

Building Healthy Relationships in Early Learning



Discussion Guide: The Road to Relationships

Macomb Family Services' approach to nurturing development of social emotional health and school readiness in early childhood.

The Road to Relationships

*“When we bring our energies together, they are increased a thousandfold.
The whole can be much, much greater than the sum of its parts.”*

Thich Nhat Hanh

“The whole community is better off when everyone contributes.”

**Owen Pfaendtner,
CEO of Macomb Family Services**

These words of wisdom may seem obvious, as you open this Discussion Guide—one of a series of such guides that help readers explore six books about innovative early-learning programs. But, scholars studying America’s social network are warning that, as a population, we are setting new records for polarization. In 2017, for example, self-described Democrats and Republicans are expressing disdain for members of the other party with an intensity not seen in 50 years of polling. The gap between rich and poor is yawning. Anxieties about immigration and cultural diversity are sparking dangerous new waves of rhetoric and, in some cases, public confrontations. We all need non-partisan opportunities that remind us of the strong American tradition of sharing through community relationships.

The full title of this book is: *Building Healthy Relationships in Early Learning—Macomb Family Services’ approach to nurturing development of social emotional health and school readiness in early childhood*. The book is available from online booksellers, including Amazon in print and Kindle editions.

(<https://www.amazon.com/Building-Healthy-Relationships-Early-Learning/dp/1942011571/>)

Wayne Baker, a nationally known expert on American values who serves on the senior faculty of the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, wrote the preface to this book. He appeals to readers to remember and revive the American spirit of what he calls “generalized reciprocity,” which is sharing our energies and resources in the community without any expectation of a specific payback. We share because it’s the right thing to do. We share because we have a sense that “the whole community is better off when everyone contributes,” as MFS’s Owen Pfaendtner puts it. Baker says that’s not an idealistic dream. He writes:

“For centuries, barn raisings were a common experience across America. They still take place in some communities—particularly among the Amish—either to help a young family get started or after tornadoes or fires have swept across the landscape. Millions of Americans, today, have picked up a hammer for what may be the modern equivalent: Habitat for Humanity.”

These classic examples of community relationships—what scholars like Baker call “generalized reciprocity” and what many people today refer to as “paying it forward”—are not lost to past generations. Habitat for Humanity and a host of other sharing programs are alive and well! And they are vital contributors to a healthy community. Baker writes, “Beyond the wood and nails and the final structure, what the community really builds is a powerful sense of gratitude and atmosphere of positive emotions.”

Now more than ever, such efforts need to be lifted up and encouraged nationwide. United Way for Southeastern Michigan is proud to highlight these six early-learning programs, including Macomb Family Services, because we know they work! Rigorous evaluation over a number of years proves that they shape children’s lives and the entire community in positive ways.

Want to inspire your community? Organize a Discussion!

Step 1 is inviting people to discuss what we are presenting to readers in these books.

Get a copy of the colorful Macomb Family Services book. People will want to look at that cover of children enjoying themselves as they learn. Invite them to flip through the book. They'll likely stop for a moment at the "comic book" illustrations of steps you can use in your own neighborhood. Then ask something like this: "Can we talk about a fresh idea I've discovered that's part of this book about *Building Healthy Relationships*? This would be a fun, inspiring discussion for us to have as friends. The materials are free for us to use. Our community certainly could use a reminder about building up our relationships."

Are you confronting especially difficult challenges in your neighborhood? You should know that all six of these books—including the Macomb Family Services program—originated in neighborhoods wrestling with the impact of poverty, low rates of literacy and recent immigration. Our metro-Detroit region has become nationally known for the creative—and effective—responses by the talented professionals working for nonprofits focused on early childhood issues. We're finding solutions that can work for you, too.

Who might join the discussion? Look around you. Did you know that millions of small groups meet every week across the United States? Group settings include congregations, schools, libraries, civic centers, coffee shops, and individuals' homes. The intentions of these groups range from religious to recreational, from educational to purely social. If you propose this idea, you're likely to find interested friends in your small group.

How do you get the conversation started? Use any of the language in this Discussion Guide to get people excited. You can reproduce sections of this text in an email, a flier or as notes to share in person with your group. Point out: "We're all concerned about divisions in our country today. Let's explore this Macomb Family Services Discussion Guide. It's going to help us spread this message in our community."

Remember: This is just one in a series of guides. Look at the last page of this discussion guide for a complete list of all six books and upcoming guides. We'd love to hear your questions and ideas for spreading this news.

Learn more and download at:
www.PlaceHolder.org

A Flexible Experience: *The Road to Relationships Retreat*



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www.PlaceHolder.org

You'll find the comic book illustration on the previous page plus four more fun and helpful comic pages in our book—and as a free download accompanying this Discussion Guide.

