

Count Play Explore (CPE) Evaluation Brief



Engaging Families to Support Children's Early STEAM Development

The Count Play Explore (CPE) initiative strives to engage professional learning (PL) facilitators, early childhood educators, families, and children from birth to third grade in the joy and wonder of mathematics. The initiative provides funding, resources, and PL to support facilitators in implementing PL and coaching for educators in early math. In addition, facilitators are supported to engage families in their local communities in learning events and activities. WestEd serves as the internal evaluator for the CPE initiative. This brief provides evaluation findings from the CPE family and community engagement (F&CE) activities that took place from January to December 2024. During this period, the initiative included an integrated approach to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM).

Families' engagement in STEAM experiences with children can impact children's short- and long-term learning and development. Research demonstrates that families' math attitudes, vocabulary use, participation in activities, and involvement in learning settings predicts children's learning and success in math (Eason et al., 2020, 2022).

Furthermore, families who participate in family engagement math interventions demonstrate changes in their support of children's math experiences and outcomes (e.g., Holtzman et al., 2023; Linder & Emerson, 2019). Therefore, it was essential for CPE to incorporate an F&CE approach that would provide facilitators and educators with experiences and resources to engage families in children's STEAM learning.

The CPE initiative implemented a cascade model with 25 agencies across California, including school districts, county offices of education (COEs), and nonprofit organizations. In this model, CPE partners engaged agency facilitators in PL and coaching. Agency facilitators typically included trainers, coaches, or other administrators. The facilitators then provided PL and coaching to educators. Educators applied their learning to support children's early math development.

For more information about facilitators', educators', and families' experiences with local CPE implementation, see the following [CPE Evaluation Briefs](#):

- *Building Facilitators' Capacity to Promote Early Math in Local Communities*
- *Building Educator Capacity to Promote Children's Early Math Development*
- *CPE Professional Learning and Coaching in Local Communities*
- *Case Studies of CPE Professional Learning and Coaching in Local Communities*

From January to December 2024, facilitators from a subset of 19 agencies received professional learning and materials to engage families in supporting children's STEAM learning. The initiative strategic goals were for families to

- **see themselves** as playing an important role in their children's STEAM learning and enjoy engaging their children in STEAM learning,
- **recognize** how STEAM concepts appear in their everyday experiences and routines and use those experiences to support their children's STEAM learning, and
- **access and use** STEAM activity resources that are accessible and culturally and linguistically appropriate.

This brief summarizes evaluation findings that address the following questions regarding the CPE F&CE approach:

- What are the key characteristics of the CPE approach and supports offered to agencies for local implementation of F&CE efforts?
- What are the key characteristics and reach of agencies' local F&CE efforts?
- In what ways does participation in CPE build agencies' capacity to engage families in early STEAM?
- How do agencies support CPE's goals related to family outcomes?

Method

Nineteen of the 25 CPE agencies chose to participate in the F&CE component of the initiative and related evaluation activities. Two of the 19 participating agencies, a COE and a school district, also agreed to take part in case studies on the implementation of F&CE activities in their local communities.

Data collection occurred between May and December 2024 and included participation from CPE partners, agency facilitators, educators, and families. Educators and families were only engaged in data collection as part of the two case studies. Refer to Exhibit 1 for a description of the data collection activities. The evaluation team also drew from a summative survey of F&CE activities collected by the CPE lead partner to determine the reach to children and families across agencies.

Exhibit 1. Family and Community Engagement Data Collection Activities

Focus group with CPE partners: One focus group with three representatives from Count Play Explore (CPE) partners on the goals and characteristics of the family and community engagement (F&CE) approach

Observations of webinars and CoPs: Observations of three webinars and three communities of practice (CoPs) offered by CPE to facilitators on implementation of F&CE activities

Focus groups with facilitators: Two focus groups with 16 facilitators from 14 agencies about implementation and impact of F&CE activities in their communities

Implementation plans and logs: Collection of agency implementation plans and logs of F&CE activities

Case studies: Interviews or focus groups with four agency facilitators, seven educators and librarians, and nine families; two site visits at F&CE events

The evaluation team conducted qualitative thematic analyses of agencies' F&CE implementation plans for activities and events. The team conducted quantitative descriptive analyses of implementation log data using Excel. Thematic coding of open-ended responses in implementation logs, interviews, focus groups, and observations was conducted using MaxQDA, a qualitative analytic software. The team developed a qualitative codebook, including code descriptions, examples, and decision rules based on notes and transcripts from interviews, focus groups, and observations. Responses and transcripts were coded by one team member and reviewed by a second team member for accuracy and reliability. The evaluation team met regularly to address any coding discrepancies and ensure consistency in coding. Results from analyses were summarized in an internal memo to identify themes across data sources that addressed the evaluation questions.

