

# Family is the Foundation

**Why Family Support and Early Childhood Education  
Must Be a Collaborative Effort**



## **Family is the Foundation:**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canadians are currently witnessing a significant change in the delivery of services for parents and their young children. In many jurisdictions, programs that relate to the care and well-being of young children are moving toward an educational model. Current policy has designated educational systems as the main producers of the skills required by the modern economy.

This paper summarizes FRP Canada's response to the reorganization of early childhood services. It emphasizes the need to complement school-based programs with a broad spectrum of community-based supports for families and young children and makes recommendations for collaborative solutions to ensure that all children in Canada have a fair chance for health and happiness in a prosperous economy.

The **Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)** has been the national leader in the field of family support since 1975. Each year, over 500,000 families with young children find resources, encouragement and a sense of belonging at family resource centres across Canada. FRP Canada and its members believe that families have the primary and most significant impact on children's development. Therefore, when developing initiatives aimed at improving lifelong outcomes for children, the fundamental role of families must be acknowledged and supported.

The recent proliferation of research in the area of early child development has heightened awareness about the critical importance of children's earliest experiences. From the prenatal period until about age 3, children are most profoundly influenced within their intimate family environments and through interaction with primary caregivers. In the preschool years, family factors continue to impact child development while influences outside the family begin to play a greater role. The groundwork for lifelong health, learning and well-being is formulated through these early experiences.

By the time children arrive at school in Canada, about 3 in 10 exhibit signs of vulnerability which may hamper their progress in school and later in life. Contributing factors include stressful or non-stimulating environments, poor nutrition, and unresponsive or harsh parenting. Rather than addressing the factors that contribute to early vulnerability, current early childhood policy emphasizes educational solutions, with improved educational outcomes as the primary objective.

Longitudinal studies from the U.S. provide substantial evidence of the positive effects of early school entry programs for disadvantaged children. However, the effectiveness of these carefully designed programs is due, at least in part, to the provision of extensive supports for parents in conjunction with educational programming for children. The fledgling early learning and care programs in Canada have not incorporated family support elements to anywhere near the same degree as these exemplary programs. Therefore, they cannot expect to achieve the same positive results as the landmark U.S. preschool programs which generated much of the evidence being used as their justification.

Since the foundation that supports children's lifelong learning is established very early, services and programs for families during the period from conception to school entry are vitally important. Child outcomes will be enhanced if all families have access to an adequate array of supports during this critical time. A comprehensive, multi-faceted policy that benefits from the expertise of community-based organizations and service providers is critically important if children in Canada are to receive the best possible start.

## Policy Recommendations

“...the next round of intervention efforts should take an ecological approach seriously, investigating how to change the child-rearing context for the families rather than focusing primarily on changing the child.”

- Dale Farran, Another decade of intervention in *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*, 2nd edition, J.P. Shonkoff and S.J. Meisels, eds. 2000. Cambridge University Press.

### 1. Acknowledge the primary influence of the family

- Give priority to programs that support families during pregnancy and when their children are very young in order to promote optimal development and respond to potential problems as early as possible
- Incorporate family-centred principles and practices within all early learning and care programs
- Ensure that families continue to be offered comprehensive programs and services to assist them in their parenting role after children start school
- Ensure high quality environments for young children in their homes and early child care settings

### 2. Build an integrated system through partnerships

- Retain responsibility for the provision of comprehensive supports for families within the community sector where mandates, experience and practices have demonstrated success
- Develop meaningful partnerships between schools, community-based organizations and parents in order to avoid duplication of effort and provide the best possible support to families with young children
- Nurture mutually respectful relationships between early learning and care staff in schools and family-serving organizations in the community so that each understands and appreciates the other's role and expertise
- Encourage collaboration between schools and community organizations through sharing resources, participating in joint staff trainings, co-sponsoring events, sitting on joint committees and engaging in other integrative strategies
- Recognize the integrative value of both informal and formal partnerships

### 3. Retain and expand family support programs in the community

- Recognize the long-standing contribution of family resource programs and their unique expertise in addressing social determinants of health
- Provide adequate funding and support for community-based programs offering valued services in their communities
- Ensure that community programs have the option of maintaining autonomy within school settings and, if appropriate, operating under the authority of municipal bodies

# INTRODUCTION

Canadians are currently witnessing a significant change in the delivery of services for parents and their young children. In many jurisdictions, programs that relate to the care and well-being of young children are moving toward an educational model. Current policy has designated educational systems as the main producers of the skills required by the modern economy.<sup>1</sup>

This paper summarizes FRP Canada's response to the reorganization of early childhood services. It emphasizes the need to complement school-based programs with a broad spectrum of community-based supports for families and young children and makes recommendations for collaborative solutions to ensure that all children in Canada have a fair chance for health and happiness in a prosperous economy.

## FRP Canada and its members

The **Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)** has been the national leader in the field of family support since 1975.<sup>2</sup> Each year, over 500,000 families with young children find resources, encouragement and a sense of belonging at family resource centres across Canada. The primary focus of family resource centres is to increase the capacity of parents and communities to raise their children. Programming is diverse and holistic, aimed at achieving multiple outcomes including improved physical and mental health, positive parenting, optimal child development, and strong family functioning. For more information about family resource centres, their philosophy and their programs, refer to the Appendices.

