

# Circle of Security Parenting™



Two-year report January 2019 – December 2020

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Commissioned by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation



Interdisciplinary Center for Program Evaluation

*Collaborate. Evaluate. Improve.*



# A History of Circle of Security Parenting™ in Nebraska



\*The Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Special Education (Part C) provided funding for scholarships which supported 80 individuals to attend from across the state.

Since 2014, Rooted in Relationships (RiR) has continued to provide systems-level support for COSP. Support consists of building a stronger statewide website ([www.necosp.org](http://www.necosp.org)), utilizing common evaluation and marketing tools, convening a state level COSP leadership team, distributing a quarterly newsletter.

\*\*RiR continued to build capacity for reflective consultation to support facilitators via a pilot process approved by Circle of Security International. Full implementation of this model began in 2017.

# Circle of Security Parenting™ (COSP) Evaluation



Nebraska's evaluation of COSP includes a standardized evaluation process. These data were submitted to Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) or Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI). Participants complete at the end of the COSP sessions, a pre-post retrospective survey (available in both English and Spanish) that was co-developed by MMI and Circle of Security International. This 9-item survey asks participants to assess their parenting stress, parent-child relationship, and parenting skills. In addition, facilitators complete a survey

that describes the session logistics and provides feedback on the session and their own reflective consultation. Attendance data is submitted for each COSP series.

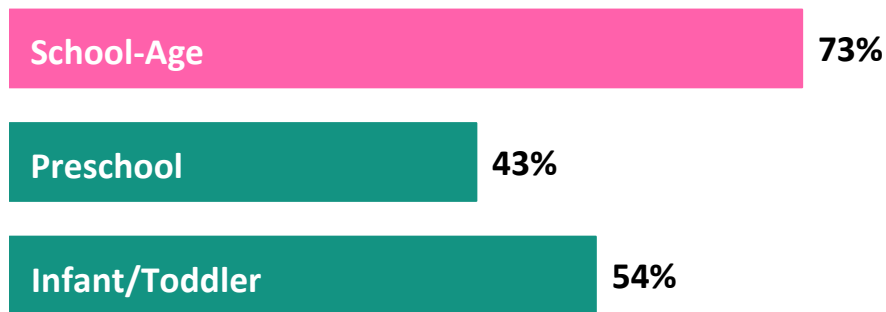
The evaluation results presented in this report are not representative of all COSP offerings that occurred in Nebraska. COSP programs that are funded via Nebraska Children and Families Foundation are required to submit evaluation data and other facilitators are encouraged to use the evaluation tools and submit their data for inclusion in the statewide data pool. Evaluation data was submitted for 94 COSP programs that were completed in 23 counties. Most (55%) of the offerings were sponsored by Rooted in Relationships or Child Well-Being communities (NCFF Initiatives). Other primary sponsors submitting data included KidSquad (Omaha), Behavioral Health Regions (statewide), Department of Health and Human Services (statewide), Learning Community (Omaha), Nebraska Child Abuse and Prevention Funds, and Sixpence (statewide).

COSP programs were provided in a variety of settings including schools, private practice offices, churches, child care centers, virtually, and community centers. Supports were provided at some of the sessions to help participants to engage in COSP including child care (25%), food (36%), and incentives (33%). Few sessions provided transportation (3%). In addition to participation in COSP, many families were referred by their facilitators for counseling, health services, and social service resources.

## Who participated in COSP?

A total of 504 participants completed the evaluation surveys from the 94 COSP programs held across the state. Throughout the analyses, there will be different numbers of participants that completed each item. The majority (94%) of the participants in the COSP sessions were parents. Other groups represented included: grandparents (3%), foster parents (2%), and other (1%). These participants were primarily female (70%) and in the 19-30 (36%) and 31-50 (54%) age groups. Compared to 2018, there were 10% more males participating. The participants had 1387 children and on average had three children with a range from having none to 12 children. Families were asked to report whether they had children of three different age groups, school-age, preschool, or infant/toddler. Most of the families (73%) reported having a school-aged child. Fewer reported having preschool-aged children. The majority of the children (58%) were eligible for Child Care Subsidy or Free and Reduced Lunch.

### Participants had children that spanned a wide-range of ages.



n=504

Both the race and the ethnicity of the participants were reported. Most of the participants were white (race) (85%) with 24% noting their ethnicity as Hispanic. These results suggest that there has been good outreach to the Hispanic community as 9% of the state population is Hispanic.

