Using Rapid Cycle Learning to Build Momentum for Change in Two-Generation Service Delivery

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Abstract

Two-generation initiatives intentionally combine intensive, high quality adult-focused services with intensive, high quality child-focused programs to improve outcomes for children, primary caregivers, and families. The goal of integrating services for primary caregivers and their children is to achieve better outcomes than those accomplished by serving each generation in isolation (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014; Sama-Miller et al. 2017). Research suggests that to effectively support families, these services should be high quality, intensive, and intentionally aligned (Sama-Miller et al. 2017).

This brief is the third in a series of three briefs that aim to support future evaluations in the field of two-generation approaches. This third brief highlights the experiences of four two-generation initiatives that used rapid cycle learning to test and refine strategies to strengthen service delivery. This brief is intended for two-generation service providers who seek to strengthen their initiatives, as well as their evaluation partners.

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Introduction

In the Next Steps for Rigorous Research on Two-Generation Approaches (NS2G) project, NS2G technical assistance (TA) providers partnered with four two-generation initiatives on formative evaluations designed to build evaluation readiness and strengthen the alignment and coordination of services. As a part of these formative evaluations, initiative staff developed and tested strategies to improve service coordination using rapid cycle learning, an iterative testing and learning process that can help initiatives break big challenges into small, manageable pieces (Cody and Arbour 2019).

This brief is the third in a series that aims to support future research on and evaluation of two-generation approaches. The first brief, Defining a Two-Generation Logic Model, presented a logic model that initiatives used to document services for caregivers, children, and families and link them to intended programmatic outcomes (Aharpour and Baumgartner 2022). The second brief in this series, Using a Structured Learning Process to Strengthen Two-Generation Service Delivery, described the learning process that initiatives completed with NS2G TA providers to identify implementation challenges and develop improvement strategies (Fung and Sama-Miller 2022). This brief discusses the program improvement strategies that initiatives implemented, and highlights insights from the rapid cycle learning process for two-generation initiative operators and their evaluation partners who might be interested in rapid cycle learning.

What is rapid cycle learning?

Rapid cycle learning is a method for quickly and iteratively testing strategies to strengthen service design and implementation. It often involves improvement cycles, which are successive cycles to pilot strategies, collect feedback from staff and participants on how these strategies are working, and gather data to demonstrate whether the strategies are supporting improvement. Based on the feedback collected and what initiative staff learn, they can revise their strategies and test again in

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a subsequent improvement cycle. This iterative testing and learning process builds staff capacity and initiative readiness for future evaluation by cultivating a learning mindset and strengthening service delivery.

Rapid cycle learning in NS2G

As part of NS2G, each initiative completed two or three improvement cycles from late 2021 through early 2023. The length, number, and timing of improvement cycles depended on each initiative's strategy and its programmatic calendar. Initiative staff collected a variety of data to inform their improvement cycles, including interview data from staff, families, and partners; survey data from families; and information from their integrated databases.

> **Service Coordination for Two-Generations**
>
> Research theorizes that well-run and potentially effective two-generation initiatives that prioritize serving whole families have intentionality and include high-quality and intensive services for both generations (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014; see literature review in Sama-Miller et al. 2017). Intentionality involves purposefully and deliberatively linking services with the needs of caregivers and their children while keeping the family's shared goals in mind (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014; King et al. 2011). Often, intentionality requires coordination between multiple service providers in an initiative.

The strategies that initiative staff developed and tested related to the intentional alignment and coordination of their services, which are key characteristics of two-generation service delivery (Box 2). The focus for each initiative varied, but their work sorted into two themes:

1. Coordination with external partners
   - Northern Kentucky Scholar House at Brighton Center (Newport, Kentucky)
   - San Antonio Dual Generation Initiative (San Antonio, Texas)
2. Coordination with internal departments
   - Garrett County Community Action Committee (Garrett County, Maryland)
   - Valley Settlement (Roaring Fork Valley, Colorado)

To address these topics, initiative staff developed and tested small changes to streamline processes and build staff knowledge and capacity related to service delivery. These activities represented small steps toward more intentional alignment and coordination of services, as well as opportunities for staff to build their capacity to identify and test other program-strengthening ideas in the future. The sections that follow describe each initiative's strategy, rapid cycle learning process, and lessons learned.

