

# Understanding Family Support Programs<sup>1</sup>

by **Suzanne Smythe**

## ▼ Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive summary of key issues emerging from the field of family support and related resources. The principles of family support are presented as well as a description of key characteristics and features of community-based family support programs. The article also highlights the theoretical models (the ecological model, theories of social support, and social capital) underpinning family support practice. Summaries of research that investigates the impact of family support for families, parents, and children are included as well as material which focuses on the collaborative nature of family support practice, training needs of program staff, and evaluation. Practitioners, researchers, and educators will find the material organized in a succinct and accessible format.

This article was commissioned from FRP Canada by the Canadian Child Care Federation. It first appeared in *Research Connections Canada*, Vol. 8, published by the Canadian Child Care Federation in 2002. CCCF has granted FRP Canada permission to reprint the article and retains copyright of this material.

1. The term family resource program (FRP) has been widely used in Canada to describe a range of family-serving community-based organizations that use holistic and strength-based approaches in their work. The term family support has recently been adopted to refer to these programs as well as what they do. This document will generally use the term family support program, except when the term family resource program appears in the title of a cited resource.

This resource is designed for child care and family advocates who want to educate staff, organization members, policy makers and funding agencies about the theories, principles and practices of family support work. The document addresses five common questions about family support programs:

- *What is a family support program?*
- *How do family support programs work with families and parents?*
- *How do family support programs work with children?*
- *How do family support programs work with communities?*
- *How do family support programs promote quality in their work?*

## What is a family support program?

Family support programs are community-based organizations that support families in a variety of ways. They are known by various titles and terms depending on the region in which they are located. These include: family (or parent-child) resource centre; family place; family centre; maison de la famille; and maison des parents. Family support programs may be free-standing organizations or linked to a school, community centre, child care program, women's centre, neighbourhood house or native friendship centre. Programs operate out of many different venues including community centres, churches, schools, apartment buildings and even shopping malls. Although their funding sources may come from unique sources, CAPC/CPNP projects (Community Action Program for Children and the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program), Early Years Centres in Ontario, Military Family Resource Centres and Neighbourhood Houses also come under the umbrella of family support programs.

Family support programs have strong grassroots origins. They are often informal in structure and driven by community members who organize around a particular concern or issue, such as access to health care information or educational toys for children, prenatal care or the desire to break down the social isolation experienced by many parents. The programs and services offered by family support programs vary according to community context and available resources. As a family support program grows, it may expand its services and formalize its structures, but the values of mutuality, democratic participation and responsiveness to local issues remain important.

Recent research describes the theories, principles and practices of family support work.

Malcolmson, J. (2002). *Putting the Pieces Together: A Conceptual Framework of Family Support Practice*. Ottawa: FRP Canada

This document is the product of national consultations and research in the family support field in Canada. The framework describes relationships among key elements of family support work and sets out a definition, guiding principles and examples of family support activities. The conceptual framework provides the following definition of a family support program:

Family support programs are community-based organizations working with children, families and caregivers to enhance strengths, to build capacities and to promote healthy development.

Family support programs deliver a range of services guided by principles that focus on building supportive relationships, facilitating growth, respecting diversity and furthering community development.

Family support programs vary depending on their size, mandate and resources. Services are flexible, accessible and offered in an informal atmosphere. These services may be provided in partnership with other groups. Family support services include:

- child development
- community development
- community outreach
- counselling and mediation
- drop-in programs
- early learning and care
- educational upgrading
- employment assistance
- family literacy
- food and nutrition support
- parent and caregiver support
- parent education
- peer contact and mutual support
- play and recreation
- promotion of health and safety
- referrals to other resources
- toy lending

The guiding principles of family support are:

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.

Kyle, I. and Kellerman, M. (1998). *Case Studies of Canadian Family Resource Programs: Supporting Families, Children and Communities*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs

This book of case studies is the first in Canada to document the work of family support programs. The Case Studies resource describes theories and concepts that are common to family support programs. These are:

- The ecological model of human development
- Social support
- Social capital

### The Ecological Model of Human Development

Bronfenbrenner, Urie. (1979) *The Ecological Model of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

The most succinct way to describe the essence of the ecological model is to quote John Donne: "No man [sic] is an island."

Bronfenbrenner identified four contexts, or systems for human development. The relationship among these systems is ecological – they are interdependent and interconnected.

From the perspective of family support work, the significance of the ecological model is the need to work with children and families in a holistic manner.