FRP Canada and its members believe that parenting and the family environment have the most significant impact on children's development. This belief is supported by extensive scientific evidence and was reinforced by Charles Bruner, Director of the Iowa-based Child and Family Policy Center, in a paper recently published by Canada's Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development.<sup>3</sup>

“Parents are their children’s first and most important teachers... and their first and most important nurses, coaches, safety officers, nutritionists and moral guides. They also are their children’s first and most important advocates and care coordinators.” - *Charles Bruner*<sup>3</sup>

## The impact of early childhood experiences

“Nothing is more important in the world today than the nurturing that children receive in the first three years of life, for it is in these earliest years that the capacities for trust, empathy and affection originate. If the emotional needs of the child are not met during these years, permanent emotional damage can result.” - *Elliott Barker*<sup>4</sup>

Our current understanding about the emotional and cognitive development of children owes much to the earlier work of luminaries such as Arnold Gessell, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Selma Fraiberg, Burton White, John Kennel, Marshall Klaus, Paul Steinhauer and others.

Over thirty years ago, Dr. Elliott Barker, an eminent Canadian psychiatrist, observed the powerful link between a child’s earliest experiences and life-long outcomes. His work with psychopathic inmates at the Penetanguishene prison in Ontario led him to become a passionate advocate for early prevention. During an appearance before the Senate Subcommittee on Childhood Experiences as Causes of Criminal Behaviour in 1977, Dr. Barker offered the following analogy: “What I keep coming back to is that it’s like pouring cement. If you don’t mix the batch right, you are stuck with it, and you have to get at it with a sledgehammer later – it’s a slow, difficult and almost impossible process. In the first three years of the child’s life, the cement is setting, and parents [with the support of the community] ought to set every other priority aside and do their best.”<sup>4</sup>

The subsequent development of magnetic resonance imagery (MRI) technology made it possible for the first time to observe the processes of brain development. Brain scans showed the devastating effects of physical and emotional stress on the wiring of the developing brain during the critical time when the “cement is setting”. These compelling images have led to an explosion of research about the interrelated factors that influence early human development. Recent studies in neurobiology, genetics, health sciences, sociology, psychology, linguistics and epidemiology have reached complementary conclusions:

- an infant’s brain is malleable and highly sensitive to its environment, even before birth
- warm, responsive, authoritative parenting and low stress environments are associated with positive child development
- harsh or unresponsive parenting and high stress environments are associated with impaired child development
- each stage of a child’s development depends upon the foundation set in place during the previous stage



- positive social and emotional development sets the stage for successful cognitive development; qualities such as curiosity, confidence, persistence, self-control and willingness to risk making mistakes contribute to learning and reduce the likelihood of aggressive behaviour and bullying
- factors that impact early child development have long-lasting effects across many domains including physical and emotional health
- impaired development, once reflected in the structures of the brain, is difficult to repair
- parenting and the early family environment have the most significant impact on children's long-term outcomes

“...neurobiology tells us that the later we wait to invest in children who are at greatest risk, the more difficult the achievement of optimal outcomes is likely to be, particularly for those who experience the early biological disruptions of toxic stress.” - *Jack Shonkoff*<sup>5</sup>

### Recent implementation of early learning and care programs in Canada

All children are born ready to learn. However, by the time they arrive at school, approximately 30% of children in Canada have been affected by early negative experiences which may hamper their progress in school and later in life.<sup>6,7</sup> The rate and degree of vulnerability is higher for children from Canada's poorest families, and lower for children from Canada's wealthiest families. However, the largest numbers of vulnerable children come from middle income families.

This reality has led policy makers to seek universal strategies which reach children from all income levels. In an effort to address early deficits, new and expanded programs for kindergarten-aged children are being implemented in several jurisdictions across the country. In Ontario, for example, half-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs for children aged 3 years, 8 months and older are becoming full-day programs, with optional child care (when available) during the extended day and school holidays on a fee-for-service basis.<sup>8</sup> Several other provinces are either implementing or considering similar programs, and many are shifting resources and authority for early childhood programs from social service ministries to ministries of education.

### Economic, political and systemic factors

Although it is now widely accepted that the trajectory for learning and well-being is established long before a child starts school, current early childhood development policy is leaning toward a remedial rather than preventive approach by focusing on expanded educational programs for 4- and 5-year-olds. This apparent disconnect between evidence and policy begins to make more sense when some economic, political and systemic factors are taken into account.

