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The Center for Children with Special Health Care Needs is a hub for cutting edge education, research and scholarship that aims to improve the health and quality of care for children with special health care needs (ages 0-21) and their family caregivers. In this newsletter we highlight an example of how two DNP students collaborated with staff and families in the University of Minnesota Cleft & Craniofacial Clinics to develop a new family-to-family support program for families along with their advisor Wendy Looman, who is the pediatric nurse practitioner in this clinic.

Ann Garwick and Wendy Looman, Co-Directors

Connecting Smiles:
DNP students implement a support program for parents of children with facial differences

The best-selling book Wonder is inspiring conversations about children with facial differences. The book has helped some children and families become more comfortable over time with the medical, social, and emotional aspects of living with a craniofacial anomaly. At the University of Minnesota’s Craniofacial and Cleft Palate Clinics, providers regularly encounter families who are learning to manage the challenges of facial differences. The birth of a child with a cleft lip and palate or other facial anomaly can be particularly challenging for parents who have never
encountered the condition, and who now must navigate multiple surgeries and specialists, feeding challenges, therapies, and worries about how their child will be accepted by others. Parents who have older children with craniofacial conditions have found strategies and resources to help them cope, and are often a helpful source of support for new parents.

The providers in the Craniofacial and Cleft Clinics sought a strategy for improving their ability to support child and family social well-being, a key accreditation standard and a core value of the clinic. Through a collaboration with the School of Nursing and the Center for CSHCN, the team engaged two DNP students in the School of Nursing Pediatric Nurse practitioner program who were looking for an opportunity to participate in a quality improvement project with a focus on children with special health care needs. Caitlin Giesen and Liza Beilke, DNP students, began working with key stakeholders in the Clinics in the Fall of 2016 to complete a needs assessment and develop an evidence-based process through which the clinic could connect new and experienced parents of children with craniofacial anomalies. The resulting program, Connecting Smiles, was implemented in 2017. The program includes a mentor parent training session, a secure, web-based enrollment process, and tools for ensuring a successful parent-to-parent match. Once a new parent is matched with a mentor parent, the parents connect via phone and email for informal support. The program has been well-received by clinic leadership, families, and providers.

“This program helped meet a critical need in our clinic”, noted interim director Anna Thurmes, PhD. “Working with DNP students integrates interprofessional education and quality improvement in a way that is a win-win for the clinic, families, and students”. To date, five families have been enrolled in the program. Cleft and craniofacial programs around the country have been reaching out to the U of M program to learn about how they might implement a similar program. Beilke, Giesen, and the team will be presenting the program at the annual conference of the American Cleft Palate Craniofacial Association in March.