What are the key characteristics of the CPE approach and supports offered to agencies for local implementation of F&CE efforts?

In their focus group, CPE partners indicated that, during this period of engaging agencies around F&CE, they aimed to

- pilot the CPE F&CE approach, activities, and materials;
- build agencies' and facilitators' capacity to engage families around STEAM;
- foster sustainable F&CE efforts focused on STEAM within agencies;
- increase families' participation in STEAM learning with their children (as described above in the initiative strategic goals); and
- impact children's early STEAM interest and success.



To achieve these goals, the CPE F&CE approach included a range of ways to support facilitators and build agencies' capacity. Refer to Exhibit 2 for a description of the key characteristics of the F&CE approach.

To meet the requirements of their participation, agencies were expected to

- implement at least one interactive exhibit and
- implement one other CPE resource to engage families and the community (e.g., M.A.T.H. Packs, CPE Issues, Math Book Guides and Activities).

Exhibit 2. Key Characteristics of Family and Community Engagement Approach

Webinars: Count Play Explore (CPE) partners provided guidance on how to implement STEAM events, interactive exhibits, and materials to engage families. Facilitators were encouraged to adapt events, interactive exhibits, and materials based on their context.

Communities of practice: Facilitators shared and learned from one another about their agency's approaches, successes, and challenges related to the implementation of family and community engagement (F&CE) activities and resources.

Optional coaching: CPE partners provided individualized support to facilitators on how to implement F&CE activities and resources.

Resources: Facilitators received handouts on how to implement family STEAM events, interactive exhibits, and Math Activity Take Home Packs (M.A.T.H. Packs). Other CPE resources included "I'm Ready" videos, CPE Issues, CPE Research Briefs, and Math Book Guides and Activities.

Note. Interactive exhibits (i.e., Light and Shadow Play, Sensing Sand, and Vertical Wind Tunnel) involved activity stations with materials that families could use to explore specific science phenomena like shadows or wind.

For more information about the CPE resources focused on families, visit the following sites:

- [CPE Family and Community Engagement Resources webpage](#)
- [STEAM Family Engagement Self-Study Module](#)

In focus groups and interviews, facilitators reported that the variety and clarity of CPE resources and the opportunities to learn from peers in CoPs were strengths of the F&CE approach. Given these strengths, facilitators reported needing little to no optional coaching, and when they took advantage of the coaching, it was primarily on the logistics of planning and implementing a family STEAM event or interactive exhibit. Observations of webinars and CoPs indicated that agencies received clear guidance on how to organize events and activities, but the STEAM concepts, skills, and vocabulary that could be highlighted with families and children were not always made explicit. In addition, agency share-outs of local implementation at CoPs illustrated the way agencies built on the strengths of families in their communities, but observations indicated that CPE content and materials could have provided additional guidance and examples of how activities and resources could be adapted for diverse families and communities.

What are the key characteristics and reach of agencies' local F&CE efforts?

In their initial implementation plans, facilitators reported that their agency's goals for F&CE efforts included supporting families in engaging children in math, training and coaching educators to support families around math, and promoting access to math learning experiences for families. Refer to Exhibit 3 for a summary of goals reported in implementation plans. In interviews and focus groups, as the initiative expanded to STEAM, facilitators reported a focus on STEAM, including supporting families' awareness of early STEAM, making STEAM experiences easy for families to attend and participate in, and providing low-cost STEAM activities for families to use at home.

Exhibit 3. Agency Goals Related to Family and Community Engagement Reported in Implementation Plans

Goals	<i>n</i>	%
Support families in engaging children in math	16	89
Promote families' positive mindsets around math	7	39
Provide families with math-related resources and strategies	6	33
Provide more math opportunities in the community	5	28
Provide professional learning on math-related topics to early educators and staff	5	28
Promote access to math learning experiences for all families and communities	4	22

Note. *N* = 18.