Northern Kentucky Scholar House (NKSH) is one of more than 40 programs offered by Brighton Center, a nonprofit serving residents in eight counties in northern Kentucky and southern Ohio. NKSH provides an array of family services to single mothers with low incomes through partnerships with its local and state housing authorities. The initiative wanted to find ways to strengthen the relationship between case managers and families by decreasing the burden on

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families who have to repeatedly share their stories. NKSH staff decided that streamlining the initiative's enrollment materials and processes would decrease this burden, because it would make the enrollment process less invasive and time intensive. Exhibit 1 depicts rapid cycle learning at NKSH, including the strategy staff tested and the data they collected during each improvement cycle to inform refinements to the strategy.

Exhibit 1. Rapid cycle learning at Northern Kentucky Scholar House

	Improvement Cycle 1 (September to October 2022)	Improvement Cycle 2 (December 2022 to January 2023)	Improvement Cycle 3 (February 2023 - Ongoing)
Strategy	Developed a flow diagram of the enrollment process, gathered feedback on the existing enrollment process, and streamlined the enrollment packet	Tested streamlined enrollment packet with previously enrolled families and met with partners to identify additional areas for streamlining	Testing the streamlined packet and processes with newly applying families
Data collected	Interviews and discussions with staff, volunteers, and partners	Survey of current families completing the packet and discussions with partners	Interview questions for families integrated into standard intake interview

The first improvement cycle that NKSH conducted focused on mapping the existing enrollment process and gathering feedback from staff, volunteers, and partners to understand what worked well and what could be improved. Based on the feedback, NKSH staff identified forms and data elements to streamline, eliminate, or move to other points in enrollment to reduce burden and time. The second improvement cycle focused on testing this streamlined enrollment packet with previously enrolled families. Based on families' feedback, NKSH staff found additional ways to refine the packet, such as offering customized support to those completing it. NKSH staff also identified forms and items they ultimately could not change because of rules and regulations from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The third improvement cycle, which was ongoing as we developed this brief, intended to focus on using the further streamlined packet with newly applying NKSH families.

> "A few of our outcomes are around parent satisfaction with their experiences. Our families come to us in crisis, and when you're in crisis, it's so hard to focus. So, [we wanted to take] some of that burden away and spend less time collecting information so they'll have more free time to dedicate to school [and] their children."
>
> — *NKSH staff member*

San Antonio Dual Generation Initiative (Dual Gen) is a collaborative, place-based two-generation initiative serving specific zip codes in the San Antonio area. Place-based initiatives such as Dual Gen aim to bring resources and services to economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and their residents (Popkin et al. 2019). The United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County leads the

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initiative, and a variety of partner agencies deliver services to support education, training, and early childhood development. To increase enrollments and referrals, Dual Gen leaders wanted to build staff knowledge of Dual Gen and capacity to provide coaching within the partner organizations that serve Dual Gen families. To support this effort, Dual Gen used each improvement cycle to better understand staff needs and capacity. Exhibit 2 depicts rapid cycle learning at Dual Gen, including the strategy staff tested and the data they collected during each improvement cycle to inform refinements to the strategy.

Exhibit 2. Rapid cycle learning at San Antonio Dual Generation Initiative

	Improvement Cycle 1 (October 2021 to March 2022)	Improvement Cycle 2 (October to November 2022)	Improvement Cycle 3 (January to March 2023)
Strategy	Trained partner staff on case management to improve understanding of role	Identified the influence of two different staffing structures on staff time and responsibilities and ability to provide quality case management	To understand staff capacity, assessed how case managers were spending time
Data collected	Pre- and post-training case manager knowledge assessment	Interviewed one case manager at each of two partner organizations with different staffing structures	Reviewed partners' administrative data and administered an online time-use survey to all Dual Gen case managers

Dual Gen's overarching goal was to support the integration of partner services as the initiative expanded its services area. To make this large effort more manageable, Dual Gen focused each improvement cycle on individual steps that would support expansion. Dual Gen's first improvement cycle focused on increasing partner staff knowledge and skills to implement the coaching aspect of Dual Gen. Leaders provided all partner organization case managers with a training, including pre- and post-training feedback forms. Through these assessments, case managers showed improvements in their understanding of the case management role but reported that they struggled to find time to meet with families. Therefore, Dual Gen leaders decided to focus the second improvement cycle on learning about the factors that affected the amount of time case managers have to meet with families.

