



## THEME 4

# Transfer of Strategies for Increasing Family Well-being

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### Related survey items

- Since I began coming to this program, I am better able to deal with the day-to-day challenges that we encounter as a family. (Parenting Survey #6)

### Related family support principle

- Family support programs focus on the promotion of wellness and use of prevention approaches.
- Family support programs work to increase opportunities and to strengthen individuals, families and communities.

### Protective and risk factors

For the benefit of our social and economic fabric, we need to invest in supporting families to provide the best possible environment for their growing children (Bertrand et al., 1999). Healthy development is

threatened when families face multiple problems and stressors (CSSP, 2004; Landy & Tam, 1998; Prilleltensky, Nelson & Peirson, 2001). Parenting style, family functioning and the absence or presence of maternal depression are strong predictors of which children will get a good start in life (Willms, 2002).

Risk factors to children may be present in the home environment, for instance domestic violence, alcohol abuse, social isolation and aggressive behaviour. In addition, children's behaviour may be difficult for parents to handle, resulting in a greater risk of being caught in an escalating cycle of conflict with parents, which may lead to physical abuse (CSSP, 2004). These risk factors occur less frequently when parents have better problem-solving skills and are able to deal better with day-to-day challenges. The same parental abilities increase the protective factors that can buffer children from the negative effects of the environment. Working with families in a systematic manner regarding family problem-solving behaviour improves parent-child interactions (Drummond, 2005).

**Domestic violence:** The leading risk factor for child abuse and neglect is the occurrence of domestic violence involving the child's mother (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). In 2003, 51 % of children confirmed to have sustained child maltreatment also had mothers who were reported to be in situations of

domestic violence, mostly as victims (Trocmé et al., 2005). By providing referrals, networking and family enrichment programming, family resource programs address this risk factor (MacAulay, 2002).

**Alcohol abuse:** Another risk factor for child maltreatment is alcohol abuse by a parent, most often the father (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). Since family stress often contributes to alcohol abuse, this risk factor for child maltreatment is also addressed by the efforts of family resource programs to improve families' problem-solving skills. In addition to assistance with developing healthy relational and problem-solving skills, high-risk families may require intensive intervention for addiction.

**Poverty:** Along with providing referrals for health services, family resource programs often provide basic resources, such as food, clothing or childcare, to families facing poverty. This support helps reduce the incidence of child maltreatment since family poverty is strongly correlated to child maltreatment (CSSP, 2004).

**Social isolation:** Parents who are socially connected are less likely to maltreat their children. Family resource programs help to reduce social isolation by increasing the level of social capital within their communities. They help families improve their social interaction skills, strengthen positive social connections and build their networks of informal social supports. In addition, they provide parents with more social opportunities outside the home and offer respite and childcare as needed (CSSP, 2004; Prilleltensky, Nelson & Peirson, 2001).

**Children's aggressive behaviour:** Early childhood is the time when children's aggressive tendencies may be most amenable to change (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). Addressing parents' control over their own physical aggression and improving their skills in teaching their child not to be physically aggressive will reduce the odds of future aggression (Casas et al., 2006; Tremblay et al., 2004). Much research shows

the high impact of assisting parents to improve their parenting early on (Brady & Coffman, 1997).

### **Strengthening the parent-child relationship**

Family resource programs aim to increase family well-being and the likelihood of optimal childhood experiences by strengthening healthy family relationships. The parent-child relationship may be the best predictor of a child's longer term functioning. For instance, poor mother-child relating in early childhood and infancy, evidenced by maternal criticism and low warmth, is associated with challenging behaviour later in childhood (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). In contrast, warm and positive child-parent relationships are associated with positive academic, social and emotional and behavioural outcomes (Moore et al., 2004). Parental warmth and empathy are also associated with adolescent children's social competence (Benard, 2004). In general, healthy child development is related to the responsiveness of caregivers (Kassaw & Dunst, 2004; CSSP, 2004).

Family resource interventions aim to encourage positive relationships between parents and their children (Powell, Dunlop, & Fox, 2006). Workers build safe, caring relationships with families within which parents learn to empathize with others and with themselves and consequently to reduce their abusive and neglectful parenting (CSSP, 2004). The relationships built at family resource centres are flexible, trusting and reciprocal - the type of relationships required to create social capital and reduce the incidence of maltreatment within families (CSSP, 2004). Workers can also encourage caring, supportive relationships with friends, intimate partners and/or professional therapists to help parents develop the psychological capacities needed to form functional relationships with their children (CSSP, 2004).

