



Community-Led Data Project Round Two Findings

**2025 Community Cafes - Emotional Health
King County, Washington
Community Cafe Collaborative (CCC),
in partnership with Best Starts for Kids (BSK)**

Prepared December 2025

Purpose and Context

The Community Café Collaborative (CCC), in partnership with Best Starts for Kids (BSK), conducted a second round of community-led data gathering Cafés across King County, Washington, focused on emotional health and wellness. These Cafés were designed to deepen understanding of how families and communities define, experience, and support emotional well-being. The Café hosts were mindful of the contexts of cultural stigma, intergenerational trauma, systemic barriers, and a heightened climate of political and social stress.

This second round of Cafés intentionally built upon findings from the first round of Community Cafés. Those Cafés focused on experiences in accessing healthcare and highlighted a widespread need for improved mental health supports while also revealing discomfort, stigma, and mistrust associated with the term “mental health.” In response, CCC and Café hosts reframed the work using language such as emotional health, emotional well-being, mental balance, and wellness. These terms resonated more strongly across communities and created safer entry points for honest dialogue.

Across this phase of the project, eight community-specific Cafés were hosted by community members, alongside two larger, in-person, cross-community gatherings organized by CCC. All Cafés were grounded in the Community Café model, centering lived experience, cultural relevance, relationship-building, and shared leadership.

Project Design and Community Leadership

This round of Cafés was designed, budget-managed, and facilitated by community members, with coaching and technical support from the CCC Leadership Team. Cafés were held in both virtual and in-person formats, increasing accessibility and allowing communities to choose the format that best fit their needs and safety considerations.

Community members served in multiple paid and leadership roles, including:

- Café hosts and facilitators
- Notetakers and storytellers
- Technical support providers
- Childcare providers
- Caterers and cultural food preparers

CCC supported both seasoned and first-time Café hosts, offering coaching and accompaniment rather than prescriptive direction. Hosts were encouraged to adapt guiding questions to reflect their community's language, values, cultural norms, and lived realities.

The two CCC-hosted in-person gatherings expanded the reach of the Cafés:

- **March 2025 Gathering:** Featured keynote speaker Erin Jones, a youth-created graphic recording, and a youth-led Café focused on turning to community for emotional support.
 - Adults, youth, and children shared how community plays a critical role in reducing isolation, fostering safety, and supporting emotional well-being. Adult participants emphasized relying on neighbors, coworkers, schools, faith spaces, libraries, childcare providers, and informal networks for connection, information, resources, and mutual aid, noting that in-person relationships, consistency, and shared responsibility build trust over time.
 - Also highlighted was the importance of showing up, being reliable, sharing resources and information freely, modeling vulnerability, and addressing trauma, inequity,

- and hard conversations honestly to strengthen communities for the future.
- Youth participants underscored the need for trusted relationships, safe environments, time, and encouragement from adults to build confidence and ask for help, while children shared that feeling supported at school comes from engaging learning, caring teachers, play, and comfort, along with a desire for more flexibility, creativity, and hands-on experiences.
 - Across all ages, participants affirmed that strong, trustworthy communities are built through presence, openness, shared care, and creating spaces where people feel safe, seen, and supported.
- **July 2025 Gathering:** Centered wellness practices, including facilitated discussion and a calming bead craft incorporating essential oils.
 - Participants were asked about their hopes for emotional healing and restoration in their communities. Sentiments expressed were for stronger youth programs, expanded access to mental and physical health care, and greater support for children who are struggling. They emphasized the need for accountable and responsive leadership in schools and systems, safe and stable housing, including transitional and permanent options with after-hours care, and healthier communities with reduced substance-related harms.
 - Community members also highlighted the importance of addressing racial bias and anti-Blackness, cleaning up and caring for shared spaces, and ensuring that people feel seen, heard, and loved.
 - Overall, there was a shared desire for communities and systems that acknowledge oppression, promote equity, and invest in mental health, healing, and belonging for all.

