



## THEME 10

# Collaboration and Partnerships

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### Related survey items

- Stakeholders and community partners support this organization. (Staff and Volunteer Survey #7)
- Stakeholders and partners seem satisfied with the services offered by the centre. (Staff and Volunteer Survey #8)
- This organization engages in partnerships that enable it to provide enhanced services. (Staff and Volunteer Survey #9)

### Related family support principle

- 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.

Child and family social needs are many-sided and require a coordinated approach, involving a variety of professionals with different skills, working together for a larger impact (Daka-Mulwanda et al., 1995).

Cooperation is required among services related to the areas of health, social service, recreation, justice, child care, child welfare, libraries and education.

The McKnight Foundation (1991) asserts that “collaboration results in easier, faster and more coherent access to service and benefits and in greater effects on systems” (p. 2). For instance, more community programs are created when there is a functioning collaborative network in a community than when child and family organizations act alone (Mulroy, 1997). Family resource programs become more inclusive and attract a wider range of participants when they work with other community agencies (Silver et al., 2005). It is therefore an essential part of family support work not only to build networks with community partners, but also to nurture positive relationships with those partners, based on mutual satisfaction with the results for children and families.

### Enhancing family support through integrated services

Effective family resource centres integrate a variety of child, family and community programs (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998; Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004). Since they cannot themselves supply all of the services required for healthy families, they connect families to other service providers as needed (Brady & Coffman, 1997).

To do this effectively, they build relationships with stakeholders and other community-serving partners, particularly those in the fields of health, social service and education (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004).

In addition to making referrals, family support organizations work with partners for a variety of purposes, including mapping available community resources, gaining access to resources (space, personnel, materials), integrating their policies and services with others, sharing funding, reducing duplication of services and increasing the quality, accessibility and responsiveness of their own services (Park & Turnbull, 2003; CSDE, 1997). Relationships range from simply sharing information among organizations to formal contractual partnerships which provide a joint service (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004). Bailey and Koney (2000) refer to “strategic alliances” which they define as “intentional interorganizational relationships created to benefit the organizational partners and, ultimately, the organizations’ consumers” (p. 4). Depending on the purpose, membership and focus of the collaborative activity, some organizational collaborations are formal and the organizations become integrated, others are informal and the organizations remain independent (Bailey & Koney, 2000). FRP Canada’s two-year study of integrated approaches in family support found that informal collaborations seemed to be preferred to more formal partnerships. Despite evidence of extensive collaboration in the field, only one-quarter of the responding organizations reported having any formal or written agreements with partnering organizations. Some respondents indicated that expectations from funders that they have formal partnership agreements tended to stifle collaboration (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004).

### **Building successful relationships**

The more connections and trust a family resource

program builds with other community organizations, the more visibility it has and the more people will likely attend its programs (McCurdy & Jones, 2000). One measure of the success of “strategic alliances” is the support that family resource organizations enjoy from their partners and other community stakeholders. Such support results largely from satisfaction with the positive outcomes, such as those mentioned above, that have been achieved for families. Service providers perceive that these improved outcomes are linked to a collaborative approach to service delivery (Atkinson, 2005).

Satisfaction with the process of collaboration itself contributes to the support family resource programs enjoy from their partners and other community stakeholders. Family support workers apply their guiding principles and their skills in collaborative practice to achieve success when they work with other organizations. Several authors point to a variety of factors that lead to success: developing common goals, building trust, ensuring clear communication, facilitating collaborative process and providing adequate leadership (Einbinder et al., 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Johnson et al., 2003). Others note that successful collaborative practice also requires attention to membership composition, clarity of purpose, the environment surrounding the organizations and sufficient resources for the collaborative activity (Mattessich, Murray-Close & Monsey, 2001). Respondents to FRP Canada’s survey identified the following four elements as most important to successful collaboration: having clear goals for the project/initiative; having a process that is respectful of all members; willingness of partners to forego ego and turf issues; and the availability of funding for staff time and other costs (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004, p. 48-49).

### **Barriers to successful collaboration**

Collaboration does not always occur easily or progress smoothly. Issues such as turf protection, differences

in organizational culture, power imbalances, limited resources (both money and time), staff turnover and forced participation have been identified as factors that may impede collaboration (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004; MacAulay, 2002). Inability to share information due to confidentiality regulations is also a major barrier to collaboration (Daka-Mulwanda et al., 1995).

