

Podcast Interview Transcript

Madelyn H. Labella, Janelle Leppa, and Larkin Strong

Welcome to *Progress in Community Health Partnerships'* latest episode of our Beyond the Manuscript podcast. In each volume of the Journal, the editors select one article for our Beyond the Manuscript post-study interview with the authors. Beyond the Manuscript provides the authors the opportunity to tell listeners what they would want to know about the project beyond what went into the final manuscript.

In this episode of Beyond the Manuscript, Associate Editor, Larkin Strong, interviews Madelyn Labella and Janelle Leppa, authors of “Promoting Resilience by Improving Children’s Sleep: Feasibility among Families Living in Supportive Housing.”

Larkin Strong:

Well, thank you Janelle and Madelyn for joining me in this interview. We’ll go ahead and get started. So the first question is that the manuscript describes how the partnership was initiated by the Simpson Housing Services staff who approached researchers at the University of Minnesota. Could you please talk more about how this happened and how the partnership came to be?

Madelyn Labella:

Sure, this is Madelyn. I am a doctoral candidate at the University, so I am on that side of things. And I was put in touch with Janelle by my academic advisor Ann Masten, who does a lot of research on understanding what helps children and families who are dealing with housing instability – homelessness or frequent moves – what helps them to be successful and resilient. And she had really identified self-regulation as one of those big factors and Janelle can talk a little bit more about how that sparked her interests and made her want to get connected to our research team.

Janelle Leppa:

Yes, thank you Madelyn. So, this is Janelle and yes at Simpson Housing Services we have been long fans of Dr. Masten and the amazing research team that she works with. They’ve done – I guess they’ve made enormous contributions towards work – really looking at the unique needs that children who’ve experienced homelessness have experienced and so, it’s something that we had benefitted from greatly. And I had the opportunity to run into Dr. Ann Masten at some point and we initiated a conversation around you know, kind of philosophy around her research, what some of their findings have been and just thought we really should get to know each other better and so I think there was some observation on both parts. She sent some of her research team to some of our family events and also we—my staff and I—had the opportunity to go and observe some of their, not sure what the word would be, some of maybe like a workshop in progress with families.

Janelle Leppa:

And so I really had a high level of confidence going in and so I'm not sure, Madelyn, I'm not sure if it was with you, but I initially talked with somebody about how over and over again, I am hearing from parents that sleep is a struggle. Sleep – transitioning from an environment where families were sleeping in shelters often meant that families were in one room sleeping together and it was challenging to make a transition to sleeping maybe in a situation where you know the mom or dad had a room and the kids were in different spaces. A lot of just, you know children moving from place to place can throw a wrench in routine and so families struggled there. But also just how to settle before bed and I saw an amazing webinar, I think it was called like “Sleepless in America,” and it made these incredible connections between what just one or two hours left of sleep a night, how that can really impact a child in their motor mechanics and like their ability to focus.

And it was just like seeing so many of the concerns that parents had raised and of course academics—children who have experienced high mobility in homelessness tend to be significantly behind their peers and so I started to wonder how is that impacting things and of course we had this amazing resource, right here in our community. And so we reached out, we explained some of our, kind of concerns and needs that we've heard from parents and this wonderful team was completely receptive and engaged us in further conversations about how we could partner together to research this more and hopefully bring a strategy that would be immediately beneficial to families.

Larkin Strong:

Ok, great! Very interesting. So it sounds like you recognize some of the concerns within the housing community as it had been expressed to you by parents and reached out to the University.

Janelle Leppa:

Exactly.

Larkin Strong:

Were there any concerns on either side, the University or Simpson Housing Services about getting involved in this work?

Madelyn Labella:

I would say from the University side there was primarily a lot of excitement. Our research team and Dr. Masten and over the course of her career has done a lot of work identifying what helps families show resilience and particularly what helps young school-age kids show resilience. So she had done a lot of great basic work and had a long standing collaboration with Minneapolis Public Schools and local homeless shelters to really lay that foundation, and at this stage in her career and in our lab program I think there's a real push and a real desire to make that knowledge available and practical for community partners to use.