The United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County explored two staffing structures in the second improvement cycle: (1) a partner that allocated one case manager to work full time serving Dual Gen families and (2) a partner that allocated multiple case managers to spend some of their

> "Our work with the NS2G team really began a conversation with our initiative partners regarding the amount of time needed to work alongside our Dual Gen families.... That dedicated staff will not only meet with a family on a monthly basis, but will collect information and place it in our data system, and maintain a relationship with the family during their time in the initiative."
>
> — *San Antonio Dual Gen staff member*

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time serving Dual Gen families and some of their time on other services the organization provided. Conversations with case managers from the two partner organizations revealed that the case manager working full time on Dual Gen had more time to meet with families than a case manager who worked with Dual Gen families on specific days. The case manager who only spent part of their time serving Dual Gen families noted that splitting time between multiple programs and initiatives strained their time and capacity, thereby making it difficult to provide high quality coaching. Dual Gen leaders also reviewed administrative data during the second improvement cycle to understand staff responses in relation to enrollment trends and other data. However, the different characteristics of the two partner organizations made it difficult to compare them and draw conclusions.

Improvement Cycle 3 aimed to explore staff capacity further. Dual Gen leaders reviewed additional administrative data from partner organizations that showed how partner agency staff were spending time and how many Dual Gen families they were serving. Through this review, Dual Gen leaders found that that the majority of case managers across partners were not consistently or sufficiently entering data about the length of coaching appointments. To further explore how staff were spending time, Dual Gen leaders administered a time-use survey. The survey revealed that partner staff spent similar amounts of time on case management and data entry. Dual Gen leaders shared these findings with their partners and opened discussions with them about additional supports and training needs for partner staff.

Garrett County Community Action Committee (CAC) is a Community Action Agency serving adults, children, and families in Garrett County, Maryland, a rural county in the western panhandle of Maryland. A Community Action Agency is a local organization that provides an array of supportive services tailored to their community, including those funded through the Community Services Block Grant. Through its two-generation initiative, Garrett County CAC aimed to address the needs of local families through education and employment services, financial literacy workshops, emergency services, housing services, and Head Start and Early Head Start. Garrett County CAC leaders wanted to improve the agency's internal referral process to better meet families' needs in a timely manner and encourage staff to follow up with families quickly when receiving a service referral from a colleague. To address this, Garrett County CAC staff developed a new process for internal referrals, which included integrating reminders for pending referrals into their data system, as well as a set two-business-day response time for pending referrals. Exhibit 3 depicts rapid cycle learning at Garrett County CAC, including the strategy staff tested and the data they collected during each improvement cycle to inform refinements to the strategy.

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Exhibit 3. Rapid cycle learning at Garrett County Community Action Committee

	Improvement Cycle 1 (August to September 2022)	Improvement Cycle 2 (October to December 2022)
Strategy	Created an improved, standardized internal referral process with a two-business-day turnaround time, referral dashboard, and reminder emails	Continuation of Cycle 1
Data collected	Review of referral reports in data system and staff focus group	Staff focus group

During the first improvement cycle, initiative staff shared that the updated referral process was easier, more direct, and faster to use. Direct service staff and supervisors said integrating referrals into their data system dashboard made referrals easier to track and follow up on. Direct service staff and supervisors also said that the new manual reminder emails were useful. However, direct service staff shared that the two-business-day turnaround time to respond to a referral was not always realistic. Because of a low number of referrals provided to families in the initiative, Garrett County CAC staff opted to use Improvement Cycle 2 to continue the same strategy from Cycle 1 and gather more feedback from a broader group of staff. In Cycle 2, the staff feedback was similar to Cycle 1. Based on the staff feedback across both cycles, Garrett County CAC staff intended to automate reminders but needed a vendor (the database developer) to make this change. Leaders also intended to have follow-up conversations with staff to better understand their concerns about the two-business-day turnaround time.

> "With this more rigorous follow-up on referrals, we hope to see more families receiving services and receiving them quicker, which will in turn lead to outcomes —not just that they're receiving energy assistance or asset building, but [that] it leads potentially to owning a home, or that child [are] entering kindergarten ready to learn."
>
> — *Garrett County CAC staff member*

Valley Settlement provides services to a fast-growing, majority Latino community in the rural Roaring Fork Valley of Western Colorado, near several ski resorts. Services provided include adult education and training, early childhood education, coaching, and other supportive services. Because the majority of community members speak Spanish as their first language, Valley Settlement's services are primarily offered in Spanish. Valley Settlement staff wanted to improve coordination and referrals between internal departments. To support this effort, they began including staff-led presentations on service offerings during existing all-staff meetings as a way to educate staff on the programs and services available and to increase referrals. Exhibit 4 depicts rapid cycle learning at Valley Settlement, including the strategy staff tested and the data they collected during each improvement cycle to inform refinements to the strategy.