For example, there are persuasive economic reasons to focus on programs for kindergarten-aged children. Today's young children are likely to have two parents in the labour force. Almost 70% of



mothers with pre-school aged children are employed and both parents are paying taxes. All-day early learning and care programs are intended to alleviate the stress of finding child care for part of the day, with the goal of reducing barriers to labour market participation by parents of young children. In addition, there is widespread belief that all-day kindergarten will enhance children's success in school which is linked to employability, productivity and Canada's future economic prosperity.<sup>9</sup>

Political factors also play a role. The creation of early learning and care programs responds to domestic and international pressure upon Canada to invest more in early childhood programs. In 2004, the OECD Directorate for Education challenged Canada "to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy, with gender equity and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn."<sup>10</sup> Two years later, in 2006, an OECD report rated Canada *last* in spending on early learning and care programs among 14 OECD member countries.<sup>11</sup> This embarrassment prompted strong reaction in many quarters and created fertile ground for system reform. A Senate committee was struck in response to the OECD challenge, and in April 2009 the committee's report<sup>12</sup> urged that the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial partners to move Canada into line with OECD countries that had already shifted mandates for early learning and care to their education systems.<sup>13</sup>

The provision of universal child care at public expense is still a matter of political debate in Canada. Public education, in contrast to child care, has long been regarded as a universal right. By implementing school-based programs which increase the number of hours of non-parental care for 4- and 5-year olds, the lines between 'schooling' and 'care' for young children are blurred, and potential objections to this new allocation of public funds are avoided.

At the system level, the integration of early learning and child care will provide an infusion of energy and funding to the ailing education sector which is being affected by lower birth rates and reduced enrollments. In addition, the education system is highly organized; the notion of bringing order to a somewhat chaotic and multi-faceted array of community-based services for families holds much appeal for some decision makers. However, it is their lack of bureaucratic structure that enables community-based programs to be nimble and responsive, leveraging community resources and opportunities in response to emerging needs.

## EVIDENCE FROM MODEL PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

“A hopeful public is advised about the great investment value of early education and its potential both to yield savings in social costs and to change the life trajectories of vulnerable children. In large measure, the public is not told that these results were achieved with family support efforts in partnership with academic training.” - Valora Washington et al.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the most frequently-referenced research about the positive long-term impacts of preschool programs comes from the United States where carefully designed preschool programs were created during the 1960s in an effort to reduce inequities for disadvantaged children. Programs such as the High/Scope Perry Pre-School Project, the Abecedarian Project and later the Chicago Child-Parent Centres provided high quality preschool environments for African American children living in poverty. Outcome data were collected from the children over many years into their adulthood. Long-term results have been positive, often showing considerable savings in tax dollars due to decreased requirements for repeated school grades and remedial programs, reduced costs of the justice system and criminal activities, and increased tax revenue because of higher wages earned. Findings from these U.S. landmark studies support the conclusion that a well-designed and resourced preschool program can be beneficial, especially for children from disadvantaged circumstances.<sup>15,16,17</sup>

However, it is important to understand that every one of these highly studied preschool programs included a range of family support components in their design. The program developers recognized that in order for the child's prospects to improve, the whole family had to be served. Although each program incorporated different elements, family support components were essential ingredients in all. These exemplary preschool programs provided supplementary supports such as help for parents to reach their educational or employment goals, regular home visits, parent resource rooms, parent support groups, linking families with health services and other community services, and providing liaison staff to continue working with families when their children moved on to elementary school.

Arthur Reynolds, author of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers study published in 2001, believes the main reason for the crime-reduction effect seen in this population was the strong family support component. He states, “If it were just an educational program, you wouldn't find the social outcomes that we've found.”<sup>18</sup>

A Canadian example of comprehensive services for disadvantaged young children is *Better Beginnings, Better Futures*. This initiative was introduced into eight vulnerable Ontario communities in the early 1990s. *Better Beginnings* was designed as a 25-year research project to study whether population-wide prevention initiatives in disadvantaged neighbourhoods would prevent serious emotional and behavioural problems in young children, promote healthy child

and family development, and enhance the abilities of disadvantaged communities to provide for children and their families. Although each site chose its own specific activities and programs, all met the *Better Beginnings* vision of being universal, holistic or comprehensive, ecological, community-based and integrated. Activities took place in schools, in communities and in family homes.

“One of the ideas behind prevention programs like *Better Beginnings* is that for parents to be effective at improving their children’s chances for success, they must be functioning well themselves.” - *Geoffrey Nelson et al.*<sup>19</sup>

Findings published in 2008 based upon analysis of 2004 data indicate that young people (now in Grade 9) who had participated in *Better Beginnings* programs from junior kindergarten to Grade 2 were better prepared for school, used fewer special education services, had fewer problems with hyperactivity/inattention, showed more adaptive functioning in school, and were likely to go further in school than comparison children. Parents from the *Better Beginnings* neighbourhoods felt more social support from others, were more satisfied with their marital relationships, reported more positive family functioning and were more satisfied with their local neighbourhood as a place to live than those from the comparison communities. The program had more than paid for itself by the time the children reached Grade 9, with greater saving anticipated in future years.<sup>20</sup>

## CAN SCHOOLS DO IT ALL?

Proponents of the new early learning and care programs have suggested that the educational system may gradually take on more of a leadership role in coordinating a wide range of programs and services for families and young children. Beach and Bertrand state that “the integration of early childhood programs and kindergarten for young children and their families builds a platform that can incorporate a host of family support, public health and early intervention initiatives.”<sup>21</sup>

The potential role of schools in the reorganization of services is cause for concern. Schools are designed to be places of learning; they are, by their nature, child-centred. The skills, knowledge and attitudes required of educators are very different from the skills, knowledge and attitudes which are required when addressing complex needs of families and communities. The concept of building a platform for family support, public health and early intervention initiatives upon a base within the education sector raises a number of questions:

- What mechanisms are being considered to incorporate these initiatives into early learning and care programs?
- What role would community partners and municipalities play?
- Would community-based organizations be able to maintain autonomy in their relationships with schools, or will school boards be mandated to replace them by offering services

directly (as was proposed in the original recommendations for the provision of child care services in Ontario)?

