

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*¹

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 outcomes².

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 preschoolers³, 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.

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.

“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*⁴

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*⁵

“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*⁶

“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*⁷

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 FutureSave⁸ 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.

References

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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. Accessed Aug. 23, 2010.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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. 36.

⁷ Member of FRP Canada in private correspondence, 2010.

⁸ 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.