Individual experience and development is shaped by the factors within each system and the relationships among the systems.

*The micro-system:* The setting in which the child directly participates such as the family, child care setting, school.

*The exosystem:* The systems that shape the immediate (micro) system such as the neighbourhood, parents' working lives, health and education services.

*The macrosystem:* Broader cultural and social values, political ideologies and practices that are often represented in social policy.

*The mesosystem:* The interaction within and between each of these systems. For example, the interaction between homes and schools (meso-system) may be very positive, which contributes to a more cohesive neighbourhood (interaction between meso-system and exo-system). The opposite may also be true.

From the perspective of family support work, the significance of the ecological model is the need to work with children and families in a holistic manner. This means paying attention not just to individual behaviours of a child or parent, but to the broader context of the individual's life: home life, school or child care, the neighbourhood, work, and the broader values and attitudes of society.

There is a connection between the ecological model and the concepts of social support and social capital. All three assume a dynamic connection between the individual, the family and the environment in which they live.

### Social support

Social support is defined by Dunst (1985) as the forms of socializing agents that include, but are not limited to the family, neighbourhood, religious organizations etc. The following resources describe forms of social support vital to families and the role of family support programs in mobilizing social supports for families.

Dunst, C. (2000). *Rethinking Early Intervention. Topics in Early and Special Education. Summer, 2000, Vol. 20, Issue 2, p. 95*

Dunst distinguishes between informal and formal social support. Informal supports include the family, neighbourhood, religious organizations and so on. Formal supports are those offered by professional organizations and "experts,"

including counselling services, education programs etc. While formal supports provide important resources to families, it is informal supports that most positively relate to family, child and parent functioning.

Thus, family support programs strive to mobilize families' existing informal supports or to help families create new ones.

### Social capital

Another key concept that is important to family support work with communities is social capital. Early uses of this term are associated with French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu and with James S. Coleman of Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago. The term captures the idea that social connection, social activity and social bonding have value for individuals and for society. The following sources expand on this idea and connect social capital to the work of community-based organizations such as family support programs.

**Putman, R. (2001). *Social Capital: Measurement and Consequences*. ISUMA, Spring, pp. 41-51**

Putman's main point is that social capital in the form of social bonds, social connectedness and social involvement in communities leads to reciprocity. According to his preliminary research, this seems to be positively linked to many other factors such as success in schooling, more citizen involvement in local issues, lower crime rates, higher quality of life for children and healthier people. The value of social connection is in feelings of reciprocity that people share for one another.

**Woolcock, M. (2001). *The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes*. ISUMA, Spring, pp. 11-17**

According to Woolcock, "the basic idea of social capital is that one's family, friends and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called upon in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and/or leveraged for material gain" (p. 12). Woolcock argues that poverty is a function of exclusion from these assets and other bases of power in society such as government, the economy, the media for example. The implications of this for community organizations is that it is not enough just to "reach out" to poor or isolated communities; it is necessary to help them to "scale up" by forging alliances and relationships with people and institutions (such as local governments, schools, public health systems) that *have* power.

These views on social capital relate to family support work in two ways. First, by working to mobilize social networks and providing a context for social connection, family support programs are important engines for building social

capital in families and communities. Second, by finding ways to link families to institutions of power such as schools, health care systems and so on, family support programs address the processes of marginalization and exclusion that contribute to poverty.

### How do family support programs work with families and parents?

Families are diverse. An important principle of family support programs is to embrace the diverse structures and strategies that families use for raising their children. While most program participants are biological parents and their children, family support programs include as parents all those who have a significant relationship with the child. These can include adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents, child care providers, teachers, relatives, friends and neighbours. The following perspectives inform family support work with parents.

#### Developmental perspectives on parenting

Family support programs view parenting as a learning process. Parents' skills, knowledge and insights develop in concert with their children's development. The following source elaborates on the developmental perspective on parenting. This perspective acknowledges that individuals begin their parenting lives at different emotional and social places, which are shaped by current circumstances as well as personal and family histories.

**Dunst, Carl (1995). *Key Characteristics and Features of Community-Based Family Support Programs*. Commissioned Paper II. Chicago: Family Resource Coalition**

Dunst describes three key features of the developmental perspective on parenting.

First, it emphasizes the important role of parents as nurturer "and the capacity for parental growth and development" (p. 11).

Second, parents' capacity as nurturers is determined by features of the family support network, characteristics of the neighbourhood and community supports and other factors such as life experience, materials resources and so on.