Collaboration

Implementation log data showed that to plan and implement family STEAM events and interactive exhibits, 53 percent of agencies collaborated with early educators in center-based programs, 53 percent collaborated with program and school administrators, and 26 percent collaborated with early elementary school educators. Collaborating with agency staff included brainstorming and facilitating event activities. Importantly, 26 percent of agencies reported engaging families in the process of planning and facilitating activities. For instance, one agency reported asking families for help adapting materials to create the tube for the Vertical Wind Tunnel interactive exhibit or the dark box for the Light and Shadow Play interactive exhibit.

Based on responses in implementation log data, interviews, and focus groups, about 32 percent of agencies also reported collaborating with community partners, such as their local First 5, Quality Rating and Improvement System, libraries, and museums. Collaborations with community partners included facilitating activities at events hosted by partners (e.g., bringing two interactive exhibits to a children's festival at the zoo and handing out CPE Issues to families) or providing the materials for community partners to implement and facilitate their own family events and interactive exhibits (e.g., creating bins with materials for interactive exhibits for a library partner to set up in their children's area).

Case Study 1: Strengthening Collaboration With Community Partners (County Office of Education)

This COE in central California provides support services and oversight to 10 school districts and three charter schools. There is one Quality Counts coordinator who served as the CPE facilitator coordinating F&CE efforts.

Implementation Model

The facilitator called on an existing relationship with a youth services librarian to coordinate and implement interactive exhibits in the main branch of the county library system. A goal of this collaboration was to reach “a larger audience, including those families and children who might not have access to a typical early childhood program” (COE Case Study Facilitator interview, September 2024). The facilitator packaged and delivered the materials for the three interactive exhibits to the library. Each interactive exhibit was set up for 4 to 6 weeks for families to use in the children's section of the main branch library. In addition, materials were incorporated into the library's collection of “programs in a box,” which are available to check out to all branch librarians.

The evaluation team visited the main branch library and observed the Sensing Sand interactive exhibit. The exhibit consisted of sensory sand in plastic trays on two low tables—four trays on each table—and a selection of plastic manipulatives, including cookie cutters and shaped molds in the center of each table. Each table also had a laminated sign with conversation prompts (e.g., “How does the sand feel?”/“¿Cómo se siente la arena?”) and vocabulary words in English and Spanish. Vocabulary words included *soft*, *hard*, *squishy*, *rough*, *poking*, *squeezing*. At the time of the observation, families gathered in the children's area after Baby/Toddler Storytime in another part of the library. Notably, there was no explicit connection made between storytime and the interactive exhibit, and library books related to the exhibit were not suggested for families.

Six families and nine children, ranging from toddler to preschool aged, interacted with the exhibit during the observation. Adults with children included mothers, a grandmother, and a grandfather. Families easily settled into the activity without any prompting from the librarians. The children touched the sand, pulled it apart, and made shapes with the molds available, with support from their families, as needed. The conversation prompts were not introduced by the librarians, and families did not use them during the observation. That said, families had spontaneous, unprompted conversations and interactions using sensory sand, asking children questions about how the sand felt or how they wanted to shape the sand. In interviews following the site visit, family members described engaging in similar activities (e.g., sensory sand or modeling clay) and using similar vocabulary at home as a result of engaging with the exhibit.



“So we ended up actually getting kinetic sand out at home, which I’ve had put away for a couple of years now. And she’s been playing with that for the last few days. So, it sparked a new activity at home for us to do.”

—COE Case Study Family Member, October 2024

Lessons Learned

Observation of the interactive exhibit and interviews with the facilitator, librarians, and families highlighted the great potential of agencies collaborating with local community partners. While collaborating with community partners allows agencies to reach more families than they might otherwise do, it is important that facilitators clearly share the CPE goals, approaches, and resources with community partners to fully support implementation.

Intentional support on how to facilitate interactive exhibits, use signage to support families, and complement experiences with community partner resources (e.g., library books related to the interactive exhibit) could enhance the experience and potential impact of F&CE collaborations. Facilitators can work closely with community partners to ensure that goals related to F&CE efforts are met and that the approaches are the most effective for the community context.