### COSP served large percentages of parents who were white.

24% of the participants were Hispanic.



n=471

## Why did individuals participate in COSP?

Participants joined COSP for a variety of reasons. Primarily, parents were interested in improving their parenting skills, supporting their children emotionally and/or improving their relationships with their children. As one participant stated, “To help my family get stronger” and “to help break the parenting cycle that I was raised.” Another expressed, “I wanted to learn more positive ways to parent, especially in tough situations.” Some parents sought out the COSP to support them in addressing a special need of their child, such as challenging behaviors, dealing with trauma, or an understanding of their child’s needs as it relates to their disability (e.g., Attention Deficit Disorder).

Many found out about the COSP through “word of mouth” from friends or co-workers. Others joined COSP as part of a court requirement to “get my children back.” “The state required me to take it, but I’m grateful I took it!” Many parents were referred by other family members (e.g., wife) or professionals (e.g., social service/child care providers or therapists). Several commented that they decided to participate as a couple so that they can “parent on the same page.” Providers participated in COSP to have a better understanding of what the program is offering their families they work with, better understand their own experiences/relationships within their family, and/or to better serve the children they work with.

## What were the participants’ outcome of engaging in COSP?

Participants were asked about parenting stress, their relationships with their children, and confidence in their parenting skills in a retrospective pre-post survey. A total of 504 individuals completed the survey. The results of the data were analyzed in two different ways. First, a statistical analysis (a paired t-test) was completed to determine if there was a significant change in participants’ perception by the end of the COSP series across the program identified outcomes. There were significant positive differences found between overall parent-child interaction scores at the beginning of the group ( $M=2.96$ ,  $SD=.771$ ) and scores at the group’s conclusion [ $(M=4.37$   $SD=.477)$ ;  $t(477)=-36.801$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=1.684$ , two-tailed test]. These results suggest a strong meaningful effect size.



“This class is amazing! I will carry this with me for the rest of my life!”

A Parent

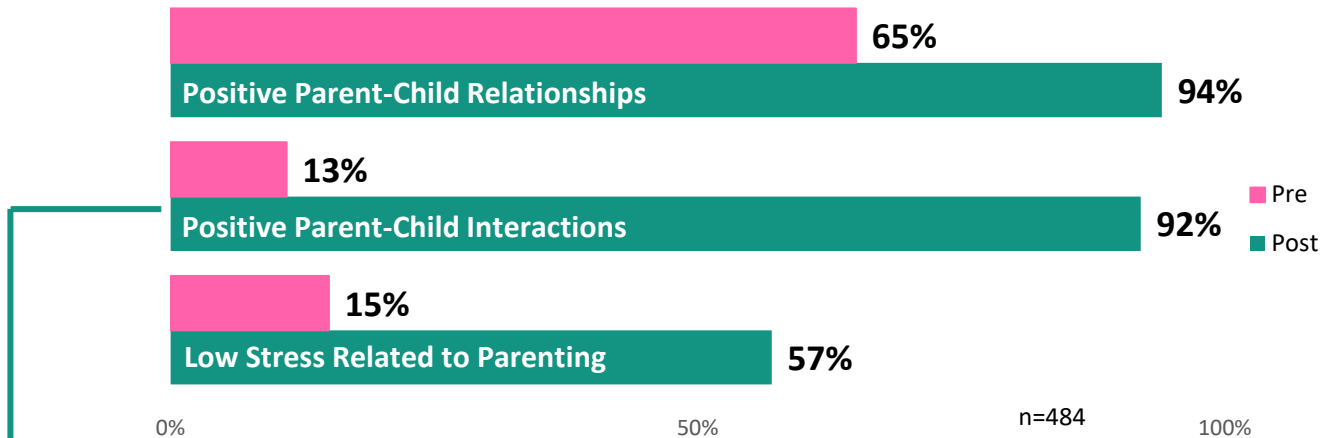
Of interest was the degree that outcomes were different dependent on the structure of the COSP (in-person vs. virtual). An independent t-test was completed to see if there was a significant difference between the in-person and online groups. The results found although both groups performed positively on the parenting subscale of the survey, the parents (m=4.65 on a five point scale) who participated in the online sessions scored significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) than parents (m=4.46) who participated in the in-person sessions. It is hypothesized that these findings may reflect the benefit that small groups has on the participant’s experience.

