncomfortable- try out showing affection and encouragement."

Square One often pairs books with craft and music activities that have a broad appeal to families. These books and activities are a chance for parents to interact with their children around an age appropriate activity. They can start conversations with kids around difficult topics. Or they can just be fun!

Recently Square One used the book *Every Little Thing*, inspired by the lyrics of Bob Marley and adapted by Cedella Marly. They paired the book with a music activity. Shalonda said they picked that book and song because everyone can relate to it, regardless of skin color or culture. **"We might be having a hard time but it's going to be all right- look at the small things- full of love and harmony- kids on the front of this book just being kids, playing. What's life without a little fun? Music is good for the soul!"**



IDEAS AND RESOURCES FROM FIRST STEPS TOGETHER SITES

Center for Human Development sends a monthly crafting activity to each of their families and have begun wrapping those activities around books. For a recent activity they chose the book *That's Me Loving You*, a poem that offers reassurance of parents' love. Destiny, one of CHD's Family Recovery Support Specialists, shared that she chose this book because it talks about how parents want to be ever present, even for their children who they might be separated from. They paired the book with a craft and sensory activity by making painted footprints and pictures. They were intentional about ordering supplies for this activity that would allow families to represent themselves

such as [Colors of the World Crayons](#). They shared that they are able to order books at a discount by using a [Bulk Bookstore](#).



IDEAS AND RESOURCES FROM FIRST STEPS TOGETHER SITES

Baystate Community Services (BSCS) was excited to find out that the Wareham Public Library is now part of [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library](#), which is a book gifting program that mails free, high-quality books to children from birth to age five, no matter their family's income. They also love the [Plymouth County Resiliency Library and Book](#)



[Buddy Program](#) which provides access to e-books for families to read, engage and learn about topics that may impact their everyday life. This free online digital library focuses on social emotional learning, resilience, and a variety of behavioral health topics.



Cape Cod Children's Place (CCCP) has a partnership with [Project Night Night](#). The project sends them cotton reusable bags filled with books, a blanket and a "stuffy." CCCP encourages parents to use the bags to create a special visit bag for things like visiting the doctor's office and meetings. They say that encouraging the use of these bags just during those times keeps them new and fresh and gives the child something engaging to do when sometimes needing to wait. Christina Russell, the Director for FIRST Steps Together at CCCP, also shares that "it can be hard as a parent to talk about some subjects. Books are an amazing window into practicing things that are hard."

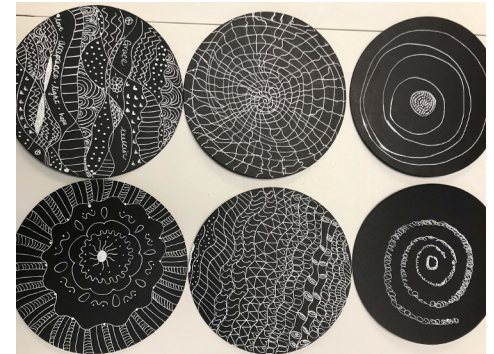


Staff at **Jewish Family and Children's Service (JFCS)** have been purposeful in coming together as a group with some of their favorite books. Danya Handelsman, Clinician, said that they chose "diverse selections that represent our families." They discuss how they want to present the books and "what is the meaning making of bringing a book to a family?" They balance "not just dropping them off, but also not having expectations about [what the family will do with the book]." Since COVID they have put together packages to use over Zoom with families that includes some of their favorite books, including Ruby finds a Worry. Amy Sommer says this book "Has really nice language about worrying and features a non-white little girl. It's important to us to have different skills and abilities, and skin tones represented." You can find a read-aloud of that book [here](#)



CREATIVE WORKSHOPS ENCOURAGE STAFF WELLNESS AND PARENT CHILD ENGAGEMENT

On March 15th and again on March 22nd, Sara Roizen, Board Certified Creative Arts Therapist and Certified Mindfulness & Meditation Teacher, presented a creative arts workshop titled *Pause, Connect, Create: Therapeutic Arts Workshop*. This hands-on workshop offered an opportunity to create inner emotional space through the supportive art making processes. During the webinar staff had the opportunity to explore simple yet meaningful art practices to “help us move through daily life more creatively and smoothly.” Through reflection and discussion Sara also bridged the activity to explore ways of integrating these ideas into our work with others. According to Sara “...these simple art activities can be utilized and adapted to [our] work with parents and children, to model self-care and art making in the home.”