- Will professional development dollars be allocated to help school professionals develop the skills needed to work effectively with community groups and adult family members?
- Will the education lens emphasize child-centred practices and learning outcomes over all other priorities?
- If school boards aren't able or willing to offer support services as effectively or efficiently as community organizations, how can this re-alignment be justified?

### **The role of community partners**

In order to achieve desired outcomes for children, families must have access to community programs which promote family functioning and prevent early problems from escalating. A comprehensive early childhood development policy would ensure that educational programs for children are complemented by a broad range of adequately funded programs and services for families, especially during the sensitive period when their children are very young. To obtain the most effective results, the scope of services should be broadly focused on the health and well-being of the whole family. For example, programs that provide nutritional and emotional support to expectant mothers in order to promote healthy birth weights make enormous and long-lasting contributions in both economic and social terms. However, the current swing of the pendulum toward educational achievement and market productivity has the potential to undermine many community programs that currently exist to support families with young children.

Essential supports for families with young children include: pre- and post-natal programs; basic necessities such as food and housing; employment programs; mental health services such as counselling and post partum depression programs; breastfeeding support; well-baby visits and immunizations; parenting groups; play groups; family literacy programs; settlement services for newcomer families; full-time, part-time and respite child care; early identification and programming for developmental delays; early identification of speech and language problems; and intensive family intervention when child neglect or abuse is a concern. These services and programs are currently organized within numerous systems and authorities including health, child welfare, settlement and social services. Although they are not formally linked through a single hierarchical system, staff in community-based programs create an integrated web of support for families based upon their knowledge of community resources and their strong relationships with other service providers.

If the distinct contributions of schools and community-based organizations were fully respected and supported through early childhood development policy, children and their families would have access to a continuum of supports which would increase parental and family capacity while at the same time improving the learning outcomes for children.

However, we note several areas of concern:

- The high cost of operating early learning and care programs in schools may lead to a corresponding loss of funding for community programs. At present, funding for many community-based programs is both insufficient and unreliable. Any reduction in the capacity of community groups would erode their ability to support families at the earliest stages of their children's development and, in so doing, undermine the very objective that early learning and care programs have been established to achieve.
- Given the vast differences in power and culture between schools and community-based organizations, mutually-respectful and satisfying partnerships can be difficult to establish and sustain. Effective relationships require good will and long-term commitment on both sides.
- Although space-sharing in schools is generally encouraged, this practice is not without challenges. With classroom space already tight due to aggressive school closure policies, schools have little choice but to ask community programs to vacate when there is a need for classroom space to accommodate full-day kindergarten. Although new policy in Ontario has been implemented in an effort to prevent this from impacting select partners, several eviction notices have already been issued during the first phase of the early learning and care implementation, and more are likely to follow. This will de-stabilize some non-profit organizations and reduce the community's capacity to provide complementary services. The harm done to these relationships will not easily be repaired.
- The potential 'schoolification' of early childhood is a concern. The Swedish experience when child care services moved under the authority of education suggests that these concerns may be warranted. Observers in Sweden have noted that preschool classes have often adopted the ways of the school, for example the organization of time and space and a focus on subject knowledge which has a tendency to be taught as something which is about doing the "right" thing or finding the "right" answer.<sup>22</sup> Academic milestones and "right" and "wrong" answers are not a good fit for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten. In addition, young children's cognitive abilities are closely linked to their social and emotional development, which is nurtured through warm adult-child interaction, mixed-age social contact and child-directed imaginative play. No matter how well-intentioned the early learning curricula, there may be a tendency for educators to rely upon familiar teaching formats such as group instruction and worksheets. This becomes an even greater concern if school-based early learning and care programs are rolled out for younger age groups.
- Finally, it appears that Ministries of Education are being positioned to take on greater responsibility for the coordination of services for young children and families, including programs offered by the community sector. A coordinated system under a single authority such as education will appeal to those who believe that a more formal infrastructure is necessary to ensure that the current array of community services can work effectively as an integrated system.

However, as described in the 2004 publication *Synergy: Integrated Approaches in Family Support*<sup>23</sup>, what may at first appear fragmented and disorganized can work surprisingly well as an informal system which connects families with the diverse services and programs they need. Early childhood policy which aims to place services for young children and their families within the purview of the highly regulated and hierarchical education system puts at risk one of the greatest assets of the community sector, namely, its ability to respond promptly to emerging needs.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In recognition of the diverse ways in which early childhood policy is now playing out across Canada, this paper proposed three overarching recommendations for consideration. Each recommendation is followed by several options for putting the recommendation into practice.

