

Parenting and Family Supports: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric Together

“...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding...”

“...the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community...”

Preamble, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

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The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) applauds the historic agreement on Early Childhood Development reached by the federal, provincial and territorial governments (September 11, 2000) and celebrates the commitment to transfer \$2.2 billion over the next five years to support investments in early childhood development.

Who we are

FRP Canada is a national not-for-profit organization that represents over two thousand family resource programs/centres and related services across Canada. Its Mission is to promote the well-being of families by providing national leadership, consultation and resources to those who care for children and support families. FRP Canada is an active member of Campaign 2000, the National Children's Alliance, and the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children.

What we are about

In Canada each year family resource programs and centres provide a wide range of supports to hundreds of thousands of families with children. The thirty-year history of the Canadian family support movement has successfully demonstrated a new way of working with families. We are gratified to see this understanding about effective approaches reflected in the Early Childhood Development agreement, namely:

- a focus on prevention and early intervention
- intersectoral/integrated services supportive of the child within the family and community context
- inclusion of children with different abilities living in different economic, cultural, linguistic and regional circumstances

The purpose of this document

This position paper builds on FRP Canada's previous submission, *Family Support A National Priority, A Response to the Public Report "Public Dialogue on the National Children's Agenda Developing a Shared Vision"* (July 2000). Entitled *Parenting and Family Supports: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric Together*, this paper focuses on the second key area for action in the First Ministers' Communiqué of September 11, 2000—Improve

Parenting and Family Supports. **Although the Communiqué mentions family resource programs only in the context of this second area for action, we assert that family resource programs are currently providing services in all four of the areas described in the Communiqué. The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs intends to address the other three areas for action in future submissions.**

In this paper we will present the family support sector's position that Early Childhood Development Initiative funding should strengthen and build on established initiatives that are currently supporting children, families and communities in Canada. We will:

- state our understanding of the meaning of parenting and family supports
- describe the role of family resource programs across Canada
- outline the values that have guided our work so effectively for three decades and
- recommend strategies for moving beyond the rhetoric of the Communiqué to actions that make the best sense for Canadian families.

Underlying this submission is FRP Canada's concern that, in their enthusiasm to reach out to children and families, government decision makers will miss opportunities to enhance initiatives that have already proven successful, with the result that the existing foundation of family support in Canada could be weakened rather than strengthened.

We believe that it is critical that the First Ministers adopt strategies that promote the four key areas for action—healthy pregnancy, birth and infancy, parenting and family supports, early childhood development, learning and care, and community supports—in ways that build on the concrete knowledge and experiences of Canadian community-based organizations such as family resource programs while continuing to support research and education that will further enhance the effectiveness of supports to all Canadian families.



Moving Beyond the Rhetoric Together

The basics of parenting and family supports

“The family support movement and the programs and people that make up that movement continue to pull the protective threads of community around parents and their children in ways that are new, yet based on age-old knowledge: in a supportive community, healthy, productive adults raise healthy safe children—who will later do the same.”

— Making the Case for Family Support, Family Resource Coalition, 1996

Parenting is inclusive

Positive parent-child relationships support the development of healthy, responsible and happy children. Parenting, as defined by family resource programs, includes all those who have a significant relationship with the child. Besides biological parents, this circle of care may include adoptive or foster parents, grandparents, child care providers, teachers, relatives, friends and neighbours.

“*The family resource program is a part of my family*”
— Parent participant

Defining family supports

Based on the premises that:

- primary responsibility for the development and well-being of children lies within the family
- all parents need support at different times and in different ways
- all families have the potential to grow and change
- well-resourced communities are essential to building family capacity,

family supports is a framework of community-based preventive services and resources focussed on strengthening the capacity of parents to raise their children.

What are family resource programs?

Family resource programs translate this prevention framework into action. Family resource programs, firmly rooted in their communities, are not-for-profit organizations that provide a spectrum of early support and prevention services for families with children. Family resource programs also serve as non-threatening access points to more specialized services in the community.