One activity was the practice of creating white pen on black circle mandalas. Sara encouraged folks to either start at the center of the circle or to pick a random starting point and to slowly draw any shape in repetition. Staff were instructed not to worry about having a plan for the finished product, but to simply allow ourselves to create and follow the drawing. At the end of our drawing time, staff had unique and beautiful mandalas and took turns reflecting on the experience. Many people were surprised by how soothing the process of creating was. We've included some of the finished pieces below.

One staff member who attended the webinar shared that they explored “what self-care means to each of us by sharing personal examples” as Sara explained the idea that **“Self-care is giving the world the best of you, instead of what’s left of you.”**



Here is a poem shared at the workshop:

*Remember that you are Water:
Cry, Cleanse, Flow, Let go.
Remember that you are Fire:
Burn, Tame, Adapt, Ignite.
Remember that you are Air:
Observe, Breathe, Focus, Decide.
Remember that you are Earth:
Ground. Give. Build. Heal.
Remember that you are Spirit:
Connect. Listen. Know. Be Still.*

By: Munshira Althaf

HELPING PARENTS MAKE BOOK SHARING PART OF THEIR DAILY ROUTINE

“The more that books are woven into children’s everyday lives, the more likely they will be to see reading as a pleasure and a gift.

- **At Meal Times**

Sing or read a story during a moment of quiet nursing [or bottle feeding] or to gather the kids around the noisy breakfast table.

- **In the Car or on the Bus**

Keep a few books in the car or in your diaper bag to keep your little ones quiet and busy.

- **At Child Care Drop Off**

Calm a crying child at good-bye time with a favorite story or lullaby. Leave a photo book with pictures of loved family members at child care so your child can flip through it when she is missing you.

- **At the Doctor’s Office**

Read or tell a soothing story to your little one in the waiting room and sing or talk through the scary parts of the visit. Before the visit, read books about going to the doctor so your child knows what to expect.

- **At the Grocery Store**

Put a few board books in the shopping cart or tie a cloth book to the shopping cart so you’re not cleaning up books from the floor as you go!

- **At Nap Time**

Familiar routines always help babies calm down. Use books and stories to quietly ease your baby to sleep.

- **At Day’s End**

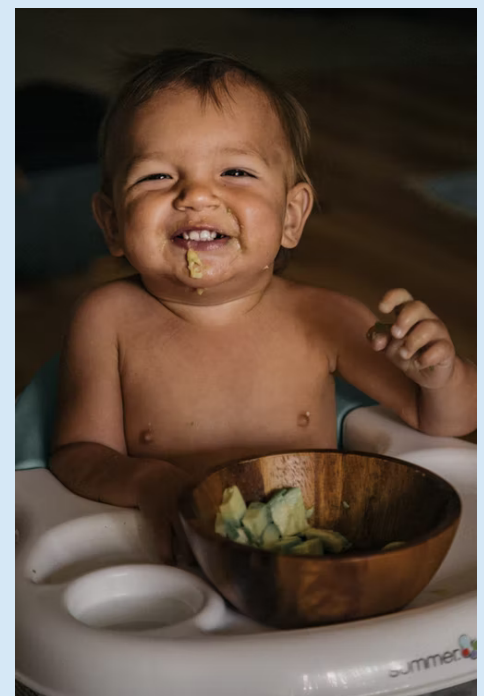
You are exhausted, the baby is fussy. Lie down on the floor surrounded by books. Play a book on tape for your baby. Sing a song together while you all try to relax a bit.

- **At Bath Time**

Plastic bath time books are great fun and may help a fussy baby enjoy the tub a little more.

- **At Bed Time**

Soothing books and stories can work magic with babies who fight sleep!”



[How to Introduce Toddlers and Babies to Books •
ZERO TO THREE](#)

BOOKS TO SHARE ABOUT BIG FEELINGS

We asked FIRST Steps Together staff for recommendations of books that help children deal with big emotions and experiences such as those around separation, trauma, loss and parental substance use and recovery.

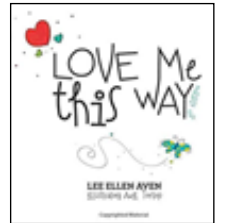
Here are some of the books they recommended:



Once I Was Very Scared by Chandra Ghosh Ippen. "Once I was very very scared," declared squirrel. The other animals chime in to share that they were also once scared. Through the story we learn what scared the little animals, ways they each respond when scared, and things that help them feel safe and calm. This book was designed to help young children who have experienced stressful or traumatic events.