Emphasizing children's social and emotional development in family resource programs has been shown to effectively improve family relationships (CSDE, 1997) and to increase respectful, sensitive

parent-child interactions (Groark et al., 2002). Most parents want to have healthy relationships with their children, but many parents just don't know how. These programs create opportunities for parents to connect more closely with their children in meaningful ways and to create a positive shared routine for families (Silver et al., 2005). Parents become more interested in their children's activities and are better able to talk with their children (Silver et al., 2005). Such relational gains, for instance parents spending more time with their children, can be long lasting (McCurdy & Jones, 2000). They lead to better developmental outcomes for children and improved dynamics within families (Brady & Coffman, 1997; Geeraert, Van den Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004).

### **Positive impact of family resource programs**

A review of family support program evaluations indicates that these programs can provide critical benefits for families (Groark et al., 2002). Participating in family support programs brings clear improvements in general family functioning and support networks (Comer & Fraser, 1998; Dagenais, Begin, Bouchard, & Fortin, 2003). Parents have opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills for guiding children's behaviour and solving family problems (Comer & Fraser, 1998). Participation in programs can also have a significant effect on parenting behaviour and parenting attitudes (CSDE, 1997; Dillon Goodson, 2005; Grusec, 2006; Trivette & Dunst, 2005). In line with family support principles, successful parent education focusses on strengths and reflects a solid adult education approach that assists families to make their own decisions (CSSP, 2004). When programs use practices that are identified as "promising" in the field of family support, their effect on family well-being can double (Layzer et al., 2001).

Family resource programs often offer parent education to help strengthen the parent-child relationship and reduce the incidence of child maltreatment (CSSP, 2004). This can take the form of both formal courses

and informal teachable moments regarding parenting. In an environment that allows parents and caregivers to talk informally about child development and parenting, parenting skills are strengthened and family well-being improves (Silver et al., 2005). Programs to develop parent skills and capacities have been shown to have significant positive effects (Layzer et al., 2001).

Children who have participated intensively in early learning programs with a strong family support component score higher on later measures of life skills competency, are less likely to drop out of school and less likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system than those who didn't participate (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). Many of the effective early childhood education interventions provide both early childhood education and family support services (Dillon Goodson, 2005). Two organizational factors that increase the effect on children's social and emotional development are professional staff and program goals related to parental self-development. (Layzer, 2001). Parents of children who attend family resource programs are more involved with their children than those in a comparison group (Reynolds & Temple, 2005) and more involved later on with their child's school (Boethel, 2004). When parents are more engaged in their children's schools, children have better academic performance (Willms, 2004). These long-term results make family resource programs cost effective due to the increased economic benefits and reduced remediation and treatment costs for children (Reynolds & Temple, 2005).

## Annotated References

Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

Benard provides an important summary of the recent literature regarding family and community protective factors which relate to family-serving organizations. Chapter Five covers family protective factors and is particularly relevant, identifying the relational influences of resilience in children. She identifies an extensive list of protective parenting factors, notably the presence of a positive parent-child relationship. Parenting style and caring relationships are shown to impact families.

Comer, E. & Fraser M. W. (1998). Evaluation of six family-support programs: Are they effective? *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 49 (2), 134-147.

Comer and Fraser (1998) present a review of six family support program evaluations and describe factors to consider. Outcomes for children can include health, development, behaviour and social ability. Outcomes for parents can include knowledge of child development and parenting. Family outcomes can include relational interaction and home environment. Community outcomes can include the use of community services and the families' involvement in the community. They found that family support programs that "attempt to control, ameliorate and eradicate risk factors associated with socioeconomic, educational and other disadvantages can be effective in strengthening families and increasing the well-being of children."

Layzer, J.I., Goodson, B. D., Bernstein, L., & Price, C. (2001). *National evaluation of family support programs. Volume A: The meta-analysis. Final report*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates. Retrieved March 17, 2006 from <http://www.abtassociates.com/reports/NEFSP-VolA.pdf>

This evaluation reports that when family support programs include peer support opportunities for parents, parent groups rather than home visits and an early childhood component, they can have a better effect on children's cognitive development outcomes. When the organization has program goals that include parent self-development, parenting behaviour can be significantly improved, and when professional staff is used rather than paraprofessionals, children's social and emotional development improves more dramatically. In addition, parenting attitudes and knowledge are more affected in family resource programs that provide peer support opportunities for parents. This report provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature.

Reynolds, A. & Temple, J. (2005). Priorities for a new century of early childhood development programs. *Infants & Young Children: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Special Care Practices*, 18 (2), 104- 118.

An excellent current review discussing the status of investments in early childhood programs. The authors

discuss patterns of participation in early childhood programs and review research regarding the effectiveness of early childhood programs and their implications for practice. Research on Child-Parent Centers and other early education projects demonstrates evidence of high economic returns from program participation.

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This literature summary is one of ten that have been prepared in conjunction with the FRP Canada e-Evaluation project. Each literature summary addresses a theme or indicator from the Participant Survey or Staff and Volunteer Survey.

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