### 1. Acknowledge the primary influence of the family

“...the next round of intervention efforts should take an ecological approach seriously, investigating how to change the child-rearing context for the families rather than focusing primarily on changing the child.” - Dale Farran<sup>24</sup>

Although caregivers, teachers, elders and others in the community contribute to the well-being of children, their parents exert the greatest influence. The quality of parenting and the family environment that a child experiences from birth will profoundly influence lifelong learning and health outcomes.

Families that are struggling need and deserve extensive supports to ensure a better future for themselves and their children. These needs do not end when children reach the age of four. Factors such as poverty, poor physical or mental health, generational patterns and other stressors can have devastating and long-lasting effects. Schools can acknowledge the expertise of community organizations by facilitating linkages between families and appropriate community service providers.

Ways to acknowledge the primary influence of family:

- Give priority to programs that support families during pregnancy and when children are very young in order to promote optimal development and respond to potential problems as early as possible
- Incorporate family-centred principles and practices within all early learning and care programs
- Ensure that comprehensive family support programs continue to offer services after children start school
- Ensure high quality environments for young children in their homes and early child care settings

## 2. Build an integrated system through partnerships

“Even if such an authority [responsible for the coordination of early child development strategies] were created, or an existing authority given the appropriate mandate, it could only function effectively by acting through, and in concert with, very local (and often informal) community groups, employers, local health authorities, and other government departments. This is a tall order!” - *David Dodge*<sup>25</sup>

In 2003 when he made the above statement, David Dodge, then Governor of the Bank of Canada, didn't know which entity or entities would take on primary responsibility to implement early child development policy. He did, however, know that in order to be effective they would need to be very skilled at working with a wide range of community groups, including informal ones and municipal governments. He understood that it can be difficult for formal systems to work well with informal systems.

Ways to build an integrated system through partnerships:

- Retain responsibility for the provision of comprehensive supports for families within the community sector where mandates, experience and practices have been demonstrated to be effective
- Develop meaningful partnerships between schools, community-based organizations and parents in order to avoid duplication of effort and provide the best possible support to families with young children
- Nurture mutually respectful relationships between early learning and care staff in schools and family-serving organizations in the community so that each understands and appreciates the other's role and expertise
- Encourage collaboration between schools and community organizations through sharing resources, participating in joint staff trainings, co-sponsoring events, sitting on joint committees and engaging in other integrative strategies
- Recognize the integrative value of both informal and formal partnerships

“... schools cannot do it alone....[through] partnerships for learning, in-school and non-school supports collaborate as equal partners to work toward a shared vision for children's learning. The key element of these partnerships is that the relationships are not merely transactional in nature. Transactional relationships tend to be exchange-based and utilitarian, and are most interested in satisfying immediate needs. Instead, partnerships for learning aim to create transformative relationships, that is, relationships that are mutually beneficial, transcend self-interests to create larger meaning,



and have a focus beyond utilitarian needs. In transformational relationships, partnering entities work together to integrate and complement their services in support of children's learning. Through fostering these connections, partners are able to create a web of supports in which the linkages add up to more than the sum of their parts. These connections provide a more seamless approach to learning that addresses the complex conditions and the variety of environments in which children learn and grow. - *Harvard Family Research Project*<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Retain and expand family support programs in the community

As the number of early learning and care programs situated within schools and operated by Boards of Education increases, there may be pressure to rationalize all services for children and families within education systems. Community-based organizations currently serving families with young children may be seen as expendable, their budgets fair game.

School-based programs for preschoolers and their parents already exist in Ontario (Parent-Child Literacy Centres) and in British Columbia (Strong Start). These early literacy and numeracy programs support parents and build bridges between families and the school by preparing children for kindergarten. Their mandates are aligned with the goals of the education system. School-based programs cannot realistically replace programs in the community which currently offer the broad range of services that families with young children both need and deserve.

Ways to strengthen the family support sector:

- Recognize the long-standing contribution of family resource programs and their unique expertise in addressing social determinants of health
- Provide adequate funding and support for community-based programs offering valued services in their communities
- Ensure that community programs have the option of maintaining autonomy within school settings and, if appropriate, operating under the authority of municipal bodies

“We’re not here to ensure that children do better in school, we’re here to ensure that children do better, period!” - *Family support practitioner*<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

“A society that values children will first focus on assuring families basic conditions of well-being in homes and communities.” - Marvin Novick<sup>28</sup>

The structure of services for young children and their families in Canada is radically changing, and it is our collective responsibility to strive for the best possible outcomes. Early learning and care programs which are currently being established in schools across Canada hold the promise of reducing disparities between young children in order to increase the capacity of all children to succeed in school and in life. However, early childhood development policy will be most effective if the primary focus stays on supporting the very young child within his or her family and community. Child, family and community well-being must be equally valued, since they are inextricably linked.

