

Forrest Gardner
Testimony for Senate H & W
March 26th, 2024

Good Morning. My name is Forrest Gardner and I'm here to testify in support of Parent Child Center Network's 2025 Grant request. Me, my wife Nicole and my 5 year old daughter, Ivy have been regular clients of the Janet S. Munt Family Room since 2018.

During the past 5 years, our family has engaged with a wide range of the programs and supports offered by the Family Room. Shortly after Ivy was born in the summer of 2018, Nicole attended baby massage with Ivy at a time when it was critical for her to have social connection with other parents. Later in 2022, Ivy attended the Family Room preschool program after I made the difficult decision to leave work and stay home with her full time. In June 2023, Ivy was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at which point our whole family began attending the Family Room's Saturday morning support group for parents of children on the spectrum. Around this same time, I began meeting regularly with the Family Room's fatherhood coordinator and have been participating in a weekly workshop aimed at helping fathers reflect on their past experiences and build their parenting skills.

Every community in Vermont should have a program like the Family Room. Being able to access the many programs of the Family Room at no cost has been a real lifeline for our family during one of the most stressful and rewarding periods of our lives. Many words and phrases come to mind when I think of what our family has gained from the Family Room's programming: community; comradery; education; and normalization of the experience of being a parent. For Nicole and I as parents, the Family Room's two generational approach has been so critical. All of the Family Room's programming for adults has a built in childcare component, which is a boon for both parents and children. For example, when Nicole and I attend the Autism support group, Ivy gets to connect and play with other children in the Family Room's super cool indoor playground while we have the opportunity to sit in a room next door and connect with other parents about the stresses, worries and joys that come along with parenting a child on the spectrum.

Ivy's time in the Family Room preschool was such a joy and here too the program's two generation approach really shines. Not only did Ivy get to practice her social skills in a safe, loving environment with other children her age, but she also formed deep connections with the adult volunteers who help staff the program. These days Ivy is thriving in kindergarten and, despite her diagnosis, has a rich social life and loves going to school every day. The safe, loving environment provided by the Family Room laid the foundation for that success.

Please grant the Parent Child Center Network's request for funding. The parents of Vermont need you to do so. Thank you.