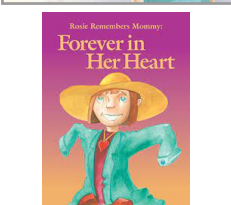
You Weren't With Me by Chandra Ghosh Ippen. Little Rabbit and Big Rabbit are together after a difficult separation. Even though they missed each other, Little Rabbit is not ready to cuddle up and receive Big Rabbit's love. Little Rabbit needs Big Rabbit to understand what it felt like when they were apart. This story was designed to help parents and children talk about difficult separations, reconnect, and find their way back to each other.



Love Me This Way by Lee Ellen Aven. How do you love someone and let them be who they are, not who you want them to be? This delightfully illustrated book is a primer on unconditional love told from the child's point of view. Use this book as a guide for raising children or for having an effective relationship with anyone important in your life - including yourself.



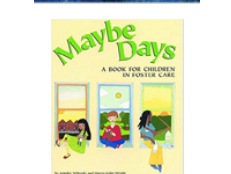
Ready to Remember: Jeremy's Journey of Hope and Healing Brings to life the grief experiences of Jeremy, a 10-year-old boy, following the tragic death of his father. This story describes Jeremy's journey as he and his family face new challenges and fears and find ways to cope with their grief.



Rosie Remembers Mommy: Forever in Her Heart Tells the story of Rosie, a young girl who is struggling after the death of her mother. Rosie expresses a variety of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts as she tries to adjust to life and cope. This story illustrates how a parent can provide solace and support to a child after the death of a loved one.



The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn This book is used to reassure children upset by separation anxiety. School is starting in the forest, but Chester Raccoon does not want to go. To help ease Chester's fears, Mrs. Raccoon shares a family secret called the Kissing Hand to give him the reassurance of her love any time his world feels a little scary



Maybe Days by Jennifer Wilgocki For many children in foster care, the answer to many questions is often, "Maybe." Maybe Days is a straightforward look at the issues of foster care, the questions that children ask, and the feelings that they confront.



The Invisible String Book by Patrice Karst "That's impossible," said twins Jeremy & Liza after their Mom told them they're all connected by "An Invisible String made of love." THE INVISIBLE STRING is a very simple approach to overcoming the fear of loneliness or separation with an imaginative flair that children can easily identify with and remember.

CLAS CORNER

Cultural Competency a Key Component of Substance Use Treatment Services

“Substance use treatment providers increasingly understand the importance of offering personalized, culturally sensitive care that respects patients’ beliefs, preferred languages, and communication needs. In a roundtable conversation, four officials from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health—Nicole Schmitt, assistant director of planning and development, Bureau of Substance Addiction Services (BSAS); Oanh Bui, [culturally and linguistically appropriate services \(CLAS\)](#) Program Coordinator, Office of Health Equity; Jen Miller, State Opioid Response Program Manager, BSAS; and Jen Parks, Assistant Director for Provider Support, BSAS—discuss how culturally and linguistically effective care is a guiding principle in their work to prevent, assess, and treat opioid use disorder (OUD).” [Cultural Competency a Key Component of Substance Use Treatment Services | The Pew Charitable Trusts \(pewtrusts.org\)](#)



Staffers at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health pose at their office. The team (from left: Jen Miller, Jen Parks, Oanh Bui, and Nicole Schmitt, standing) works to help ensure that substance use disorder services are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
Massachusetts Department of Public Health

FIRST Steps Together is a home visiting program that offers community based and/or virtual services, delivered by a parent in recovery with training to support both recovery and parenting journeys. We also offer groups, care coordination, and the option of working with a mental health counselor. FIRST Steps Together is open to any person 18 years old or older, who has used opioids, stimulants, and/or other substances, AND who is pregnant or expecting a child, or has at least one child who is 5 years old or younger. Participants do not have to have custody of their children or be actively parenting.

For more information about our program, including contact information for each program site, please visit

mass.gov/FIRST-Steps-Together

Recent FIRST Steps Together Newsletters:

[Fall 2021: 2021 Accomplishments](#)

[Summer 2021: SAMHSA Recovery Dimensions](#)

[Spring 2021: Groups](#)

[Winter 2021: Goal Setting](#)

[November/December 2020: Holiday Resources](#)

[September/October 2020: Working with Dads](#)

[July/August 2020: Supporting New Parents](#)

[May/June 2020: Forging Partnerships](#)

[April 2020: Mindfulness to Support Parent and Children](#)

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FAMILIES IN RECOVERY SUPPORT

Winter
2022

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