It is vitally important that families continue to have access to the community supports which help them raise their children, especially if they are dealing with multiple challenges such as poverty, absence of positive parenting models, history of child maltreatment, post partum depression or other conditions that might put their children at risk for negative outcomes. Family resource programs have the expertise and the mandate to offer appropriate and comprehensive services to families and their young children. Public funding of these community programs should not be traded away to pay for higher cost education and care programs.

The well-being of children cannot be separated from the well-being of their families. While a close relationship with a teacher can have beneficial results, it is the family (for better or worse) which will continue to have the greatest influence upon the child for his or her whole life. Research is clear on the need for an ecological, life-course approach to closing current school readiness gaps.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, good public policy for early childhood development will support institutions which focus on the child in the context of family and the family in the context of community.

Some policy makers believe that it is more efficient to work with children directly, rather than tackle deeply-rooted issues at the family level.<sup>30</sup> It is certainly true that reaching and engaging families can be challenging and requires particular skill sets and attitudes. But helping families, especially troubled families, is the most important and rewarding work that we as a society can do. It would be a travesty if public resources allocated for all-day kindergarten actually reduced the capacity of organizations which work with struggling families in the community. Programs which help families achieve optimal birth experiences, good nutrition, reduced stress, positive parenting and healthy relationships deserve constant and unwavering public support.

The implementation of early learning and care programs is a social experiment. As this experiment unfolds, everyone has the responsibility to remain open minded, be willing to reexamine the evidence upon which these programs are based, carefully monitor their effectiveness, and make changes if warranted. Children are our future; together with their families, they deserve the very best.

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- <sup>30</sup> For example, the authors of Fact and Fantasy: Eight myths about early childhood education and care state that "Family factors are more important than child care; a good, caring, supportive family situation will have decisive and positive developmental impacts on a child. However, family situations are complex and difficult to alter with public policy; extra income and parenting programs have only marginal effects. It is however possible to radically improve the typical quality of non-parental child care situations using public policy and the evidence shows that this would have strong positive effects on the lives of most children." Cleveland, G. & Krashinsky, M. Fact and Fantasy: Eight myths about early childhood education and care, Summary. Republished in *Perspectives in Family Support* Volume 2, Winter 2006, p. 12. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs. <http://www.childcarecanada.org/pubs/other/FF/FactandFantasy.pdf>

# APPENDIX A

## Family resource programs in Canada

“This program is great. We had just moved here when I started going. I met new people, got out of the house, my kids met their first friends which they still play with. I felt welcome from the first day I walked in the door. I am so grateful that there was a place like this to come.” - Parent<sup>1</sup>

“Family resource programs” or “FRPs” are generic terms for a prevention model of service delivery which emerged during the 1970s as a result of several independent community initiatives<sup>2</sup>. These informal programs enhanced child and family well-being by reducing the isolation of parents with infants, toddlers and preschoolers, by providing information and resources that encouraged healthy child development and positive parenting, and by acting as friendly access points to more traditional community services. Participation was voluntary and open to all families from diverse backgrounds and life circumstances<sup>3</sup>. The goal was not to fix problems, but rather to offer the kinds of supports which had traditionally been available within extended families and close-knit communities. The holistic approach to service delivery acknowledged the complex and ever-changing needs of families<sup>4</sup>. Many of the first family resource programs continue to provide services to families in their communities, and thousands more have been established during the intervening decades. Although the majority of family resource programs are independent not-for-profit organizations, some operate within large multi-service organizations such as YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs or community health centres.

Family resource centres aim to be welcoming and inclusive. They are located in settings such as community centres, schools, church basements, storefronts or neighbourhood houses, where parents and others in the parenting role can spend time with their young children and with each other. Over time, staff and participants develop mutually-respectful and trust-based relationships. Staff members are often hired from the community and bring to their work a range of formal and informal credentials; personal warmth and people skills are highly prized. By enhancing the capacity and confidence of parents and caregivers, family resource programs endeavour to strengthen families and communities. The well-being of both children and adults is attended to.

Family resource centres are responsive to participants’ diverse needs. For example, babies, toddlers and preschoolers can explore stimulating and safe environments, manipulate materials, play alongside other children of different ages, learn songs and rhymes during Circle Time and share the pleasures of picture books with their parents. Parents or caregivers are able to talk with other participants and staff about the joys and challenges of child rearing, chat with a public health nurse, borrow high quality and age appropriate toys, books and equipment, or access resources on a myriad of topics from car seat safety to understanding temperament. Specific program components are developed in response to identified needs. They may include fathering groups, family literacy activities, clothing exchanges, cooking groups, parenting sessions and

workshops on topics of interest. Activities are designed to increase capacity in many domains including physical and mental health, parenting, lifelong learning, and community development.

The high degree of flexibility and responsiveness found at family resource programs is facilitated by their relatively independent status and their governance structures. As community-based not-for-profit organizations, family resource programs are usually governed by volunteer Boards of Directors comprised of community members; program participants often serve as Directors. With Board support and guidance, decisions can be made quickly in response to emerging community needs. Power-sharing and collaboration with other community groups is a natural aspect of this work. Frequently, family resource programs act as honest brokers to help create new partnerships and initiatives within their communities<sup>5</sup>.