Recently, social service funders (governments, foundations and other funding organizations) have been accelerating the trend to partnerships by instituting funding policies that require family resource programs and other community organizations to demonstrate that they provide services in collaboration. However, partnerships formed primarily to meet funders' expectations can be less satisfactory than those which develop organically in response to common interests of two or more organizations. In the words of one program coordinator, "...the trend is to form partnerships or [else your] funding is in jeopardy, and this sometimes forces partnerships that should not exist. Partnerships should be voluntary, not forced." (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004, p. 60). Lyons (2004) refers to the pressure by government to force human services agencies into collaborative arrangements. He describes this type of collaboration as "an unnatural act between unconsenting adults" (quoted in Woodworth, 2005).

### **The role of family resource programs in building and sustaining collaborations and partnerships**

Walter & Petr (2000) argue that success depends on shared values that are based on family-centered principles. Family support organizations are thus in a unique position to facilitate collaboration among community agencies. Family support workers have experience building respectful, trusting relationships with children and families who participate in their programs and they can extend the same principles to their relationships with community partners (Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004).

They serve to remind all concerned that programs and services belong to the communities, not to the organizational leaders. They work to minimize competition as they encourage all organizations to reduce duplication and increase integration of services.

### **Evaluation of collaborations and partnerships**

Studies have shown that partnerships among community organizations have resulted in many positive outcomes (Backer, 2003; Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, 2004). Woodworth (2005) has used a framework for collaboration to evaluate the success of three collaborative projects in Brant County, Ontario. Woodworth found that partnerships depend on many factors for success, which is by no means assured. She identified management style as a key contributing factor for a successful outcome. Researchers are calling for further evaluations of the effectiveness of the collaborative ventures involved in providing services to families (Harbert, Finnegan & Taylor, 1997; Harrison, Lynch, Rosander & Borton, 1990).

## Annotated References

**Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada). (2004). *Synergy: Integrated approaches in family support*. Ottawa: FRP Canada.**

This report reflects current experience related to the provision of comprehensive services for families in Canada. It explains service integration and collaboration in a practical way for family resource centres. It presents the factors that make service integration work, the benefits as perceived by participants, practitioners and funders, the factors that contribute to positive collaborations and the factors that impede success. Examples of successful community inter-organizational initiatives are included.

**Einbinder, S. D., Robertson, P. J., Garcia, A., Vuckovic, G. & Patti, R. J. (2000). Interorganizational collaboration in social service organizations: A study of the prerequisites to success. *Journal of Children & Poverty*, 6 (2), 119-140.**

Einbinder et al. (2000) conducted a quantitative survey within a case study research design. Family resource centre collaboratives (involving public, private, nonprofit and child welfare institutions) in eight California counties were surveyed. They found that that *incentive, willingness, ability and capacity to collaborate* were four "prerequisites to effective interorganizational collaboration" (p. 127). They concluded that collaborating agencies involved in family resource centres must have sufficient reason to collaborate. Also, successful collaborations develop goals that can converge with each of the participating organizations' goals.

**Mulroy, E. A. (1997). Building a neighborhood network: Interorganizational collaboration to prevent child abuse and neglect. *Social Work*, 42(3), 255-264.**

Mulroy (1997) conducted a rigorous case study of a demonstration project to develop an integrated community family service network. Several factors were found to influence the success of that collaborative group. For example, strategic alliances worked best when attention was paid to developing a culture of mutual trust, maintaining role flexibility, building relationships, including community residents as partners, having a full-time project director and having funding for an administrative infrastructure. In addition, mutual trust was facilitated when all partner agencies were non-profit organizations. The article concludes that a collaborative community network produces more community programs than when child and family organizations act alone.

**Walter, U. & Petr, C. (2000). Template for family-centered interagency collaboration. [Electronic Version] *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 5, 494-503.**

This paper provides an introduction to collaboration and sets out a framework for successful family-centered interagency collaborations. The authors recommend that the core of such collaborations should be a commitment by family-serving organizations to shared values based on

family-centered principles. In particular, they suggest that success depends on maintaining the family as the unit of attention, maximizing families' ability to make decisions, applying a strengths perspective and being culturally sensitive.

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

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