Both gatherings included Kid Cafés, ensuring children could explore emotional health in age appropriate, creative, and supportive ways while caregivers participated fully.

Participating Communities

CCC partnered with eight self-defined, intersectional communities, recognizing that community identities are complex and overlapping. Participating communities included:

- Fathers

- Young Men / Fathers
- Young Parents
- Indigenous Latinx (including Indigenous Guatemalan communities)
- Uniquely Designed (parents and caregivers of children with disabilities)
- Kinship Families
- Latinx
- Immigrant communities

Each Café reflected the priorities, histories, and current realities of its community, including experiences with racism, immigration enforcement, disability systems, foster care, schools, healthcare access, and economic stress.

Guiding Questions

While hosts adapted questions to their context, the Cafés generally explored four core areas:

1. **Coping strategies** individuals use to manage emotional well-being
2. **Community narratives** about emotional health and how it is discussed (or avoided)
3. **How children manage emotions**, including where they seek support
4. **Ways access to emotional health supports could be improved**

Key Cross-Community Themes and Findings

1. Intergenerational Silence and Trauma

Across communities, participants described growing up in households where emotions were ignored, punished, or silenced. Common phrases included “keep it in the family,” “don’t show weakness,” and “suck it up.” Many participants connected these experiences to:

- Physical or emotional punishment
- Fear-based parenting
- Abuse or neglect
- Forced independence at young ages
- Suppression of grief, anger, or fear

Despite these histories, participants expressed a strong desire to break generational cycles and parent differently.

2. Parenting as a Catalyst for Healing

Children emerged as powerful teachers of emotional awareness. Parents shared that their children:

- Teach patience and perspective
- Prompt self-reflection and emotional regulation
- Encourage open communication
- Motivate parents to seek therapy, counseling, or support groups

Many participants described intentionally becoming “the adult I needed as a child.”

3. Safety, Trust, and Belonging

A consistent theme, especially among young people, immigrant communities, and fathers, was the need to feel safe: emotionally, culturally, and physically. Safety was described as:

- Being heard without judgment
- Knowing information won't be weaponized
- Trusting that participation won't trigger system involvement (e.g., ICE, CPS)
- Seeing facilitators and helpers who share cultural or lived experience

For Indigenous Latinx and other immigrant participants, language access, fear of deportation, and cultural mistrust significantly shaped participation and access to emotional health supports.

4. Coping Strategies Are Often Individual, Not System-Supported

Participants named a wide range of coping strategies, including:

- Prayer and spiritual practices
- Walking, exercise, and time outdoors
- Journaling, music, art, and creative expression
- Silence and isolation
- For those in the immigrant community, having an emergency plan in place in case the worst should happen
- Talking with trusted friends or family

While many found personal strategies helpful, there was a strong consensus that community-based and professional supports are difficult to access, especially those that are affordable, culturally responsive, and language-accessible.

5. Barriers to Emotional Health Supports

Across Cafés, participants identified systemic barriers, including:

- Cost and insurance limitations
- Long wait times for appointments
- Lack of bilingual or culturally responsive providers
- High turnover among therapists
- Fear of discrimination or judgment
- Technology and literacy barriers
- Immigration status concerns

Participants emphasized that availability alone is not enough and that trust, cultural relevance, and consistency matter.

Impact of the Community Café Model

Participants described the Cafés as:

- Healing
- Validating
- Similar to a counseling session
- A rare non-judgmental space
- A reminder that “I am not alone”

Key impacts included:

- Increased willingness to talk about emotional health
- Peer learning and shared strategies
- Reduced isolation, especially among men and caregivers
- Strengthened sense of community and mutual support
- Renewed interest in therapy, counseling, and group spaces

Many participants expressed a desire for ongoing Cafés, more frequent gatherings, and opportunities to host Cafés within their own communities.

Presentation slide deck: https://www.canva.com/design/DAG75vsxC9w/XZ9Ka4g74zTeCR0CTNF0eg/view?utm_content=DAG75vsxC9w&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=uniquelinks&utlId=h7803565143