The second analysis examined the percentage of participants who rated their skills positively in the three outcomes areas (a rating of agreed or strongly agreed), after the conclusion of the COSP series. The results found high percentages of participants rated their parenting skills and their relationship with their children very positively by the final session. Slightly over half (57%) of the parents reported low stress related to their parenting at the end of the COSP sessions; an increase from the pre-assessment, where only 15% reported low stress related to their parenting. These results suggest a decrease in parenting-related stress after participation in COSP. Many of the parents (65%) began the training with strong relationships with their children with almost all (94%) noting a positive relationship with their child at the conclusion. The most gains were made in the areas of positive parent-child interactions in which they changed from 13% with a positive rating at the beginning of the COSP program and 92% rating their overall parenting skills positively at the end of the program.



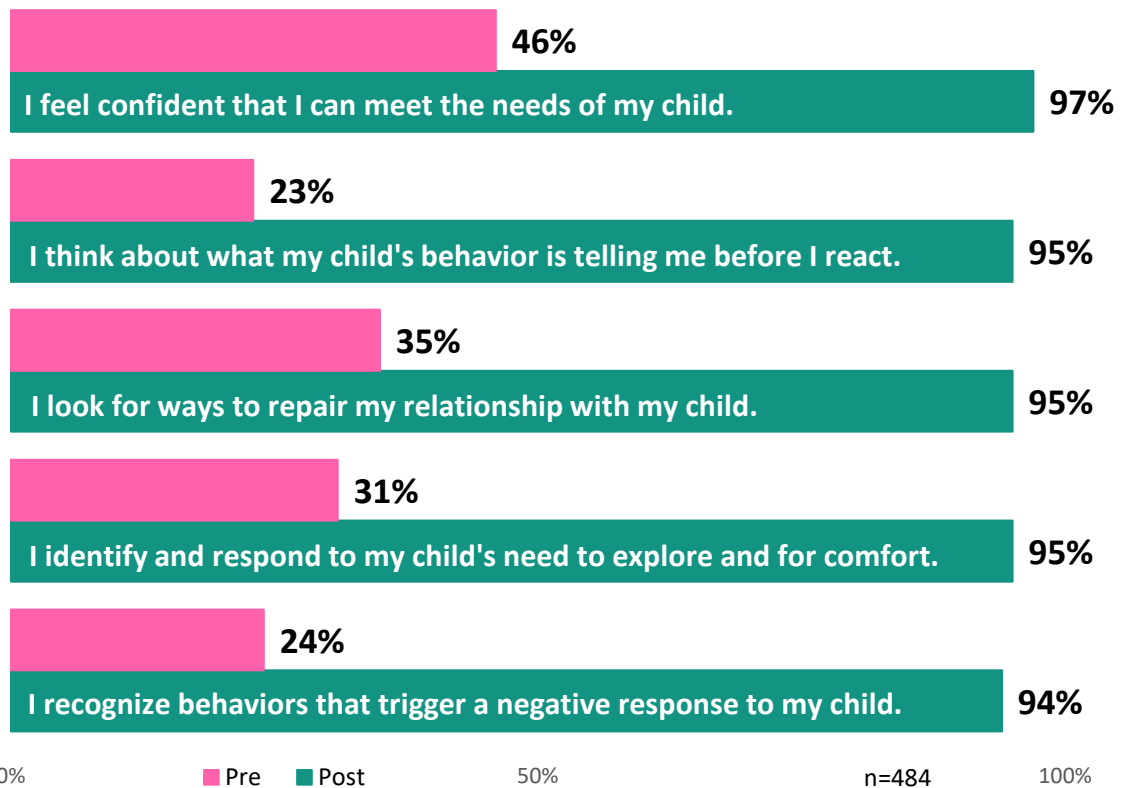
**Most of the participants met the program goal in adopting positive parent-child interactions and had positive parent-child relationships.**

Parenting stress was lowered by the end of the COSP session.



**Positive Parent-Child Interaction Items: Parents make gains across all areas.**

The most gains were made using the child's behavior to understand their needs and recognizing the triggers for a negative response to their child.





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## A Parent Success Story

*One participant began COSP talking about her struggles with her 2-year-old. She described him as very clingy, she couldn't leave the room without him crying or hitting his head on the floor. By week seven, she reported improvement. She said she began being more aware of her own feelings when her child became upset. She also got him more involved in outside activities and their relationship has greatly improved by the end of the program.*

A COSP facilitator

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## What did participants tell us about their experience?

