



THEME 6

Strengthening Family Social Networks

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Related survey items

- Since I began coming to this program, I have made friends I can connect with and turn to outside of the program. (Basic Survey #7)

Related family support principle

- Family support programs work to increase opportunities and to strengthen individuals, families and communities.
- Family support programs operate from an ecological perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of families' lives.
- Family support programs value and encourage mutual assistance and peer support.

Families benefit from social capital

Social capital is the benefit accrued through positive social relationships. The more trust, social networks and citizen engagement, the more social capital. In vibrant civic communities where social capital is high,

child development is much more positive (Putnam, 2000) and children are more likely to be healthy (Cohen et al., 2006). Aside from the level of poverty, the level of social capital in a child's community is the strongest community predictor of the level of children's health and family well-being (Putnam, 2000; Runyan et al., 1998). "Neighbourhoods with high levels of social capital tend to be good places to raise children" (Putnam, 2000, p. 307). When families are able to share values and social ties, social capital is created which is then available for these families to draw upon.

Community risk factors for child abuse and neglect include a low degree of social capital, as well as high levels of poverty, violence, and unemployment (CSSP, 2004). Isolated parents, without supportive networks of relatives and friends, are more likely to maltreat or neglect their children (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Trocmé et al., 2005; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). Family support organizations address this underlying risk factor by helping parents develop friendships and community networks (CSDE, 1997).

Fostering interpersonal relationships and feelings of belonging

Workers in high-quality family support organizations have the ability to develop strong interpersonal relationships with and among parents and children

and are tuned into the culture of the community (CSSP, 2004). They take the time to connect with each family and build trusting relationships one at a time (BCAFRP, 2004). They also open the door for parents to build caring, supportive relationships with friends, intimate partners, and/or professional therapists in order to develop the psychological capacities needed for functional relationships with their children (CSSP, 2004). The relationships built in a family support setting are flexible, trusting and reciprocal—the type of relationships required to create social capital and reduce the incidence of maltreatment within families (CSSP, 2004). When programs provide opportunities for parents to meet together and when their approach includes peer support, they have a greater effect on children’s social and emotional development (Dillon Goodson, 2005).

Participants value the friendships and networks they develop in family resource programs, along with the sense of belonging they gain (Silver et al., 2005a).

Cohorts of parents with children of similar ages share similar life circumstances as they travel through their parenting journeys. The quality of interpersonal relationships within a family resource program sets the tone for family learning (CSSP, 2004). When workers encourage mutual assistance and peer support in parent education programs, parents can learn more appropriate discipline strategies. At the same time, hearing other parents’ stories helps parents feel less alone with their frustrations (Onyskiw, Harrison, Spady, & McConnan, 1999).

Families’ dependence on community professionals decreases as connections to other families increases (Dunst, 1995). A survey of 1,005 parents in the United States found that most parents would benefit by talking with other parents, being affirmed for their parenting, seeking advice from professionals they trust and having other adults they trust spend time with their children (Roehlkepartain et al., 2002).

Better developmental outcomes for children

In general, higher levels of social capital result in better developmental outcomes for children. For example, children who live in a higher quality of neighbourhood and community environment are more likely to perform better at school (Willms 2002). Roehlkepartain, et al. (2002) show that families with more social connections are more likely to demonstrate positive parenting, resulting in more positive child outcomes. When there is a high level of social capital in a neighbourhood, children are more likely to have better language skills and parents are likely to be healthier and less stressed (Hertzman & Kohen, 2003).

The quality of children’s relationships with their neighbourhood also affects their health and development (Jackson & Mare, 2005; Pebley & Sastry, 2003; Sastry & Pebley, 2003). For example, connecting seniors with youth and increasing other opportunities for family interaction with others can help child development (Perry, 2005; Putnam, 2002). Bruce Perry (2005, no pagination) claims that children and families are “relationally impoverished. Far too many children grow up without the number and quality of relational opportunities needed to organize fully the neural networks to mediate important socio-emotional characteristics such as empathy.” Participants in family resource programs appreciate that their children have opportunities to build relationships with other neighbourhood adults and children (Silver et al., 2005b). They feel that these relationships result in improved readiness for school and pro-social skill development for their children. In addition, they feel that their parenting skills are enhanced and their stress levels lowered, making for better family interactions at home (Silver et al., 2005a).