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Exhibit 4. Rapid cycle learning at Valley Settlement

	Improvement Cycle 1 (August to September 2022)	Improvement Cycle 2 (October 2022)	Improvement Cycle 3 (November 2022)
Strategy	Integrated staff-led presentations about service offerings into existing all-staff meeting (Programs 1 and 2)	Integrated staff-led presentations about service offerings into existing all-staff meeting (Programs 3 and 4)	Integrated staff-led presentations about service offerings into existing all-staff meeting (Programs 5 and 6)
Data collected	Staff surveys taken after each presentation	Staff surveys taken after each presentation	Staff surveys taken after each presentation

Each improvement cycle focused on providing presentations for two of the six programs. Because each cycle focused on a different pair of programs, Valley Settlement did not make any changes between cycles. Rather, initiative leaders analyzed the feedback across all presentations. Overall, the survey data indicated that initiative staff found the presentations to be an effective way to communicate program-specific information and that staff felt more confident referring participants to other Valley Settlement programs. Based on the feedback, Valley Settlement recognized the importance of consistency and continuing to share these materials with staff. Valley Settlement hoped that the acquisition of a new data system would enable them to analyze referral rates between programs, including for services that caregivers and their children received.

> "Because we're hoping to have a higher cross-program referral, as we understand each family's needs and how they could benefit from another program in our organization … that also comes with really equipping our staff and having staff fully understand what every other program does."
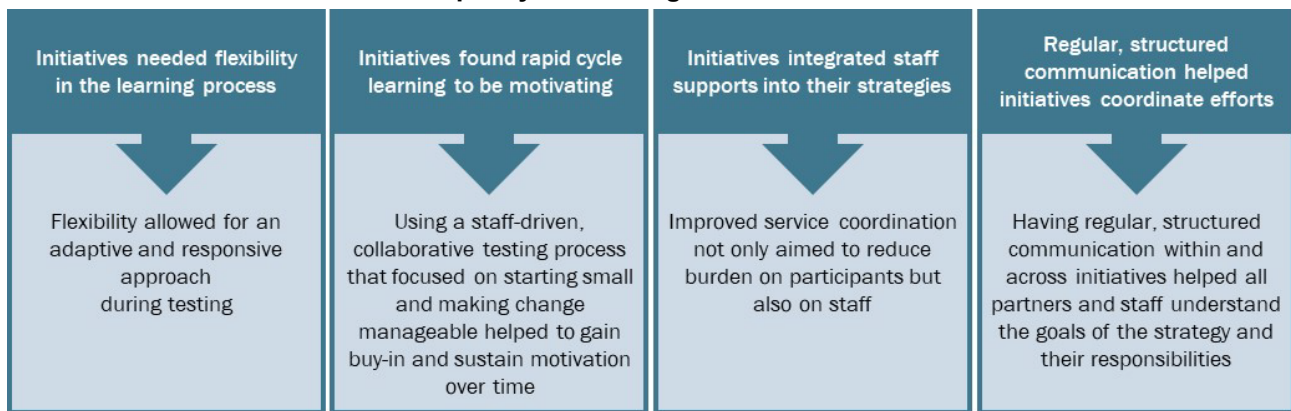>
> — *Valley Settlement staff member*

Lessons learned: What the NS2G project can tell the field about rapid cycle learning

The use of a structured rapid cycle learning process to implement and assess a strategy can help embed collaborative program improvement into two-generation initiatives. Exhibit 5 presents the lessons learned through this structured rapid cycle learning process in NS2G.

Two-generation initiatives lengthened iterative improvement cycles to learn more about their improvement strategies or adjusted their planned approach as needed. Many two-generation initiatives serve a small number of families because of location, cost, and the expected duration of services (Baumgartner et al. 2023). For example, NKSH's experience illustrates how small

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enrollment numbers can influence the rapid cycle learning process. Although limited enrollment was a byproduct of the scale and duration of service delivery in NKSH's model, it presented as a challenge for "rapidly" testing changes to their enrollment packet. NKSH had low numbers of enrollment appointments scheduled in early 2023 when it rolled out the streamlined enrollment packet. Knowing this, initiative staff structured the first two improvement cycles to collect data in creative ways—by asking staff, board members, and currently enrolled families to provide feedback as if they were going through the intake process themselves. Being flexible in their data collection strategy, timing, and methods enabled NKSH staff to gather meaningful feedback on their enrollment packet while maintaining a structured learning approach. Staff decided to leave the third improvement cycle open-ended with no firm end date so they could collect as much feedback as possible from new families.