Today, thousands of family resource programs across Canada operate according to similar, but not identical, mandates; they offer different program components; they are known by many names<sup>6</sup>; and they are supported through many kinds of funding.<sup>7</sup> They are not organized into a single, hierarchical system. However, the family support field has a strong sense of cohesion. Centres and practitioners are closely linked through shared values and holistic, strength-building practices which set the family support sector apart from traditional systems such as education, health and social services<sup>8,9,10,11,12</sup>. See The Guiding Principles of Family Support in Appendix C.

Research at FRP Canada and elsewhere has focused on many aspects of family support practice; those who wish to learn more about this unique approach to service delivery are invited to access FRP Canada's publications ([www.frp.ca](http://www.frp.ca), resources).

FRP Canada has developed evidence-based tools<sup>13</sup> to help its members assess the impact of their programs and services. The online *e-Valuation* system was launched in 2006. To date, over 15,000 participant surveys have been inputted and analyzed. Parents report positive outcomes for themselves, their children and their families associated with their participation at family resource programs<sup>14</sup>.

## Appendix A References

<sup>1</sup> Participant comment, FRP Canada's *e-Valuation* system, 2008-2009.

<sup>2</sup> Kyle, I., & Kellerman, M. (1998). *Case Studies of Canadian Family Resource Programs*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

<sup>3</sup> Many family resource programs focus primarily on the needs of families with young (pre-school aged) children. Some also offer programming for school-aged children such as homework clubs, recreation programs, camps and babysitting courses; some have programs for youth and/or seniors as well.

<sup>4</sup> Smythe, S. Understanding Family Support Programs in FRP Canada's *Perspectives in Family Support*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2004, 5-14. <http://www.frp.ca/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewDocument&documentid=4&documentFormatId=450>

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs. (2004). *Synergy: Integrated Approaches in Family Support*. Ottawa, ON: author.

<sup>6</sup> For example family resource centre, family place, maison de la famille, organisme communautaire à la famille, Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), Parent Link Centre, Ontario Early Years Centre, neighbourhood house, parent-child centre and military family resource centre.

<sup>7</sup> Federal funding includes CAPC (Community Action Programs for Children), CPNP (Canada Pre-natal Nutrition Program), Military Family Resource Centres and Aboriginal Head Start. Many family resource centres are funded by provincial and territorial programs; others are funded through a combination of donations, community service groups, United Way, their municipalities etc. Typically, family resource programs rely upon multiple funding sources.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolmson, J. (2002). *Putting the Pieces Together: A Conceptual Framework for Family Support Practice*. Ottawa, ON: FRP Canada, the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, D. A. (2002). *Discovering Our Capacities*. Ottawa, ON: FRP Canada.

<sup>10</sup> MacAulay, J. (2002). *Tensions & Possibilities: Forging Better Links Between Family Resource Programs and Child Welfare*. Ottawa, ON: FRP Canada.

<sup>11</sup> Trivette, C., Dunst, C., & Hamby, D. Influences of Family-systems Intervention Practices on Parent-Child Interactions and Child Development in *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, May 2010 30:3-19.

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<sup>13</sup> FRP Canada. *Evidence for Family Support: 10 themes*. [www.frp.ca/evidence](http://www.frp.ca/evidence).

<sup>14</sup> Annual summaries of e-Valuation data can be found at [www.frp.ca/e-Valuation](http://www.frp.ca/e-Valuation).



## APPENDIX B

### Family-centered practice: How family resource programs work with families

“...sometimes the best intervention strategy for young children with serious behavioral or emotional problems is to focus directly on the primary needs of those who care for them.” - *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child*<sup>1</sup>

Family-level challenges require family-level solutions. Programs and services that are designed to effect change in families and improve outcomes for children rely upon the active participation of one or both parents. Family resource programs have a long history of attracting and engaging parents of young children, including those that may be marginalized and distrustful of public systems. *How* services are offered is considered even more important than *what* form they take, since it is the relationship between family and practitioner which defines the outcomes<sup>2</sup>.

Dr. Carl Dunst and his colleagues from the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute in North Carolina have spent many years studying the impact of family-centred practice on family and child outcomes. In a recent meta-analysis of eight studies involving hundreds of infants, toddlers and preschoolers<sup>3</sup>, they concluded that “capacity-building helpgiving and family-systems intervention practices had direct effects on both parent self-efficacy beliefs and well-being and indirect effects on parent-child interactions and child development.”

According to Dunst and colleagues, interactions between service providers and program participants are effective in building capacity because they help family members to identify their needs, they provide supports and resources to meet these identified needs and they draw upon family strengths while developing new abilities.

“There are two dimensions of capacity-building helpgiving practices: *relational* and *participatory* helpgiving. Relational practices include behaviours typically associated with effective helpgiving (compassion, active listening, etc.) and positive staff attributions about program participant capabilities. Participatory helpgiving practices include behaviours that involve program participant choice and decision-making, and which meaningfully involve participants in actively procuring or obtaining desired resources or supports.” - C. Trivette & C. Dunst<sup>4</sup>

The approach is consistent with practice at family resource programs. Staff members build trust with participants through the development of warm and respectful relationships. Practice is built upon the belief that everyone has something to offer and the strengths to take an active part in finding their own solutions.