Implementation

Most agencies (79%) submitted implementation logs that reported doing an interactive exhibit, and more than half (63%) held a family event or distributed CPE resources to families (refer to Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Family and Community Engagement Activities Conducted by Agencies Reported in Implementation Logs

Activity implemented	<i>n</i>	%
Interactive exhibit (e.g., Vertical Wind Tunnel, Sensing Sand, Light and Shadow Play)	15	79
Family Math or STEAM Night	12	63
Distributed resources to families (e.g., M.A.T.H. Packs with children's books, <i>Discovering the Math: Book Guide</i> , and related activity)	12	63
An organized visit to a community space where math and science concepts were explored (e.g., farm, museum, farmers market)	4	21
Having or creating a STEAM room or makerspace	2	11
Other family and community engagement activities, including professional learning sessions for educators, events for families (e.g., father literacy event), distributing materials to community hubs, and interactive exhibits different from the three proposed exhibits (e.g., exploring robotic insect toys)	5	26

Note. *N* = 19. Because implementation logs were self-reports of agencies' F&CE activities, some of the numbers of activities agencies completed may be underestimates.

Reach

In their F&CE implementation summative surveys, agencies estimated reaching a total of nearly 5,700 children and 3,400 families across agencies, including families from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, families with low incomes, and families who speak languages other than English. Facilitators and educators reported using resources (e.g., CPE Issues, books, posters, activities) and conducting events or communicating with families in their home languages (primarily Spanish, but also Vietnamese and Punjabi). Facilitators also described that they planned event logistics so that it was easier for families to attend (e.g., providing food, making event hours flexible).

Agencies estimated reaching a total of nearly ... **5,700** children and **3,400** families

A range of family members took part in F&CE events, including parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Facilitators and educators reported supporting families and children by showing families how to engage children in interactive exhibits and other STEAM activities, engaging families in conversations and using open-ended questioning and STEAM language, and modeling STEAM activities families could do at home (e.g., using book guide activities, activities using everyday materials).

While some agencies reported using the CPE resources as provided, others reported creating their own activities or adapting the materials to fit their agency's needs. More than half of agencies (58%) reported developing their own STEAM activities, including a pattern and counting bracelet station, number bingo, snowflake symmetry art, and a math scavenger hunt through the zoo. In addition, 26 percent of agencies modified the original CPE materials to make them more appropriate for their populations, such as crushing Cheerios® for the Sensing Sand interactive exhibit to make it accessible for infants and toddlers, creating a low-tech shadow display with colorful flashlights and a box, and providing larger Hexbugs® for younger children. Seven agencies (37%) translated CPE materials—such as the CPE Issues or book activities—to better serve the languages represented in their communities. Most CPE book guides and activities are translated into Spanish, and agencies were provided translated materials when requested.



In what ways does participation in CPE build agencies' capacity to engage families in early STEAM?

Through their participation in PL focused on F&CE and their implementation of F&CE activities, agencies and facilitators built their capacity to engage families in early STEAM.

Facilitators reported varied levels of participation in CPE F&CE webinars and CoPs. Some facilitators attended most PL sessions, and other facilitators indicated minimal or no participation. CoP attendance indicated that 68 percent of agencies had facilitators who attended two or three CoPs, 26 percent of agencies had facilitators who attended one CoP, and facilitators at one agency did not attend CoPs at all. Furthermore, few agencies engaged in the optional coaching, citing that clear, high-quality resources were sufficient to implement their F&CE activities.

The evidence showed that participation in the CPE F&CE PL contributed meaningfully to building the capacity of agencies, facilitators, educators, and community partners. In interviews and focus

groups, facilitators reported that participation in the F&CE PL and activities enhanced their agency's capacity to

- provide math PL that also focused on supporting families,
- align communications and activities with families around the importance of STEAM learning, and
- strengthen connections between home and school settings.

Facilitators also reported growth in their own ability to

- lead PL for educators focused on supporting families,
- plan and implement F&CE events,
- support families in engaging with STEAM activities, and
- collaborate effectively with community partners.