A total of 497 participants completed the satisfaction survey. Participants were very positive about their COSP experience, using descriptors such as “eye-opening”, “uplifting”, “awesome”, and “very helpful.” Many of the participants noted that the sessions were very informative with the facilitator making the “material relatable.” Several commented that the instructors helped “members interact and share personal experiences with each other.” Another participant indicated that “seeing that I am not alone with parenting has been refreshing.” One parent who experienced one of the virtual sessions, noted that the “small group made it much easier to be open and honest about the experiences.” Overall, they viewed COSP as enjoyable and interesting.

“The open discussion was great because it helps you realize you're not the only one struggling and who isn't perfect.”

A parent

Many commented on the benefits of participating in COSP, specifically how it helped them to gain parenting skills, improve their ability to meet their child's needs, or improve their relationship with their children. The sessions helped participants learn about their own behaviors, thoughts, and experiences. This helped them to identify changes that they could make that led to better relationships with their children. One parent commented that it “helped me with the process of thinking before reacting.” Several commented that COSP helped them “look at my child's behavior through a different perspective” and gave them tools to “help my child organize his feelings.”

“This has made me feel more confident in my ability to repair my relationship with my daughter and not make the same mistakes with my son. Thank you.”

A parent



Providers (e.g., social service workers and child care providers) have always joined the traditional COSP sessions as part of their continuing education. The purpose of their participation was to help them reflect on their own experience of being parented and how that influences their interactions with children and families. Providers who participated in COSP found that it helped them personally, as well as, helped them understand what families were learning. For both groups of providers, the experience helped them interact with families differently than before COSP. Social service workers were also able to use the same verbiage with families that they had heard in COSP, which helped families “feel safe and secure.” Child care providers were also able to reflect on how their own experiences influenced their interactions with children in their care. One teacher was really able to “confront her own attachment and trauma-based reactionary behavior and move into a place of reflection.”

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### *A Child Care Teacher Success Story*

*When teachers participated in COSP, it served as a great opportunity for the teaching team to bond and to come together in a space of vulnerability that allowed them to learn more about themselves and about each other. They were able to reflect on how their upbringing impacts how they operate in the classroom with children, families, and with each other.*

*A COSP facilitator*

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Participants were asked to rate two questions that were related to their satisfaction with the implementation of COSP. Overall, the participants rated the group format (92%) and their facilitator very positively (97%).

### Participants strongly agree that COSP was a positive experience for them.



Leader did a good job working with group



Group format was helpful

Agree

Strongly Agree

n=497

### Does COSP contribute to preventing ongoing involvement with the child welfare system?

Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children (NeAEYC) in Lincoln coordinates most of the COSP referrals for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Nebraska. During 2019 and 2020, DHHS referred 281 parents, all who had an open Child and Family Services (CFS) case. Of these, 202 parents participated in and completed COSP. In partnership with DHHS, NeAEYC was able to continue to monitor the COSP referral status for these families related to reports of abuse or neglect. The results found that as of April 2021 only four of the parents were determined to have a substantiated report of abuse or neglect. These results suggest that participation in COSP supports parents and children and helps to prevent ongoing engagement with the child welfare system.

### What did COSP facilitators tell us about their experience?

Facilitators reported most parents were engaged and willing to learn. They were “kind and respectful to one another and did not pass judgement when others shared past experiences.”

As one facilitator noted, the parents “were really listening to each other and acknowledging their difficult feelings.” Overall, facilitators reported that COSP benefited both providers and parents. One predominant theme was the participants’ discovery of how their past reflected on how they interacted with their children. Participants were able to “reflect on their experience, their guilt and talk about what they could do to repair relationships in a positive way.” Many families shared how they were connecting better with their children and in return seeing fewer behavioral disruptions. Parents were recognizing their children’s needs and better responding to them. Some parents after participation in COSP recognized the need for “counseling in their lives to make their children’s lives better.”

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## A Parent Success Story

*One single parent described that her three-year-old never was able to get to bed before midnight. She taught her daughter breathing exercises and played one of the sleep meditations. The parent reported that her daughter now falls asleep within 10 minutes, which gives her some down time at night and where her daughter benefits from a good night's sleep.*

*A COSP facilitator*

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Facilitators also saw many benefits for providers, (e.g., Department of Health and Human Services social service workers, child care providers). One facilitator noted that COSP gave DHHS case workers “new lenses as to how they can identify and relate to families. They are asking different questions and observing the families before they judge.” COSP helped teachers build relationships with each other and “helped them to see challenging behavior as a signal of a need rather than open misbehavior.” Several commented that they are looking forward to piloting the new early childhood classroom version of COSP.