Some of the hallmarks of practice at family resource centres include:

- Commitment to the value of mutual aid or parent-to-parent support – participants are encouraged to value their own expertise and build their own social support networks
- Facilitation, not instruction
- Understanding that basic needs should be met before parenting issues can be addressed
- Non-categorical, holistic approach, recognizing the interconnectedness of the multiple dimensions in families' lives
- Cultural sensitivity and respect for participants' life stories
- Flexibility, ability to respond to specific needs quickly

“Parents have told us that simply being accepted and trusted, and being given physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual support in the daunting task of parenting alone helped to give them strength at a time of crisis to move on with their life and make good long-term decisions for themselves and for their children.” - *Family resource practitioner*<sup>5</sup>

“Parents are more willing to participate in a parenting program when it is facilitated by someone who also advocates and supports them around meat-and-potatoes issues that are more pressing, e.g. child welfare challenges, income assistance, food security.” - *Family resource practitioner*<sup>6</sup>

“The difference in a family resource program is that we serve the whole community. We know our families by name and are able to come alongside parents to support them. We can connect them to the community, giving them a sense of belonging and confidence. They are not a client or a caseload. We have the opportunity to change lives by speaking to the whole person.” - *Family resource practitioner*<sup>7</sup>

The following real story was shared with FRP Canada by a family support practitioner. It demonstrates the breadth of support that can be offered at a family resource program and the benefit for the whole family that can be achieved when genuine, respectful relationships are established and when program objectives focus on family well-being and the social determinants of health.

*About five years ago, a mother started coming to our centre for her children, to help them prepare for school. She showed no interest in connecting with other adults; she'd just sit in a corner waiting for the children's program to end and*

then leave. Slowly we started to engage with her and have been able to come alongside her in many areas over the years to provide support. We have helped her with parenting questions and school issues, as well as with finding a free preschool spot at our centre, free dance lessons, food, clothing and new-baby supplies. She has been linked up with a not-for-profit organization to help her renovate her housing, which was rundown and not adequate for her and her three children. In addition, she has gradually built up a group of friends. And now, thanks to the FutureSave<sup>8</sup> project, we have helped her to set up RESPs for her children and to start getting her financial affairs in order.

As this account reveals, a number of serious family issues were addressed over time which will have significant impact on the children's development and long-term outcomes. If the program's focus had only been on children's learning outcomes, many of these activities or interventions would not have occurred.

## Appendix B References

<sup>1</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2008). *Mental Health Problems in Early Childhood Can Impair Learning and Behavior for Life, Working Paper 6*, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Mann, B. (2008). *What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parenting Education*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada). Findings from this extensive literature review are also summarized into five resource sheets for practitioners at <http://www.parentsmatter.ca>, click on "For Facilitators." To access ten brief literature summaries focusing on themes relating to general practice at family resource programs, visit [www.frp.ca/evidence](http://www.frp.ca/evidence).

<sup>3</sup> Trivette, C., Dunst, C., & Hamby, D. Influences of Family-systems Intervention Practices on Parent-Child Interactions and Child Development in *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, May 2010 30:3-19.

<sup>4</sup> Trivette C., Dunst C. (2009). Community-based parent support programs. Rev ed. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, QC: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, 1-7. [http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Trivette-DunstANGxp\\_rev.pdf](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Trivette-DunstANGxp_rev.pdf). Accessed Aug. 23, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Family support practitioner quoted in Mann, B. (2008) *What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parenting Education*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada), p. 5.

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<sup>7</sup> Member of FRP Canada in private correspondence, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> FutureSave is a 3-year project awarded to FRP Canada by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada in 2008. Activities include training practitioners to offer workshops to low-income parents about the availability of government grants and bonds to assist with saving for their children's post secondary education.

## APPENDIX C

### Guiding Principles of Family Support<sup>1</sup>

1. Family support programs are open to all families, recognizing that all families deserve support.
2. Family support programs complement existing services, build networks and linkages, and advocate for policies, services and systems that support families' abilities to raise healthy children.
3. Family support programs work in partnership with families and communities to meet expressed needs.
4. Family support programs focus on the promotion of wellness and use a prevention approach in their work.
5. Family support programs work to increase opportunities and to strengthen individuals, families and communities.
6. Family support programs operate from an ecological perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of families' lives.
7. Family support programs value and encourage mutual assistance and peer support.
8. Family support programs affirm parenting to be a life-long learning process.
9. Family support programs value the voluntary nature of participation in their services.
10. Family support programs promote relationships based on equality and respect for diversity.
11. Family support programs advocate non-violence to ensure safety and security for all family members.
12. Family support programs continually seek to improve their practice by reflecting on what they do and how they do it.

<sup>1</sup> Malcolmson, J. (2002) *Putting the Pieces Together: A Conceptual Framework for Family Support Practice*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.