The staff at Macomb Family Services has provided many training classes for parents and educators—and has organized many small groups over the years, including retreats. This Discussion Guide provides a step-by-step outline of an experience we call *The Road to Relationships Retreat*. However, if you are reading this Discussion Guide as a veteran group leader, we encourage you to flexibly adapt the ideas we are presenting. You may prefer to explore these ideas in a series of meetings with your group, rather than in a retreat setting. You may want to add elements or change some of the questions. Please do so!

Here is how we present these ideas:

Description: This workshop, small group experience or extended retreat focuses on the benefits, pitfalls and temptations that can prevent building good relationships—and then, encourages Signature Strengths that you can promote among your friends and colleagues as you build a healthier community.

We encourage you to dig deeper: You may already know a lot about this subject. If you are looking for further reading, many resources and significant research on healthy relationships can be found online, including in recent journal articles and books. For general readers, several of Robert J. Wicks' books contain detailed tips and checklists for healthy relationships, as well as for resiliency among caregivers. His 2010 book, *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life* (Oxford Press), is designed for individual reflection as well as workshops, and includes a six-page Questionnaire on Personal Strengths and Virtues that can be easily adapted for a retreat. Use our ideas in our book; gather more online; borrow ideas from books—and organize your own retreat.

Use our comic book illustrations: As veterans of countless workshops, training sessions and retreats, we know that fun, colorful illustrations go a long way toward helping participants remember the major ideas we are discussing. We commissioned Michigan artist Rebecca Tallarigo to create a mini-comic book for us. Along with this Discussion Guide, you are free to download the five pages of this comic and share it with participants. You can print the pages and pass them out in your group; or, you can show participants the images on a screen or hand-held device. The comic panels are almost self-explanatory and are fancifully designed to prompt smiles and encourage creativity.

The basic themes: The first page introduces our approach to personal mission statements. The next four pages invite participants to discuss the following themes.

Who will travel with you? As we say on that page of the comic: "Everyone brings talents." The comic character opens a treasure chest and asks, "What are your talents?" In your workshop or retreat, spend time talking about the relationships you hope to encourage. Are you considering a diversity of skills, of socioeconomic backgrounds, of ethnicity, of ages? Are you viewing this question through different lenses? Who might we want to invite on the journey with us?

Pitfalls! For this portion, we have drawn together a list of real dangers that people encounter as they reach out to form new relationships—especially among professionals who are bridging various disciplines and agencies. We suggest on that page that your group identify a more specific list of potential pitfalls. Be honest about your own fears in your own community! Take a look at your agency culture; is it gossipy or competitive? Sometimes we are tempted by pitfalls that can masquerade as good intentions, such as insults in the guise of venting or sarcasm in the guise of humor, but others may wind up nursing unintentional wounds. These sometimes subtle shortcomings can waylay even the most highly motivated professionals. Among overworked professionals, a common pitfall is discouragement and apathy. That dual temptation is addressed in many of Robert Wicks' books, as he encourages resiliency. Self-reflection needs to be fostered in an intentional way to increase awareness and make it easier to avoid such pitfalls.

Collaboration. We take our "strength-based approach" very seriously in all aspects of our work. So, while it is important to name and discuss potential dangers, fears and temptations, we also

recommend that you include, in your workshop or retreat, a rich discussion of the values that contribute to collaboration. In the next comic panel, our team shows those values blossoming along our *Road to Relationships*. Discussing these values—and then asking your staff to add their own phrases to the list—will encourage a collective mindfulness about behaviors that will wind up strengthening the entire team.

Signature Strengths! Finally, we encourage you to wrap up your journey down our *Road to Relationships* by listing your group’s Signature Strengths. What might be involved in that discussion? Please see the next section of this Discussion Guide for more resources.

So Much More Inside the Book

If you are developing your own *Road to Relationships* discussion or retreat, you may want to share some of the remarkable, inspiring resources within these pages. Here are some examples of what you can find in the book.

Planting Healing Seeds: Among the nationally known experts recommending these ideas is Dr. Robert J. Wicks, author of more than a dozen of his own books on resilience and well being among the men and women who regularly serve our communities. Through his writing and training events, Wicks specializes in counseling a wide range of public servants, among them: health-care workers, teachers, caregivers and men and women in military service. In pages 71-74, Dr. Wicks writes about the importance of this particular focus on shoring up the relationships within a community. Here is a brief excerpt from Wicks’ chapter:

“This book comes out of Michigan at the right time. Wherever I travel around the world, I find people who are doing very difficult work to help people in need—but they often find that their biggest challenge is finding the resiliency to keep going with their work, day after day. I am a caregiver for other caregivers. I work with highly motivated individuals who often are serving in communities where so much trauma surrounds them that they wind up feeling fatigued. Sometimes, they are so drained that they feel like failures, even when it’s obvious to me that they are not. ... In offering friendship and community and an opportunity to become intrigued again about the possibilities of life, that’s what we can do to help our world: Together, we can plant healing seeds.”