Facilitators reported that the resources available through Circle of Security International were helpful. There were new videos available on their website. The handbook has clear examples and strategies to help caregivers reflect on their parenting practices. Several reported that they continue to also benefit from the COSP experience by learning about themselves and the relationships in their lives.

**“I continue to learn each time I lead a class. It continues to make me a better mom and better facilitator.”**

**A Facilitator**

## CHALLENGES

Facilitators were asked to describe any challenges or suggestions for improving COSP programs. Most responses were positive, “This class was amazing and I have seen growth, not sure I would change anything.” However, a few challenges and opportunities for improvement did emerge that are summarized in the following:

- Some participants “struggled to be open to new ways of thinking about their children and their needs and recognizing that physical punishment is not a helpful way to address behaviors of children.”

- It is important to recognize that some parents want “quick fixes and answers, but by the end understood the process” needed to successfully parent.
- Although most participants were engaged throughout the sessions, some facilitators noted that occasionally there would be a parent that was hard to keep on target or who was quiet and infrequently joined in the conversations. It was important for facilitators to identify strategies to help them stay on topic and to engage participants to communicate their thoughts and feelings about what they were learning and by creating a safe environment.
- For some participants attendance inconsistencies were a challenge. Participants encountered a broad range of barriers such as lack of transportation, children’s health issues, weather, or work conflicts. Although make-up sessions were available, at times it was difficult to re-schedule these make-up sessions. Facilitators recommended that “expectations and consequences” be reviewed at the beginning of the COSP series. In additions, facilitators need to continue find ways to support attendance.

## Support for COSP Facilitators

In Nebraska, multiple layers of support are provided for COSP facilitators. Rooted in Relationships (RiR) has offered opportunities for facilitators to participate in Fidelity Coaching, Peer Reflective Consultation, and supports additional training when available. Sessions are frequently offered for question and answers about facilitation, and resources are available on the state website ([www.necosp.org](http://www.necosp.org)).

**What did facilitators tell us about their Fidelity Coaching experience?** The purpose of Fidelity Coaching is to help each facilitator to deepen their understanding of the COSP model as they practice implementing the model; help to deliver the model with fidelity; and to enhance each facilitator’s capacity to help stressed parents think in new ways about themselves and their relationships with their children.

The Fidelity Coaching structure is designed as a 9-week intervention consisting of 90 minute sessions each week with a Circle of Security International trained Fidelity coach. This is a prescriptive process which involves reflection using a Fidelity Journal that highlights topics specific to the COSP process and at the same time helps shape the facilitator’s awareness of their “shark music” and its roots. Upon completion of the two sessions of Fidelity Coaching they will receive a COSP Facilitator II endorsement by Circle of Security International.

“This (Fidelity Coaching) has been an invaluable process. I’m excited to facilitate in the future.”

A COSP Facilitator

During this past two years, nine facilitators participated in Fidelity Coaching. A retrospective pre/post survey was completed by eight facilitators to determine the degree that Fidelity Coaching supported building their capacity as facilitators. The survey is based on a five-point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Specific content of the survey focused on level of stress related to facilitating COSP, adoption of facilitating practices (e.g., identifying caregiver’s needs, helping to repair relationships), recognizing what behaviors trigger their own “shark

music, and confidence in meeting the needs of caregivers. The results found that the Fidelity Coaching experience lowered their stress and improved their facilitating practices. The overall survey score at the start of the Fidelity Coaching sessions was 3.32 (a neutral rating) and improved to 4.63 (an agree to strongly agree rating).

## What did facilitators tell us about peer reflective consultation?

All COSP facilitators were provided the opportunity to participate in peer reflective consultation via video conference. During the past two years, RiR supported four different consultants to offer reflective consultation opportunities. Consultation sessions were offered every other week throughout the year and facilitators were able to participate as available. Facilitators were asked at the completion of the last COSP session to complete a brief facilitator survey to share their experiences. Of the 22 who reported that they participated in consultation, most participated in sessions one to two times per month (41%). One facilitator noted, it was important to “reflect on myself and take reflective supervision as it helps me to be more sensitive and able to “be with” the participants.”