So Dr. Masten had started doing a research project with training self-regulation in the shelter and I think those – and in other community partner sites—and I think those are the workshops that Janelle was referring to. And we saw this as another really perfect opportunity to translate some of the basic research and start to do more applied research – seeing if we could actually help improve children and families lives hopefully, improve their self regulation, by improving the likelihood of getting a good night's sleep. And it fit really well with my own interests, so to hear from Janelle that that was what the parents were asking for, felt really powerful. So from the University side, there was a lot of excitement. Maybe Janelle you can speak a little bit more about the community reaction?

Janelle Leppa:

Absolutely. So yes, I would say that there was also a lot of excitement on the end of Simpson Housing Services. We also had some skepticism and some concern. We had a couple of staff that I think did a really great job of asking lots and lots of questions. Really wanting to make sure that we weren't putting families in a situation where they would be in any way exploited or maybe, you know, wouldn't benefit directly from this study but it would be seen more as: "Well, you're a research participant, but you're one of many and" – you know I guess naturally we work with people who are advocates for families. And so I think a lot of really important questions were asked and basically this amazing team passed every question with flying colors and we could tell that their hearts were absolutely in the right place. They very much wanted this to be very tangible and meaningful for families and so we were in a great position to move forward.

Madelyn Labella:

And from the University perspective, I have to say I found that to be so valuable to get that little bit of respectful push back from the community partners. And like Janelle described that some of the staff really thoughtfully pointed out that it was really important to them that we see Simpson Housing as a place of stability and a as a window of opportunity for these families to be in stable consistent housing and hopefully to be making positive changes. So there was a desire to make sure that we were framing our research questions in terms of building strengths and moving forward and there wasn't a strong – like an overemphasis on the stressful experiences they've had or the negative impacts that poverty can have on sleep, on family routines, on children's self regulation.

And that was really helpful in reminding me how important framing is and how much I wanted to emphasize and build on the strengths of Simpson and the strengths of these families and not use language that might imply that I was seeing this mainly as a deficit issue. And I really appreciated the protectiveness of Simpson Housing in insuring that the families who were involved in this study were directly benefitting themselves in addition to hopefully providing valuable information for the future. And with their sort of, prodding – I mean I hope that we would have thought of this anyway, but maybe not – we were able to do more direct benefits in terms of offering consultations from the developmental behavioral pediatrician on the team to talk through sleep issues with any families, to insure that people, that families and children got direct benefits from this partnership as well.

Janelle Leppa:

Very well said, maybe if I could add one thing about communicating with the families then because we set it up where Simpson Housing would share that this study was available to families and then families could opt in if they felt like that would be a good fit or something that they'd want to participate in. And I would say from the family side the response was really overwhelmingly positive. Obviously, it was wonderful to have something that families had put out there, parents had said, "Hey I'm concerned about this, I'd like some information," and to have a response especially a response by such a well-respected research team. But also there was an element of: "I'm going to contribute to something that will help other parents." And that was really important to families as well.

Larkin Strong:

Great, well we'll move onto the next question, so could you please tell us more about the relaxation enhancing CD and what it is about the stories or other information that's on the CD that helps to prepare children for sleep?

Madelyn Labella:

Sure, so the CD was “Indigo Dreams,” which is commercially available by Lori Lite and she has a few CD’s and few books in this sort of line that guide children through these child friendly narratives that are kind of fanciful and involve animals or mermaids. But what happens in the stories is that one of the characters coaches one of the other characters kind of through a relaxation technique, so either through deep breathing or through progressive muscle relaxation. Just these different techniques that we have to help people relax their bodies and minds but packaged in this really kind of appealing child friendly way. And I am in a joint child development and clinical psych program and I had found that resource, both when I was trying to help settle children in advance of their study sessions in the homeless shelter so to help them transition and calm down, but also with children that I was seeing for therapy who you know were anxious, or a bit hyperactive, and needed some guidance on how to use these techniques. So I just thought this is such an easy usable resource, this could really be built into a bedtime routine and could help give tools to children and give language to parents on how to help coach their children through those skills.