Third, it is important to acknowledge existing parenting knowledge as starting points for building confidence and competence: all parents have strengths.

These three features guide family support programs in working with parents as adult learners, who have a wealth of experience to share and the capacity to continue to learn and grow.

## Educational approaches for working with parents

Smythe, S. and Weinstein, L. (2000). *Weaving Literacy into Family and Community Life*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs and the Movement for Canadian Literacy

Smythe and Weinstein identify three main approaches family support programs adopt when working with parents. It is important to note how these approaches reflect family support program guiding principles, and the belief that all parents have skills, knowledge and strengths they can share with others.

### Experiential learning

Experiential learning is a theory of learning that recognizes that people learn from experience, and from reflecting on experience: connecting new understandings to existing ones. Brenda Hall, a coordinator of a family support program in the North West Territories, calls this “gentle learning” According to Brenda, gentle learning involves taking advantage of a teachable moment such as an incident, event or discussion topic to help participants make connections between their experiences and new ideas. This approach is in keeping with an ethos of collaboration and mutuality where staff members are not experts but facilitators and co-learners. Many family support staff use the experiential learning cycle in their work with families. This cycle was first developed by Kolb (1975), and now takes many forms. The stages in the cycle are:

1. Describing the learning experience;
2. Reflecting on the experience: what did we/you notice?
3. What does this mean to us/you?
4. How can we/I/you learn from this? How does this experience apply to us as a group/as individuals?

### Modeling

Family support staff model ways of interacting with children and adults that are respectful and that create opportunities for open sharing, for language development and positive discipline. Parents and caregivers learn from this modelling in ways that connect with where they are in their own development.

### Empowerment

Paulo Freire (1972). *Education for Liberation*. New York: Routledge

Empowerment is hard to define, but as Dunst (2000) points out, people know it when they see it. Empowerment

education is based on the theories of Paolo Friere, among others. Freire believed that education that respects people’s experiences and knowledge and involves people in identifying and solving their own problems, can lead to social change. Many community-based organizations, including family support programs, have adapted and built upon Freirian ideas in their education work with parents and communities.

### Respecting values

Common to these three approaches to learning is respect for the values that families and parents bring to their parenting. Each family brings its own history and experience to the role of parenting, and their values stem from these. While a culture or community may share certain values, no two families have exactly the same sets of values. Thus, family support work is not about changing people’s values, but helping people to recognize the values that they do hold and the impact of these on their parenting decisions.

### How adult learning approaches come together in work with parents

Herman, S. and Marcenco, M. (1996). Parents’ perspectives on quality in family support programs. *Journal of Mental Health Administration*, Spring 96, Vol. 23, Issue 2, pp. 156-160

This study summarizes approaches used in family support programs that parents felt were very successful. The findings highlight that education approaches need not involve formal teaching, but rather experiential learning, modeling and empowerment.

Herman conducted focus groups with 300 parents who participated in family support programs that assisted them in dealing with their children’s disabilities. They asked them about the practices that they felt were most effective in working with parents. The most common answers were:

- *Process*. Respect, focus on relationship-building, feeling of belonging and connectedness with staff and other parents.
- *Opportunities to network with other parents*. The empowerment learning models helped parents to realize that valuable knowledge and resources existed within the group and that support was there for them.
- *Accurate and timely information*. It was important for parents to get accurate, clear information, in good time, to help them make their own decisions.
- *Access to services*: The lack of barriers to participating in programs, such as user fees, bureaucratic red tape

such as referrals, wait lists and criteria for participation made it easier for everyone to feel they belonged and wanted to be there.

The responses reflect adult learning approaches described above, and also highlight parent views of quality in family support programs.

## How do family support programs work with children?

The concepts described above – the ecological model, social support and social capital – are as important to working with children as they are to working with parents. Below are some additional concepts and approaches family support programs use in working with children.

### Child development

Family support programs adhere to principles of child development and design learning for children and families that reflect these principles. The following sources articulate child development principles as they relate to family support work:

**Guy, Kathleen, A. (1997). *Our Promise to Children*. Ottawa: Canadian Institute of Child Health**

This book reviews findings in human development and early brain development research. The authors identify four factors that are essential to children's optimal development:

- *Protection from harm and neglect*. this protection is needed from conception to adulthood and ranges from proper nutrition to protection from emotional and physical abuse.
- *Quality relationships*. "Children's developmental potential is supported or diminished by the care and attention they receive from parents, teachers, neighbours, friends, family members"
- *Opportunity and hope*. Children and young people need opportunity to play, to learn, to share their ideas and their feelings, and to have a sense of hope for the future.
- *Community*. The families in which children grow need support networks, services and social cohesion. This can be brought about by equitable distribution of wealth, fair decision-making practices and responsive governments.