Facilitators were asked to evaluate their experience with peer reflective consultation at the end of each session. Overwhelmingly, the responses to this survey were very positive.

### Facilitators strongly agree that peer reflective consultation was a positive experience for them.



Participating in reflective consultation will positively impact my capacity as a COSP facilitator.



I was able to reflect on my experience as a COSP facilitator.



Group format was beneficial.

N=36

Agree

Strongly Agree

Almost all facilitators reported that peer reflective consultation helped them reflect on their experience as a COSP facilitator, positively impacted their capacity as a facilitator and being in the group was beneficial to them.

## **What was the experience of facilitators offering COSP virtually?**

With the onset of COVID-19, it became apparent that an alternative to in-person COSP needed to be found. Nebraska's COSP leadership worked with Circle of Security International to provide guidance so that COSP facilitators could implement a COSP virtual pilot in order to support families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine facilitators that were part of the pilot joined one of two focus groups to share their experiences. The following is a summary of focus group results.

### **IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES**

**Circle of Security International guidance was helpful.** Facilitators reported that the guidance on implementing COSP virtually, the handout resources, and the videos that was provided by Circle of Security International were very helpful. For those less familiar with virtual technology, this resource was even more valuable. Those that had used virtual technology used this resource less often. Overall, there were no major recommendations for additional supports. The only suggestion was a short handout for participants on “expectations for participation” in sessions. These expectations would outline such items as using the mute button when not talking, staying present (e.g., not fixing a snack or taking a phone call), and finding a quiet place in your home where you could stay in one spot for the duration of the session.

**Regular attendance.** Overall, participants' attendance was good and was not an issue for the pilot. Several indicated that they had perfect attendance. Some indicated that the sessions had to be rescheduled multiple times or there needed to have make-up sessions for multiple participants. It became evident that each facilitator had their own “rule” on how they did make-up sessions and how many absences would result in the participant not receiving a certificate. Some only allowed two absences, others rescheduled so all could participate, and others did the make-up session as part of each session. It was recommended that the state leadership team discuss and identify recommendations so that there is consistency across facilitators.

**Increased access.** Since COSP was offered remotely, it expanded access for participants who participate in COSP. The participants no longer needed to be within driving distance of the program location. For example, a facilitator could be in Lincoln and have participants from any location in the state.

### **SUCSESSES**

**Parents were engaged in the virtual process.** A key aspect of COSP is participant engagement. One of the initial concerns was whether the same level of engagement could

be obtained through a virtual platform. Some felt nervous about the process initially and it “felt a little different at first.” Initially, they were worried it would be more like teaching rather than facilitating, but that did not happen. Facilitators found that they could build up trusting relationships with the participants, who shared personal information as part of the process.

Overwhelmingly the response from the facilitators was that there was strong participant engagement. Only one had a session where it was more difficult to engage members in this virtual environment. For never having any in-person contact, facilitators were surprised that the participants opened up, revealing personal content in their online discussions. Many indicated that it was better than in-person sessions. Facilitators commented, “I made a great connection.” “It was better, more intimate.” As one facilitator summarized, “I think it is a more relaxed setting for them and us.”

When asked what contributed to this success, there were many responses. Some thought that smaller numbers in the program affected it, which had been limited to up to three per group for this virtual pilot. They suggested that perhaps it is the small size of the group that was the key and not that it was virtual. “They were willing to be pretty vulnerable with each other, more than in a larger group where it is harder to feel safe.” Another suggested that since the participants lived in different communities, there might have been more willingness to share, as they would not be seeing the other participants outside of this group.

“I was surprised how well it went and how many connections were made.”

A Facilitator

“It (COSP) still worked. That is the beauty of the circle. They don’t get the personal connections with each other, yet they still grew. It still happens.”

A Facilitator

Others suggested that by joining via a screen perhaps made it easier for individuals to share and participate. They indicated that there is research to support this even though “it goes against what is in my head that (in-person) matters.” One facilitator suggested the online mechanisms served as a “safety net.” Another facilitator reinforced this point through her experience. One of her participants, who displayed high anxiety, successfully participated in the small virtual group and would have struggled in a group of 10 or more that was typical of an in-person series.

**Unique opportunity to model and coach.** An unexpected success of this approach was to see parents interacting with their children when they interrupted the sessions. For example, one child was supposed to be playing with her Legos and was interrupting her parent. During the session, we could coach on how to apply what she was learning in the COSP sessions. “We were living it and applying it.” Opportunities like this were unique

to the virtual setting and provided an opportunity that facilitators may not get during in-person sessions. “We don’t have this same window of opportunity when they come to us.” Having the opportunity to meet with individuals in their homes, helped us learn what we already knew, how “hard it is for some families.”