These programs empower and strengthen adults in their roles as parents in different ways. Many programs are comprehensive and provide a range of social, educational and recreational activities, while others have a single focus, such as parent/child drop-in, telephone support or mobile toy library. Some programs serve specific populations, such as new parents, parents of children with special needs, teen or employed parents. Others support families as they experience specific life events, such as pregnancy, divorce, family crisis, immigration or military deployment.

What's special about family resource programs?

Family resource programs are defined as much by their approach to working with families as by the program components they offer. An essential aspect is the development of trusting relationships.

The way in which social services are usually provided is turned on its head in family support programs:

- Programs focus on the entire family in the context of its culture and community, rather than just the individual.

- Programs give priority to the delivery of community-based, preventive and comprehensive services, rather than fragmented and problem-specific crisis interventions.
- Programs emphasize the strengths, skills and abilities that enable and empower families to solve problems and achieve goals, rather than focusing on weaknesses and the amelioration of deficits.
- Programs place families in a primary role in the planning, design and delivery of services, rather than expecting them to fit into a predetermined set of service options.
- Programs provide services, activities, and referrals so that all families get what they need, rather than allowing eligibility requirements to prevent families from receiving needed help, resources and support.

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

“Family resource programs are committed to extending help to families and communities when they need it, where they need it, and how they need it based on their perception of what they require in terms of intervention. Family resource programs represent a community building/reclaiming approach to the protection of children from abuse and neglect within families and society. The shifts that I am advocating for in children’s protection are what I see taking place in family resource programs. The programs fit with what research suggests are key attributes of successful programs, these being programs that:

- are comprehensive, flexible, responsive, and persevering
- see children in the context of their families
- deal with families as parts of neighbourhoods and communities
- have a long term, preventive orientation, a clear mission and continue to evolve over time
- are well managed by competent and committed individuals with clearly identifiable skills
- operate in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect.”

From an address given on June 8, 2001 by Dr. Kenneth Barter, Chair in Child Protection, Memorial University of Newfoundland to family support practitioners from Atlantic Canada.



“It’s not what you do, it’s how you do it”

— Family support worker



Who provides the programs and services?

Family resource practitioners bring rich and varied backgrounds to their work. Often, staff are recruited from the same community that is served by the program. Life experience and personal attributes are highly valued when hiring decisions are made.

The skills and knowledge required for effective work in the family support field are extensive and cross many disciplines. They combine both academic and experiential learning. Family resource practitioners must have a good understanding about early childhood development, parenting, adult education, family systems, community development, ecological perspectives, family literacy, group facilitation, nutrition, volunteer management, counselling, community resources, cultural awareness, family violence, child abuse and neglect, managing not-for-profits, research methods, proposal writing, evaluation and much more.

Effective funding initiatives promote family resource programs

Typically, funding for community-based organizations is neither generous nor stable. Depending on when, where and how they were started, family resource programs have different funding profiles, and many combine several sources of funding in order to ensure their survival. Government funding is often restricted to specific services or targeted at specific populations, creating further challenges for organizations that are committed to offering comprehensive services to the whole community.

Three positive examples of funding initiatives for family resource programs are acknowledged here:

- the allocation by the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador of a portion of the National Child Benefit Funds to the creation and support of additional family resource programs in the province
- the establishment by the Department of Defence of military family resource centres on bases in Canada and overseas
- the implementation by Health Canada of the Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) which has provided funds to hundreds of community-based family support programs in communities across Canada that identified this type of program as a priority.