Building community connections

Family support programs look beyond the well-being of parents and children to develop the community in

which they live (FRP Canada, 2002). They work "to increase opportunities and to strengthen individuals, families and communities" (FRP Canada, 2004, p. 8). They occupy a unique position to assist the community in building connections among all its members.

Because they are open and welcoming to all families, they are able to build wide community connections (Silver et al., 2005a). They use strategies that bridge across cultures, ages and social class. Family resource programs can have an impact on reducing racial conflict and increasing acceptance of diversity among community families (Nelson et al., 2005). Participants like how family support organizations help them to expand their sense of belonging to the community and their social networks (Silver et al., 2005b).

Family support programs may also take an active community development role (FRP Canada, 2002). Engaging families and engaging communities are distinct activities with different goals and strategies. However, they are inextricably linked in so many ways that they must be considered and planned for together. Family resource programs increase their visibility and attract participants by building connections and trusting relationships with other community organizations (McCurdy & Jones, 2000). Participants appreciate an organization that works with all other community organizations (including schools) in order to create a holistic, safe environment for family development (Silver et al., 2005b).

Organizations can also consider hiring community members in order to increase their participatory element at the same time as they contribute to the social capital in the community (Bruner, 1998). One way to build social relationships and social capital is to engage families in community processes, such as needs assessments, and community organizations, including schools (Willms, 2001).

Through participation in family resource programs, families develop respectful, trusting relationships with workers, other community organizations and other families. In other words, they strengthen their support

systems and build social capital in their community (Silver et al., 2005a). Although evidence shows the positive effects of social capital on family well-being, further research is needed to understand which specific factors are most important.

Annotated References

Bruner, C. (1998). From Community-Based to Community-Staffed: The Experiences of Three Allegheny County Family Centers in Community Hiring. Starting Points Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh. Retrieved February 16, 2006 from <http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/publications/report1998-Ob.pdf>.

This study looks at three family resource centres and their journey of hiring community residents to staff their centre. The study found that participation by community residents would have been better if staff had been more knowledgeable about community services and resources. It also found that social capital was increased in the community through the hiring of community members.

Silver, S., Berman, R. & Wilson, S. (2005a). *What participants value: Practices and outcomes at family resource programs. An MAFRP - Ryerson University Project*. Retrieved January 27, 2006 from <http://www.ryerson.ca/voices/pdf/participantsvalue.pdf>.

The Voices project was a large-scale qualitative research study designed to uncover what participants most value about family resource programs. Four main themes emerged from interviews and focus groups conducted across Canada as regards factors that contribute to the success of family resource programs. The themes were the importance of engaging families, empowering participants, building social support and social capital, and building community. These themes were then used to develop a set of indicators for evaluating family support organizations.

Silver, S., Berman, R. & Wilson, S. (2005b). *A place to go: Stories of participants of family resource programs. An MAFRP - Ryerson University Project*. Retrieved January 27, 2006 from <http://www.ryerson.ca/voices/pdf/placetogo.pdf>.

The Voices project was a large-scale qualitative research study designed to uncover what participants most value about family resource programs. Interviews and focus groups were conducted across Canada to gather the voices of people who participate in family resource programs. Their stories, which appear in this volume as case vignettes, highlight the importance of four themes: engaging families, empowering participants, building social connections and social capital, and building community.

Willms, J. D. (2001). Three hypotheses about community effects. In J. Helliwell (Ed.), *The contribution of investment in human and social capital to sustained economic growth and well-being*. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada. Retrieved February 17, 2006 from <http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pdf/0012.pdf>.

Willms provides a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between early childhood development and social capital. He makes recommendations for improving research into social capital within communities.

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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.

Principal Researcher

Dr. Peter Gabor

Researcher

Ellen Perrault

Writer/editor

Betsy Mann

Project Coordinator

Janice MacAulay

Layout

Create Method