Family support programs promote child development for example through:

- parent education about child development;

- language development programs such as singing and story telling;
- facilitating play groups;
- modelling and educating parents about co-operative discipline

### Early brain development

Recent technological developments have made it possible for scientists to study the developing brain as it responds to its environment. They have found that the brain is a social organ that responds to conditions in its environment, and that there are sensitive periods between the ages of 0-6 years that shape children's social, emotional and cognitive development in important ways. The findings have broad important implications for the work of family support programs, for child care programs and for social policy. In many ways, they confirm scientifically what family support programs and the people who started them in grass roots settings have known for some time: children need loving, stimulating environments and families need a range of social supports to provide these. The following resources are just two among many that outline the implications of early brain research for family support work.

**Nourish, Nurture, Neurodevelopment: Neuro-developmental Research, Implications for Caregiver Practice. (2001) Ottawa: Canadian Child Care Federation and the Canadian Institute of Child Health**

This kit was put together in an effort to make the findings of early brain research easier to understand and apply to the daily lives of children and families. The resource is written for parents and caregivers of young children in early child care settings. The kit provides practical information, including resource sheets, posters and a summary of research findings, on four key elements that promote early brain development: breastfeeding, healthy attachment, responsive care and protection from harm.

**McCain, M. N. and Mustard, Fraser, J. (1999). *The Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain*. Final Report. Ottawa: The Canadian Institute for Advanced Research**

This study summarizes recent findings in neurological science (the study of the developing brain), and the implication of these findings for supporting early childhood development in homes, communities and in social policies. The researchers note that there are sensitive periods of brain development in the early years, periods in which adequate and appropriate stimulation is necessary to create "pathways" to further cognitive, social and emotional development. The report notes that at the same time as we are recognizing the importance of nurturing and protective environments for children in the early years, families are ex-

periencing unprecedented stresses related to work, income and parenting. Among its recommendations, the report underscores the need for family support services to address and alleviate stressors, and the need for education on a community level about the developmental needs of young children.

### Promoting Resiliency

Howard, S. and Johnson, B. (2000). *What Makes the Difference? Children and teachers talk about resilient outcomes for children "at risk."* *Educational Studies*, Vol. 26, Issue 3, p.321

The concept of resiliency is tied to both Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development and to a strengths-based approach to child development. According to Howard and Johnson (2000), rather than focus on the deficits of children living in difficult circumstances, research into children's resiliency is focused on the assets and strengths that contribute to children's competency. A question that researchers of resiliency ask is: What makes "at risk" children apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others? (Howard and Johnson, 2000, p. 322).

Howard and Johnson's research suggests that characteristics of resilient children are social competence, problem solving skills, mastery, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and a future. Factors in the environment that support these characteristics are:

- An ethos of care in schools and community organizations in which everyone is seen as having a stake in the well-being of all children;
- Respectful and ongoing communication between homes and schools;
- The consistent presence of a caring individual in the child's life.

Family support programs promote resiliency by offering education and recreational programs to all children and families, by promoting an ethos of care among individuals and community organizations, and by educating the public about

Family support programs promote resiliency by offering education and recreational programs to all children and families, by promoting an ethos of care among individuals and community organizations, and by educating the public about child and family issues.

child and family issues. These strategies are also important in supporting and strengthening communities.

### How do family support programs work with communities?

The implications of Bronfenbrenner's model is that "it takes a whole village to raise a child." Three concepts that are important to family support work in communities are:

- Promoting safe and cohesive neighbourhoods
- Asset-based community development
- Community collaboration

### Promoting safe and cohesive neighbourhoods

It is widely believed that communities, and more specifically, local neighbourhoods, strongly shape parenting practices and children's development, particularly as children grow older. This is linked to the concept of resilience described above. Children who live in neighbourhoods that promote an ethos of care for all children

will be more resilient to the effects of other difficult circumstances in their lives. The following sources represent research on the importance of neighbourhoods.