**Social media was a fit for many participants.** Technology worked for many of the participants, especially the younger ones. As one facilitator noted, the younger parents in her group were used to communicating via social media. These parents in some ways felt more comfortable in interacting in this virtual realm and felt free to share their opinions through this medium.

## FACILITATOR CHALLENGES

**Technology.** Initially, one of the primary challenges encountered across facilitators was related to technology. As one facilitator noted, “There was a learning curve” in using this medium. Many stressed the need to become comfortable with the technology in order to be an effective facilitator. For some that meant taking Zoom tutorials, for others it was problem solving when something didn’t work. For example, one facilitator described having problems sharing her screen and have sound at the same time. Another described an unexpected thunderstorm ending her access to Wi-Fi and she needed to reschedule the session.

**Interest in expanding the numbers.** Facilitators appreciated that the size of the class was limited as they began the pilot. However; several suggested that now they have experience with virtual training, they felt the group size could be expanded slightly. They felt that having three people limited the richness of the conversations in some groups. This was especially true if one person was not able to attend. They also wanted to be good stewards of the funds to support COSP. Increasing the numbers would make the virtual option more cost-effective.

**Access to the print materials.** The facilitators felt the participant workbook was a valuable resource for parents. Some emailed it out to the participants; however, many participants did not have access to a printer. Others mailed the print copy to them, which added cost to the process. It was recommended that identifying supports to distributing the materials would be helpful.

## PARENT CHALLENGES

**Technology.** Facilitators discovered that the experience of the participant was enhanced if they were able to access the session through a computer rather than the phone. With phones, participants cannot see all of the participants at once and there were interruptions from incoming emails or phone calls. A tablet was better than the phone, but the computer was the best choice. They described how it was important to do a technology pre-check with parents to make sure the system worked for them and to help them navigate the system. Occasionally there were problems with bandwidth, but no one had to stop a session due to bandwidth problems.

**Distractions at home.** Although there were often distractions at home, individuals eating their meal, other family members moving in and out of the screen, and other background noises, it did not seem to be a primary distraction for families. It was important to have participants mute when they were not talking.

**Lack of informal connections.** In virtual sessions, participants lose the opportunity for informal connections. Facilitators noted that during in-person sessions, there are

opportunities for participants to connect with each other in “parking lot” conversations or conversations before or after meeting. “They will show up 20 minutes early and talk.” Sometimes new relationships and supporting each other occurs due to this opportunity for informal networking. This extra benefit is not there in virtual settings.

## IN THE FUTURE

Circle of Security International released in late 2020 an Endorsement to their COSP Program, called the Classroom Model. This modifies COSP for childcare providers, teachers, and other early learning professionals and requires COSP facilitators to participate in an online module for completion. Currently, Nebraska has approximately 10 facilitators that are trained in this enhanced model and the Nebraska State COSP Leadership Team is working on developing evaluation and supports for this to be implemented.

## Conclusions

- COVID-19 changed access to Circle of Security Parenting™ (COSP) program in 2020. Program participation numbers were smaller due to Circle of Security International limiting number of participants virtually; however, it increased the availability of programs across the state. Participants rated their experience in virtual sessions positively.
- COSP was effectively implemented across communities with parents demonstrating significant increases in parenting skills, improved relationships with their children, and decreased parenting stress.
- Parents rated the COSP experience positively, noting the high quality of the facilitators.
- Parents reported that participation in COSP helped them to learn how to reflect on their own experience, which resulted in improved relationships with their children and ability to meet their needs.
- Providers reported that COSP helped them to better support families and children.
- Facilitators viewed reflective consultation as a valuable resource as it helped them reflect on themselves, their facilitation practice and ultimately helped them be more sensitive as they worked with the participants.
- Facilitators reported that Fidelity Coaching helped them to lower their stress related to facilitating COSP and enhanced their facilitating practices (e.g., identifying caregiver’s needs, helping to repair relationships, recognizing what behaviors trigger their own “shark music”, and confidence in meeting the needs of caregivers.)



“Very informative and helpful. I use these skills and amazing instruction with all interactions with my kids.”

A Parent



nebraskachildren

AND FAMILIES FOUNDATION

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