Larkin Strong:

And Janelle, do you have anything to add to that from the experiences of the families perhaps?

Janelle Leppa:

Sure, absolutely. The response by families to the CD was fantastic. Parents said that they sometimes – I had a couple parents who mentioned actually using the CD themselves to go to sleep which makes a lot of sense because it’s really really calming and it’s just a very cute comforting story. And for the kids, yeah it is fanciful it is really accessible and sweet and calm and I can say, you know personally I have used this with my daughter and she’s now 7 and she actually just came down a couple weeks ago, “Mom can you turn on that caterpillar story, I think I’m really gonna need it tonight.” And so yeah it’s fantastic and I would highly recommend it to other parents.

Larkin Strong:

Great, ok and then let’s conclude with a question sort of about what has come out of this collaboration, so the manuscript describes additional collaborations that stemmed from the pilot work, such as, you all describe a boot camp to improve children’s executive function, a grant proposal for an augmented sleep promotion intervention and also a collaboration with University of Minnesota’s residence program. And I’m wondering, you can elaborate on those or since the writing of the manuscript can you share on sort of what’s happened since then and where you might see things headed in the future?

Madelyn Labella:

Yeah, maybe, do you want to take this first Janelle?

Janelle Leppa:

Sure, yeah and then you could fill in too. So yeah, a few really exciting things have happened since. One being that we did have an opportunity to have a summer enrichment program for children, really based on executive functioning and it was kind of a preschool program geared at three, four, five and we had some six year olds who would just come down for, I think it was 90 minutes per day, four days a week. And play some very fun executive functioning games and do some calming activities. It has been a great success and we have since repeated it, I think we started it two summers ago and have – it’s still going on this summer again. So that was one fantastic outcome.

Janelle Leppa:

Another piece was something that we refer to as a pediatric home visiting program, where resident pediatricians at the University of Minnesota shadow some of our early childhood education staff in their home visits. And it's really a win, win, win for every one because for our families they have a very knowledgeable pediatrician coming into their home where they can one on one ask questions that they might have. You know sometimes nutrition related, sometimes sleep related, sometimes wanting more information about medications that their child is on and maybe they have you know, some questions about how does this really work, am I administering this correctly, should we be eating food here or there after? So it's been fantastic for families to have the devoted attention. They also feel like they're giving back because we tell them, "Oh this person is very much in training and you're really gonna be helping them out too in their education to have this visit."

We've heard positive feedback from the pediatric residents saying, you know, it really opened their eyes to some of the realities that families who are facing significant poverty and homelessness and – but also being able to see a lot of the strengths that families have and reducing maybe assumptions or stereotypes that they might have about families who've experienced homelessness. So it's great for them and for our staff too, it's just been a wonderful resource of being able to ask questions of pediatricians and kind of neutral learning there too.

Madelyn Labella:

And then from the University side of things we're – a member of our research team Dr. Andrew Barnes is pursuing future grants dedicated to sleep promotion and would really like to scale up, sort of building on this initial intervention to have even a little bit more targeted information around sleep that could be delivered to community sites, like Simpson and perhaps even to families who are currently dealing with homelessness. So the quest for funding is ongoing and in the meantime we are also doing some more basic data collection based on some of our experience at Simpson. We kind of modified our strategy for using sleep actigraphers, those sensors that can collect indicators and identify, quantify about how much time families have been asleep in conjunction with sleep diaries. So we are getting that information from families who are currently homeless, from both children and parents as well and we're definitely seeing that the struggles with sleep are cross cutting and can be pretty profound. So we are hoping to be able to share some general information about that with the shelters we collaborate with as well and are thinking as well about how we might be able to intervene with currently homeless families as well as formerly homeless families who are in more stable settings, like Simpson. So lots more to learn and definitely a commitment to being able to develop and disseminate hopefully pretty easy and efficient, interventions that families can really use to help improve sleep.

Larkin Strong:

Alright wonderful. Well thank you all so much for joining me in this interview.

Madelyn Labella:

Thank you.

Janelle Leppa:

Thank you.