Brooks-Gunn, J., Duncan, G. and Aber, J.L. (Eds). (1997). *Neighbourhood Poverty: Context and Consequences for Children, Volume 1*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation

The authors of this volume report on longitudinal and multidisciplinary studies of neighbourhood influences on children at various stages of their development. They found that although family characteristics remain a powerful predictor for aspects of child development, the neighbourhood shapes parenting experiences in important ways, such as social support available to parents, the effects of low vs. high income households in the neighbourhood, and availability of resources and education. Neighbourhood characteristics also became important for child outcomes at the time of transition to school, and in early adolescence. This research suggests the importance of building mixed-income neighbourhoods offering a variety of resources for families,

and of paying particular attention to family needs at times of transition, such as Kindergarten/Grade One entry and early adolescence.

### Asset-based community development

*“Strengths- and asset-based models evolved in response to the increased recognition that building on strengths, interests, preferences, and so forth is a more productive approach to affecting behavior change than are efforts directed primarily toward correcting weaknesses or alleviating deficits (Benson, 1997; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).”* Carl Dunst, 2000, p.5

An important part of family support work is to find out about, and build upon, positive initiatives and capacities already present in a community. The following resource articulates this “asset-based” approach to community development.

**Kretzmann, J. and McKnight, J.P. (1996). *Building Community from the Inside Out*. Chicago: ACTA Publications**

These authors distinguish between the knowledge and solutions that arise from “needs-focussed” development and “capacity-focussed development.” A “needs” perspective focuses on problems in a neighbourhood and the deficiencies of those who live there. Solutions seek to address these needs and deficiencies by providing services from outside. The result is often short-term, fragmented initiatives that have very little impact on the main issues facing a neighbourhood. “Capacity-focused development” focuses instead on the “capacities, skills and assets of lower income people and their neighbourhoods” (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1996, p.3). This approach recognizes that significant community development takes place only when members are committed to the process and willing to be involved in creating solutions. It focuses on the issues and abilities of local people, and on building relationships between and among local residents, associations and institutions.

### Collaboration

Family support programs strive to enhance rather than replace what is available in the community. Working with existing organizations is important for the following reasons:

- It is more cost effective;
- It allows projects to combine their resources and skills to better work with families;
- It reduces barriers to access;
- It promotes a holistic perspective of family life by linking education, health, child development,

community and economic development, and other factors central to family well-being.

In *Case Studies of Family Resource Programs* by Kyle and Kellerman (1998), the authors describe the range of organizations with whom family support programs collaborate. These include:

- child care centres
  - employment and job search programs
  - literacy organizations
  - community colleges
  - libraries
  - local small businesses
  - cultural centres and community centres
  - elementary schools
  - women’s centres
  - public health departments
- and many more...

The following resource describes the collaborative activities of family support programs and the values that underlie them.

**Smythe, S. and Weinstein, L. (2000). *Weaving Literacy into Family and Community Life, Book Five: A Literacy Workers’ Guide to Family Resource Programs*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs**

- *Examples of collaborative activities*  
Examples include: sharing space; staff training; co-writing funding proposals; co-developing and offering literacy and employment programs; providing in-kind services such as child-care and snacks; running a community kitchen; story time or family drop-in; offering counselling services in exchange for use of an office or meeting space, etc.
- *Values guiding family support program partnerships*
  - Agree not to compete for funds, clients or contracts with non-profit organizations doing similar work. Rather, strive to complement and enhance existing initiatives.
  - Understand that programs and services belong to the community, not to individual organizations.
  - Be willing to “let go” of a program and see it grow and change in another setting.
  - Be committed to reaching the “hard to reach” without targeting or stigmatizing certain groups.
  - Work hard to build trust among partners;
  - Follow an enhancement (asset) model: Focus on abilities and capacities that families already have.

## How do family support programs achieve and maintain quality in their practice?

There are three main strategies for promoting quality in family support programs:

- The development of a quality practice framework
- The formulation of a staff training and development strategy
- Program evaluation

### A quality practice framework for family support work

Malcolmson, J. (2002). *Putting the Pieces Together: A Conceptual Framework of Family Support Practice*. Ottawa: FRP Canada

As described at the beginning of this document, the family support field has developed a framework to promote quality practice. The quality practice framework identifies important ingredients for promoting quality in a family support program. These include:

- A definition and a set of guiding principles that speak to the values and assumptions underlying family support work;
- An emphasis on practices that reflect the guiding principles;
- An emphasis on reflective practice (thinking critically about our work as practitioners);
- A commitment to evaluation: both ongoing and summative, with an emphasis on the feedback and experiences from participating families.