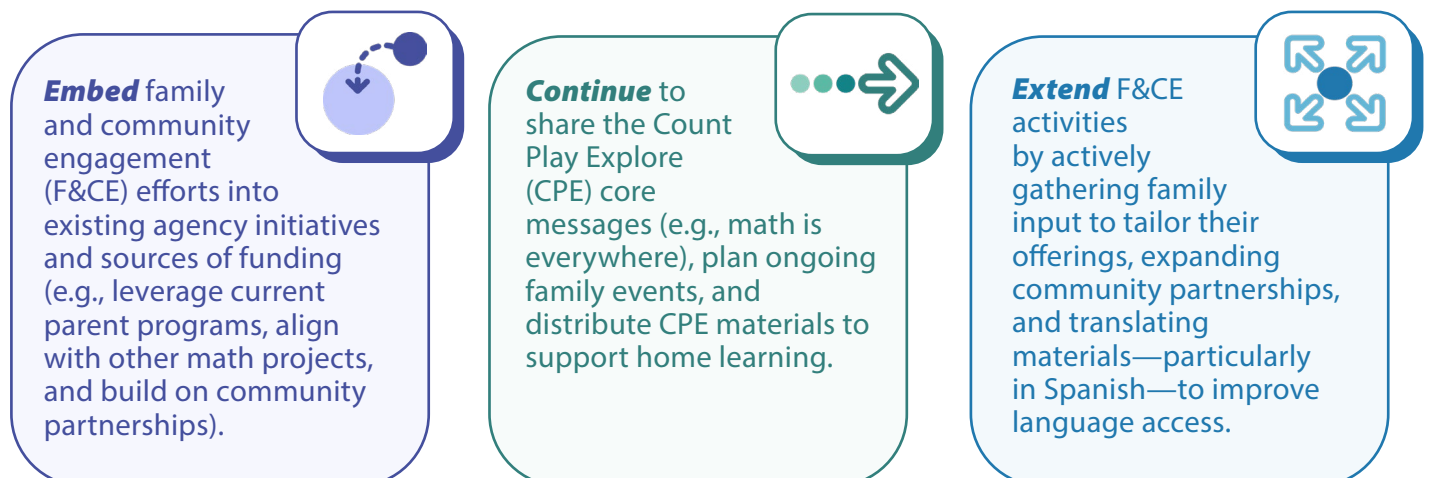
"Learning new ways to reach families directly has always been important to us, and I feel this [initiative] has shown us ways we can do that."

—COE Case Study Facilitator, October 2024

In turn, facilitators reported that their community partners gained awareness of agency resources and developed new strategies to integrate STEAM into their family offerings. A librarian from one of the case studies shared that hosting interactive exhibits helped their team discover practical ways to engage families in STEAM content. Educators developed new skills to engage families in STEAM and showed increased enthusiasm and participation in planning related activities. Facilitators observed that educators enjoyed hands-on exhibits and solidified their understanding of the importance of family engagement.

Agencies demonstrated a strong commitment to sustaining their F&CE efforts. Exhibit 5 summarizes agencies' efforts to embed, continue, and extend F&CE efforts.

Exhibit 5. Approaches to Sustainable Family and Community Engagement Efforts



How do agencies support CPE's goals related to family outcomes?



In focus groups and interviews, facilitators and educators reported the following:

- Families and children engaged actively and joyfully (e.g., smiling, laughing) during interactive exhibits and family STEAM nights. Family members played and encouraged children's curiosity.
- Families asked open-ended questions and used STEAM language (e.g., spatial properties, measurement, geometry, problem-solving).

This level of engagement was also observed during case study site visits. In follow-up interviews after case study site visits, families reported planning to continue engaging with STEAM topics and using CPE resources after engaging with an interactive exhibit or taking part in an event. Six of the nine family members interviewed described getting ideas for STEAM activities to do at home (e.g., being inspired to do their own version of an interactive exhibit) as a result of engaging with the interactive exhibits or taking part in a family STEAM night.

At a school district STEAM night observed by the evaluation team, families made spontaneous comments about what they might do at home, and they also went home with a M.A.T.H. Pack that provided ideas for what they might do at home. Three family members described doing STEAM activities at home (e.g., one child used a flashlight and toys to create a light and shadow display at home for family members), and two family members reported using CPE resources after engaging with an exhibit or taking part in a family STEAM night.

Family members described

- **feeling more capable** of supporting their children's STEAM learning,
- **having an increased awareness of STEAM** concepts as a result of participating in a family STEAM event, and
- **feeling more connected** to other families or their children.



"It did inspire me at home to do more of what [they] had there that day, in my own version."

—COE Case Study Family Member, October 2024

"I saw the activities that were very simple. So I told my mom, 'You see, we can do this at home.' We don't have to buy things. We can build and do, and she can still learn."

—School District Case Study Family Member, November 2024

Similarly, facilitators, educators, and family members reported that children demonstrated confidence and success around STEAM. One family member described their child learning about STEAM concepts (e.g., the child describing what they learned about gravity to a grandparent) as a result of participating in a family STEAM night.