Sources:

“Making the Case for Family Support,” Family Resource Coalition (now Family Support America), Chicago, 1996

I. Kyle and M. Kellerman, *Case Studies of Canadian Family Resource Programs*, Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, Ottawa, 1998

K. Barter, “Community Development Approach for Child Protection,” unpublished presentation, St. John’s, 2001.



Recommendations

Twenty-five years ago, family resource programs in Canada consisted of a handful of independent grassroots programs that were taking a fresh approach to supporting families. Today, many hundreds of programs located in urban and rural communities across the country represent a new paradigm of service delivery that is cost-efficient, effective, widely respected and officially recognized.

Largely through their own efforts and despite barriers of distance and differences in funding, auspices and mandates, family resource programs have succeeded in connecting with each other to build a strong national family support movement.

Although there have been many successes, there is still much to be done. Family resource programs in every province and territory are bursting at the seams. They are trying to meet the expanding demand for their services with funding that continues to be insufficient and unreliable. Many family resource programs are struggling to keep going in the short term while keeping a focus on improving outcomes for families in the long term.

This section will focus on recommendations in four domains: stabilization; sustainability; sharing knowledge, information and effective practices; and accountability.

1. Stabilization

“Governments and other partners currently provide a range of programs and services to effectively support early childhood development. The challenge is to build on existing services and supports, to make them more coordinated and widely available.”

— Introduction, Early Childhood Development First Minister’s Meeting Communiqué, 2000

Family resource programs owe their success to the hard work and commitment of individuals and groups working within their communities across Canada. This community-based approach ensures that the parenting and family supports provided are uniquely suited to local circumstances and that voluntary leadership is maximized. Over the years, the sector’s infrastructure and knowledge base have grown organically from community roots to become a valuable resource.

We commend the approach taken by Newfoundland and Labrador regarding the allocation of Early Childhood Development Initiative funds. After an extensive consultation with key stakeholders across the province, decisions were made to enhance the system of family resource programs that already exists in the province as well as to foster new programs in communities that are currently under resourced.

We recommend that partners in the Early Childhood Development Initiative recognize the social capital that has been built over many years through the efforts of family resource programs.

We recommend that the foundation of existing family resource programs be strengthened before new initiatives are established.

We recommend that funders make conscious efforts to link newly funded programs and services with existing family support organizations and networks.

We recommend that the partners in this Initiative acknowledge the contribution of existing programs by stabilizing the infrastructure of family support organizations and networks across Canada.

2. Sustainability

“Our outcomes are really thirty years away in the form of good citizens.”

— From a key informant interview, “Building Capacity and Quality Practice Sharing” project, January 2001

Based on our long track record in community development, we know that it takes time to build viable, effective programs for children and families. New initiatives require the support, patience and encouragement of their funders as they gradually establish themselves and develop relationships of trust within the community.

We are pleased that the First Ministers’ Communiqué affirms a long-term commitment to our children’s future and states that investments for early childhood development should be incremental, predictable and sustained over the long term.

We recommend that funding, whether for existing or new programs, be provided in a manner that allows enough time and resources for programs to develop and grow strong without anxiety about meeting unrealistic short-term objectives.

We recommend that, given the First Ministers’ commitment to developing strategies that support local communities, mechanisms are put in place that respect differing capacities and resources of communities to meet the needs of children, families and communities.

We recommend that funding for the Early Childhood Development Initiative be extended beyond the five year period of the agreement and that the federal government and its partners begin a process now to ensure the sustainability of this funding into the future.

3. Sharing Knowledge, Information and Effective Practices

The First Ministers' Communiqué acknowledges the importance of research, knowledge, information and the sharing of effective practices in the area of early childhood development.

Family support practitioners are eager to learn about research findings that can assist their work and to share information about effective practices. Strategies to disseminate this information include on site and distance education courses at academic institutions, regional and national conferences, training events, newsletters, journals, and electronic networking. Depending on the resources available to them, local, regional and national networks help facilitate the exchange of knowledge.