### Staff training

Kellerman, I. and MacAulay, J. (1998). *Training needs assessment project: Report on a national survey*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs

Family support programs consider training and development to be one of the most important ways to ensure quality in their programs. The researchers in the training needs assessment project undertook focus groups and interviews with family support workers from across Canada. Respondents said that although they take part in a range of short-term, professional development workshops to promote quality in their practice, the main barriers to training and development are:

- the lack of available funding for training;
- inadequate staff to release people for training; and
- a lack of programs offering formal qualifications.

The barriers to staff training and development identified in this resource are addressed in the following document.

Smythe, S. and Malcolmson, J. (2002). *Staff Education, Training and Development*. Ottawa: FRP Canada

Smythe and Malcolmson report on interviews and consultations with family support workers across Canada, noting that respondents favour training and education opportunities that will not create professional hierarchies between themselves and the families with whom they work. They also want a training and development plan that does not

exclude community workers who have life experience but not necessarily formal qualifications. Staff point out that just as parents learn by reflecting on their experience, so too do workers. Thus, it is important to recognize experiential learning along with “formal” learning.

With these issues in mind, the family support field is calling for a training strategy that includes a range of options including short and long-term training, in-service training and more structured programs leading to credentials. Possible models include train-the-trainer, partnerships with college and university departments, support and expansion of the existing Ryerson Family Support certificate, models for recognizing and accrediting prior experience, and short term, in-house training.

Family support programs consider training and development to be one of the most important ways to ensure quality in their programs.

### Evaluation

As described earlier, program evaluation is an important way to promote quality in family support programs. Evaluations show that staff members are accountable for their work, and they provide an opportunity to involve participants in shaping quality practices that reflect family and community values and interests. Program evaluation has also become a key tool for funders in tracking the outcomes of family support work. The two documents reviewed below underline the evolving thinking about the relationships between appropriate evaluation methods and program quality.

Ellis, D. (1998). *Finding our way: A participatory evaluation method for family resource programs*. Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs

This resource promotes a view of evaluation that is based on the notions of success shared by program participants, rather than just outside agencies. The author emphasizes the importance of ongoing evaluation (collecting information during programs) and the involvement of staff and participants in deciding on what an evaluation should focus on and the methods that should be used. Issues of power and confidentiality are positioned at the centre of evaluation process. The author recommends ways to share results with the participants, the funders, the community and so on. This sharing is vitally important in promoting ownership and community involvement.

**Schorr, L. (1997). *A New Focus on Results. Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighbourhoods to Rebuild America*. New York: Anchor Books and Doubleday. pp. 115-140**

The author documents the rise in popularity of “outcomes-based” evaluation, and considers some of the benefits and drawbacks of the approach for family support programs. The author argues that outcomes-based evaluations can benefit family support programs in three ways. They reduce the need for rigid bureaucratic regulation, the goals of a program can become more transparent and thus better supported by the community, and clearly stated outcomes can provide staff and participants with a clear idea of what they want to attain. Some drawbacks to outcomes-based evaluations include once again the issue of power. Who decides what outcomes are appropriate for families and communities to work toward? How are these often personal and long-term outcomes best measured? Many people who work in human services ask, “Why should we have to prove to hostile critics that our work is valuable?” (p. 135)? The author suggests that if there is democratic participation in the development and measurement of outcomes, the results could be greater public interest in the welfare of children, families and communities.

**Gabor, P. (2003). *Evaluation of Family Resource Programs: Challenges and Promising Approaches*. Ottawa: FRP Canada**

In an effort to move toward more appropriate evaluation of family resource programs in Canada, FRP Canada undertook a two-year project under the direction of Dr. Peter Gabor of the University of Calgary. After gathering information through a literature review, a national survey and extensive consultations with family support practitioners, evaluation experts and funders across Canada, Gabor presents key findings and makes a number of recommenda-

tions to ensure future collection of reliable and meaningful data from the field. Gabor discovered that evaluations are often designed and structured to meet system-level information needs of funders and that they are focussed more on *proving* than on *improving*, therefore having low utility for the programs themselves.

**Suzanne Smythe** is an adult and family literacy educator and researcher based in Vancouver, BC. She has worked on a number of projects with FRP Canada, the most recent of which is the 2004-2005 Weaving Literacy Training Project, a national literacy and community building project involving family support programmes and literacy organizations. Suzanne is completing a doctoral dissertation on a social history of mothering and literacy and is interested in the relationships between literacy and community building.