Exhibit 5. Lessons learned about rapid cycle learning on NS2G

Initiatives needed flexibility in the learning process	Initiatives found rapid cycle learning to be motivating	Initiatives integrated staff supports into their strategies	Regular, structured communication helped initiatives coordinate efforts
Flexibility allowed for an adaptive and responsive approach during testing	Using a staff-driven, collaborative testing process that focused on starting small and making change manageable helped to gain buy-in and sustain motivation over time	Improved service coordination not only aimed to reduce burden on participants but also on staff	Having regular, structured communication within and across initiatives helped all partners and staff understand the goals of the strategy and their responsibilities

The rapid cycle learning approach was motivating. The opportunities for improvement that two-generation initiatives identified were large and fundamental to their operations, such as coordination between partners and service providers. Improvement cycles in NS2G intentionally started with small changes to agency practices and services. Initiative staff reflected that starting small and working iteratively helped make program improvement more manageable and approachable, particularly when the challenges were large, or when staff didn't know where to start. The short time frame for rapid cycle learning boosted staff motivation, although in some cases, it limited data collection, such as with NKSH. Because rapid cycle learning prompted action, staff were excited by the potential to move quickly from developing an idea or strategy to testing it.

The strategies that initiatives tested intentionally integrated supports for staff. Dual Gen's emphasis on staff capacity led United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County to focus on ensuring Dual Gen partner staff had enough time to dedicate to the initiative and the families they served. Analysis of administrative data, a time-use survey, and interviews with two case managers highlighted the need for defining clearer expectations related to staffing at each partner organization. Similarly, Garrett County CAC wanted to find ways to improve services while reducing burden on staff. By adjusting their referral process (and with plans to automate follow-up

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reminders), Garrett County CAC leaders intended to reduce chances that families' identified needs go unaddressed. The referral reminders decreased reliance on individual staff members' organizational skills, memories, and connections in the referral process.

Regular, structured communication helped service providers coordinate their efforts. Valley Settlement initiative staff shared that it was difficult to serve families if staff could not communicate effectively with one another. They felt the presentations that colleagues provided during team meetings helped

> "This project led us to create [more] intentionality around that coordination piece and that communication piece... with all the programs we have."
>
> — *Valley Settlement staff member*

reduce some of the isolation between programs. Overall, this strategy helped to create protected time and space for staff communication and coordination. Similarly, the efforts of Garrett County CAC to refine their referral process ensured that staff were able to communicate with each other more easily.

Conclusion

Rapid cycle learning helped two-generation initiatives in NS2G realize that they could create manageable change that was neither complex nor burdensome. When replicated over time, this structured process could support improvements in the intentional alignment and coordination of services to both generations, while normalizing change as a part of serving clients. In this way, rapid cycle learning offers an approach to strengthen an initiative's ability to make informed, practical changes based on data and lived experiences of families and staff. When sites approached improvement cycles with flexibility, they learned more about the strategies they tested. Staff reported that rapid cycle learning was motivating and helped strengthen coordination and communication in their initiatives.

The experiences of the participating initiatives in NS2G demonstrate how rapid cycle learning can be a useful tool for practitioners of other two-generation initiatives to build momentum for creating change and continuous improvement. Specifically, using rapid cycle learning can help two-generation initiatives:

- be more intentional about how they provide services to caregivers and children;
- assess the appropriate intensity of services to support family outcomes; and
- strengthen service delivery to better meet the needs of families, caregivers, and their children.

More information about rapid cycle learning is available in the report Strengthening Two-Generation Initiatives That Support Child Development and Improve Family Economic Security: Insights from the Next Steps for Rigorous Research on Two-Generation Approaches Project.

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OPRE's Portfolio on Coordinated Services

This project is part of a portfolio of research focused on coordinated services to support children and families. Projects within this research portfolio address the intentional coordination of two or more services. These projects span OPRE's program-specific research portfolios, including child care, Head Start, home visiting, child welfare, and welfare and family self-sufficiency. More information about OPRE's Coordinated Services projects can be found at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/coordinated-services-research-and-evaluation-portfolio.

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