Case Study 2: Building on Existing Family and Community Engagement Efforts (School District)

This large school district in Southern California offers early education and care in infant centers, early education centers, California State Preschool Programs, and transitional kindergarten classrooms throughout the district. Four CPE facilitators provided PL and coaching to educators across different regions of the district.

Implementation Model

This school district focused F&CE efforts in one early education center per region covered by each of the CPE facilitators. In these four centers, facilitators collaborated with educators to plan and facilitate a family STEAM night that incorporated the three interactive exhibits and other STEAM stations inspired by other resources and programs (e.g., The Creative Curriculum® study, a math program led by a local university). The STEAM nights built on each center's ongoing family engagement activities, leveraging the rapport between educators and families to promote participation.

The evaluation team observed the STEAM night at one center in November 2024. Families attended the event from 3 to 5 p.m., taking advantage of pickup time and accommodating families' work schedules as much as possible. The center principal shared that in a prior learning session with families, the program had shared the focus of the STEAM night and encouraged their attendance. Families of approximately 46 children enrolled in the center (a majority of those enrolled) attended the event, including parents, grandparents, and siblings.

Each classroom space (i.e., one toddler classroom and three preschool classrooms) had tables set up with different activity stations, including the three interactive exhibits, Hexbugs®, counting activities, and activities related to their study on clothing. Family members moved freely from one activity to the next with their children. Teachers and assistant teachers helped to facilitate families' engagement by demonstrating how to use materials, asking children and adults questions related to the math or science concepts they were exploring, and using related vocabulary. At the end of the event, families were given M.A.T.H. Packs with books and activities that they could use at home. When the evaluation team followed up in interviews with families who attended the STEAM night, several indicated that they had gone home and used materials from the M.A.T.H. Packs or tried one of the activities from the event at home.

Lessons Learned

It was clear from the successful STEAM night that building on existing F&CE efforts contributed to the high engagement of families in the STEAM activities. Families were used to attending events at the center and understood the importance of collaborating with educators to support their children's learning. They felt respected and welcomed by educators and prioritized attending the event with their extended families. Children and families seemed at ease interacting with educators as the educators encouraged them to be playful, engage in inquiry, and participate in STEAM-related interactions and conversations. Family members then implemented what was modeled by educators with children not only during the event but once they went home and had the resources that had been shared with them.



"It brings the community closer. [The Family STEAM Night] gave us time to get to know the other parents. I could get an idea of how much she [my child] knows and understands, I saw her participate and I saw how confident she is, and the vocabulary. I have a better idea of her learning and the confidence she has with everyone and with everything."

—School District Case Study Family Member, November 2024

Key Insights and Implications

BREADTH OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND RESOURCES BUILT AGENCY AND FACILITATOR CAPACITY

The evaluation demonstrated that the CPE F&CE PL model and resources helped build agencies' capacity to design F&CE approaches that impacted children's and families' engagement in STEAM. By incorporating their efforts into existing initiatives and funding sources, the agencies showed their capacity to make these F&CE efforts sustainable.

Although PL and resources were valuable to agencies and facilitators, the evaluation also showed that given the diverse communities that agencies serve, having materials translated to more languages represented in local communities would better support F&CE work. In addition, to strengthen the impact of F&CE activities on families' and children's STEAM knowledge and skills, facilitators could benefit from further guidance on how to use CPE resources to make explicit connections to STEAM concepts and phenomena.

COLLABORATION WITH EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Facilitators worked with staff within their agencies and with community partners to implement their F&CE efforts. Although many of the events and activities were successful, agencies may require further guidance on how to engage with educators and community partners in co-planning F&CE efforts and making these efforts sustainable beyond individual, onetime events. Agencies may need ideas for providing PL to educators and collaborating with community partners so that the CPE principles and approaches are incorporated in a coherent approach to F&CE around STEAM.

POSITIVE IMPACT ON FAMILIES' ENGAGEMENT IN STEAM

Facilitators, educators, and families reported that participating in CPE STEAM events and activities provided meaningful opportunities for families and children to play, explore, and learn together. Families also reported that they used some of the ideas and resources from those events to continue the STEAM experiences at home. Learning from a wider sample of families over a longer period of implementation would deepen understanding of the impact of F&CE efforts and how they might be improved.

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