Why Does This Matter? Further along in the book, on page 84, you’ll find a very helpful section written by Christine Zimmerman, widely known for her work in early childhood programs with a special focus on social and emotional development. Christine’s chapter is titled, *Why Do Relationships Matter So Much?* Christine directly addresses community leaders and professionals who may be considering using ideas from this book. She writes in part: “In our field of expertise, research confirms a link between the strength of professional relationships and the range of positive program outcomes, for the adults who are the caregivers—parents and teachers—as well as for our children.”

What are Signature Strengths? Starting on page 97, Christine Zimmerman describes “Signature Strengths” as she has explored this important theme over many years. She advises readers: “Don’t simply accept our list of Signature Strengths. We’re simply offering suggestions. ... Here are six Signature Strengths that our Macomb Family Services team strives to embody in its work.” Over the next seven pages, Christine describes in detail those key values.

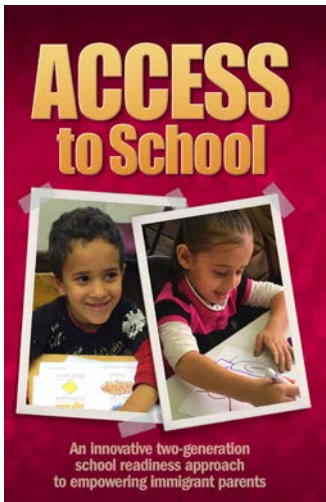
Expand the Conversation

If you've read this book, used this Discussion Guide and care about these issues, then please help with the larger overall effort. Now more than ever, Americans need to be reminded of the challenges we face in early childhood education and nutrition. With funding cuts and shifting public priorities nationwide, assistance from community-based nonprofits will be urgently needed. You can help meet these needs by letting others know about your personal interest—and the potential of group discussions. Many men and women feel isolated in their concern for the welfare of young children. Simply letting other people know of your concern can help to touch off a growing community-wide awareness.

One way you can expand the conversation is by visiting the book's Amazon page and adding a review of the book. Of course, we hope you've found this book helpful, so we welcome Amazon reviews that may prompt others to pick up a copy and extend the discussion.

But that's not all! Share your thoughts on Facebook or in your own newsletters. *(Note: You are free to quote from our book in a blog post or column you might write about your experience in reading and discussing Regie's Rainbow Adventure. We want you to share these important ideas far and wide.)*

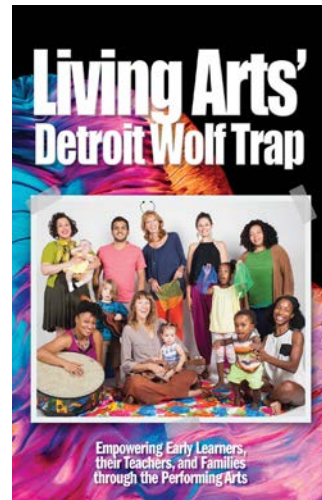
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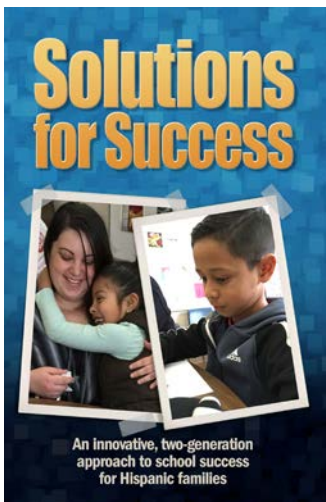
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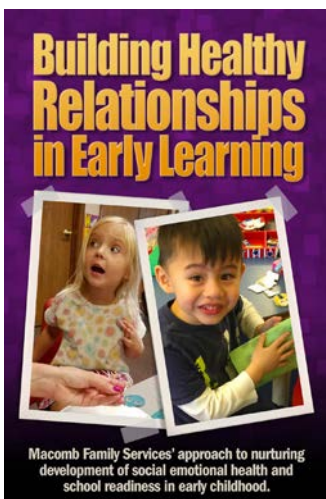
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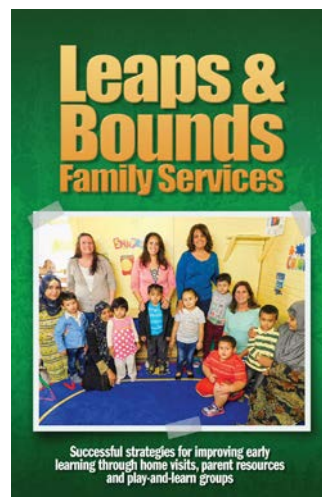
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Discussion Guide:
Play & Learn



Leaps & Bounds Family Services
ISBN: 978-1942011675

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Building a Better Nonprofit

Discussion Guide:
Home Visiting



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