

CITYSPROUTS

Cambridge, MA

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The CitySprouts team in Cambridge, MA strives to invite youth input and participation in their botany/gardening- focused programming, and parents and caregivers are welcomed.

CitySprouts convenes program activities in beautiful garden spaces where food grows, elements they use to promote engagement between youth and their parents/caregivers.

As the program serves families in the Greater Boston area, there are equity considerations when planning family engagement activities. For example, many families live in small apartments with few windows, so they cannot grow many plants. Another consideration is the location of clubs. The three clubs that have the most family engagement are spread across Boston and Cambridge. The team wants to provide STEM learning opportunities that are convenient for, and accessible to, all their families.



PROGRAM
SPOTLIGHT

citysprouts
Public school gardens for teaching and learning

The Family Engagement Plan

The CitySprouts team planned two family engagement events customized to their unique program sites. The first was a trip to learn about the process and science of growing mushrooms, an edible fungus that can be grown in cool temperatures and does not require much light or space. The team noticed that growing mushrooms is very popular with youth, and can be grown by families whose homes may not have a lot of space or sunlight.

Youth were provided with mushrooms and recipes to cook the mushrooms at home. “They are cooking a lot with mushrooms and herbs. So, they are going to make mint tea. They are going to make a mushroom pasta with herbs and alliums from the garden.”

The second event was a winter solstice celebration in a community garden for youth and families to make lanterns and write out their hopes for the coming year. They hoped that bringing together families from different neighborhoods would encourage deeper community connections and provide an opportunity to reflect together on gardening goals for the coming season. “When they [families] have their lanterns... they’re going to say what they are looking forward to in the new gardening season.”



The A-Ha Moment

The CitySprouts team discovered that bringing parents/caregivers into the planning process was an effective way of increasing their commitment: **“We started involving parents in the planning process [for our field trips]... they really became more committed to what their children are doing ...now we’re thinking of parents as partners, rather than info dumping on them.”** CitySprouts realized that parents and caregivers can be meaningfully involved in the program and their children’s learning even if they cannot join program activities or events – the program can include and engage families regardless of their ability to attend.

The team also acknowledged insights gained through sharing with other programs in the fall family engagement cohort/learning community: **“For me, what I found most helpful... it was the connection. The breakout groups in the meetings and hearing what other people were doing was helpful for me and a little inspiring. It’s good to know what challenges other people are facing...the other thing is meeting with you [ISRY] holds us accountable a little bit, keeps an awareness of what we’re doing with families.”**



Family Engagement Strategies Reimagined

CitySprouts invested more in listening and learning from families. **“We were going to combine events...We had to cater to what the parents can do, so we had to do separate events. We reached out to the parents, and they said we can’t do that. Last year, we would have done one event, but using the ISRY [Planning] Tool, we respected what they had to say and that increased their engagement.”** The CitySprouts team also focused more on building connections. **“Be friendly! If you had the chance to talk to families—by phone, email, or in-person if you’re lucky—the most important thing you can do is connect with them there and make it happen. And, of course, work on the relationships with kids. Kids will go home and say a little tidbit about what they are feeling about our club. Those things are basic but an important foundation.”** The CitySprouts team is working towards having a more “unified plan, like these are the steps we are going to take, these are signs of success,” and to engage more families by working with more schools. **“We want to come in and really talk about where the club is, make it seem really fun and accessible, and be really strategic about what schools...”**

Evidence of Success

CitySprouts received positive responses from participating families. **“It was nice to see that we had that trust among families and enthusiasm among families...”** The CitySprouts team challenged themselves to offer new opportunities and try new approaches to connect with families. They discovered different ways of including parents/caregivers in their children’s STEM learning, even if they could not be present in-person. The CitySprout team’s efforts allowed families to attend that hadn’t previously: **“Some of the families, especially some who hadn’t been able to come in the past are coming... They really enjoy things around growing and food and that connection.”**