Through a recent series of national consultations, FRP Canada has learned that practitioners want more access to this information through quality training and staff development. Currently there are very few academic courses designed specifically for family resource practitioners in Canada. Although an impressive knowledge base has been developed through years of experience, there are limited opportunities for practitioners to access this information at training institutions. Education for the family support field must be carefully designed and developed, using an inter-disciplinary approach which is grounded in experience.

We recommend that all partners in the Early Childhood Development Initiative fund the development of appropriate inter-disciplinary courses for family support practitioners at the college and university level with particular emphasis on distance education formats and that financial assistance be provided to practitioners who wish to access this training.

We recommend that resources be made available to allow the family support sector to participate in planning education and training initiatives that make sense for the field.

We recommend that all partners in this Initiative provide support for less formal opportunities to share knowledge such as national and regional conferences, short-term intensive courses, development of resource materials, web sites, etc.

We recommend that any training strategy for the family support field should provide maximum flexibility for the practitioner, recognize both academic and experiential learning, and be affordable.

We recommend that all partners in this Initiative seek the involvement of existing provincial and territorial networks of community-based programs as well as national organizations such as FRP Canada to develop strategies for sharing information about research and effective practice in parenting and family supports.

We recommend that funds be allocated to research that furthers the knowledge base to inform practice in family supports.

4. Accountability

Distribution of funds

The First Ministers' commitment to public accountability for this new funding is commended by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs and its members. However, we believe that governments should be accountable for the process as well as for the product. This means that, in addition to being accountable for the amounts of money that are directed to particular programs and services, provincial and territorial governments should also be accountable for ensuring that these funds are allocated and distributed according to principles of transparency, participation, and respect.

We have seen in the past the negative effects of funding decisions that, despite best intentions, have created inequities between programs and communities. Decisions that fragment communities and further destabilize existing programs are incompatible with the vision of the National Children's Agenda.

For example, it is distressing that the Province of Ontario, which has publicly embraced the vision of comprehensive and integrated supports for families with young children, has decided unilaterally to use this funding to create a brand new system of Early Years Centres throughout the province while at the same time minimizing the needs of existing family resource programs by downloading responsibility for their support onto overburdened municipal governments.

We recommend a planning and decision-making process for the Early Childhood Development Initiative that includes the participation of family resource programs and other community-based groups. This process should be open and inclusive, build on strengths, be collaborative, respect diversity and be responsive to individual, family and community needs.

We recommend that the partners in this Initiative be accountable not only for the amount of money that is being spent and the programs and services that are offered as a result of this Initiative but also for the health of the family supports sector as a whole in their area of jurisdiction.

Accountability framework for program evaluation and outcome measurement

“All the evaluation reports just go into a big box in the bureaucrat’s office and no one reads them.”

— Participant, national meeting of evaluation specialists, Aylmer, Québec, May 10-13, 2001

Community-based programs are accountable to their participants, their communities and their funders. On-going monitoring and periodic evaluation is essential to help organizations find out what’s working well and what needs improvement so that they can plan for the future. However, in recent years, the evaluation of community-based social programs in Canada appears to have been driven more by a need to satisfy short-term political objectives than by a desire to help programs improve and flourish over time.

Nothing is more discouraging for parents, staff and the community than participating in a hollow exercise merely to satisfy the demands of a funder. Programs with multiple funders must repeat this exercise several times, using different methods, instruments and reporting mechanisms depending on the specific requirements of their funders. At the end of the day, a great deal of time and money has been spent documenting what everyone already knows—community-based family support programs change lives for the better.

Both government funders and programs want meaningful evaluation data. By working together, we can develop an accountability framework that is cost-effective while taking into account the objectives, values, time and resources of community-based organizations.

We recommend that the primary objective for the accountability and evaluation process should be to strengthen and improve services for families over time, not to achieve short-term political objectives.

We recommend that community-based programs should participate in the process of developing a rational, cost-effective and meaningful accountability framework.

We recommend that community-based programs be involved in the process to determine the indicators and measurable outcomes for the area of parenting and family supports.

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