e-Valuation FRP CANADA

THEME 1

Engaging Families with a Welcoming Atmosphere and Respectful Staff

Related survey items

- When I come to this program, I feel welcomed and accepted. (Basic Survey #1)
- Staff members of this program treat me with respect. (Basic Survey #2)

Related family support principle

- Mutual trust, respect, honesty and open communication characterize the relationship between families and service providers.

Welcoming physical environment

A family's first impression of an organization often comes from the physical environment in which it is housed. The entrance to the family resource centre provides an initial opportunity to indicate to the family that they are welcome, perhaps with something as simple as an "Everyone Welcome" sign on the door.

The entrance should not be intimidating, nor should the staff's welcome be overwhelming. Ideally, once families enter, they will have a quiet space where they can build their confidence. This means that a front reception desk, in the form of a large counter, is not a good idea. There should not be too many staff members gathered close to the entrance. A sand table or toys that will engage children's interest create a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere.

The space needs to be clean, comfortable and safe (Chen & MacAulay, 1999; Silver et al., 2005). Families need to be confident that the space has been child-proofed and that toys are sanitized regularly (BCAFRP, 2004). It must be easy for everyone, including people with disabilities, to move freely through the space while playing with toys or interacting (Chen & MacAulay, 1999; BCAFRP, 2004). Workers strive to avoid overcrowding, although this is often a challenge given the limited space available to many family resource programs (BCAFRP, 2004).

Other aspects which contribute to a welcoming feeling include a variety of play areas, a reading area, a dress-up area, and a water table (BCAFRP, 2004). Comfortable couches, fish tanks, artwork and plants also help to create a homey, engaging atmosphere (Chen & MacAulay, 1999). It is important to offer places where people have privacy to discuss particular concerns. The ability to maintain confidentiality helps

to build families' trust in staff members.

When a family first comes to a program, it is important that a staff member greet all family members, learn their names and make an effort to get to know the participants in a manner that is adjusted to the comfort level of each unique family (Silver et al., 2005). Staff can wear name tags and provide an orientation to the centre for each new family at the centre, spending more time with families who may need more support to engage in activities. It is important that there be enough staff members present to ensure that every family is greeted. An important opportunity is missed when a family is not received with a warm hello or friendly welcome (BCAFRP, 2004). Refreshments are a useful way to welcome families and encourage them to return regularly.

Everyone welcome

In family resource programs, the climate of support is extended to all who come with children: paid home child care providers, grandparents and others. Special events or programming convenient for men may attract more fathers, grandfathers, uncles and other care giving men (BCAFRP, 2004; Onyskiw, Harrison, Spady, & McConnan, 1999). Men may be more likely to attend if contacted by male staff (Lang & Krongard, 1999; Smith, 2003).

Special, one-time events held in the family resource centre or in another community setting (community centre, church, school) may also draw in new families that do not feel comfortable walking into a family resource centre without a clear purpose. Afterwards, these families may start to participate in regular programming. Accessibility is also improved when support is offered for all families, not just targeted to particular problems or to "at-risk" families (FRP Canada, 2004). Often, centres recruit community volunteers to make contact within a particular neighbourhood or ethnic group (Lang & Krongard, 1999). Staff members require the cultural competence to work with a diverse population. Their awareness of and respect for each family's unique beliefs will be reflected in their inclusive language and behaviour.

Staff characteristics

Workers need to be sensitive and responsive when a family reaches out for help; otherwise, the family may retreat into disconnection and become at greater risk (BCAFRP, 2004). They need to demonstrate care and concern by being respectful, friendly and trustworthy (Silver et al., 2005). Families value workers' ability to be accepting, non-threatening, non-judgmental and available to help clients discuss and cope with stressors (Onyskiw et al., 1999). Workers build trust and connection through consistently credible and engaging interactions with participants and by following through with any promised action in a timely manner (BCAFRP, 2004). The rapport they develop often leads to discussion of other issues of concern. Caring workers who can provide reliable information, including accurate referrals, are key for connecting families to the services that they require (Silver et al., 2005).

Respect for families' capacities

Participants value workers who accept them without judgment and recognize the important role they play in the well-being of their children. It helps too when workers listen to the family's perspectives on possible solutions to problems, as well as their hopes and timelines (Lang & Krongard, 1999). In addition, workers focus on the family's strengths, capabilities and competencies. For instance, they can identify strengths such as the family's readiness to change or the parent's ability to invest in learning parenting skills (Lang & Krongard, 1999). By being involved in the problem-solving process, families learn to assess their own situation and to identify their strengths and possible solutions (Lang & Krongard, 1999).

When parents with low self-confidence have added stressors, they are likely to feel overwhelmed and are

thus less likely to take positive actions (McCurdy & Jones, 2000). By giving parents positive feedback, workers not only build a stronger connection, they also increase parents' feelings of confidence and self-efficacy and therefore empower them to make positive choices (McCurdy & Jones, 2000).

Unfortunately, families do not always feel valued. Workers may not remember who they are, may be in a hurry to be somewhere else, or may not take the time to understand their difficulties (Statham & Holterman, 2004). It is important for family resource workers to demonstrate respect in every action. One example is in the area of program schedules. Families feel more respected when programs are scheduled at times that are convenient for them, perhaps evenings and weekends (Lang & Krongard, 1999).

Trusting relationships lead to desired outcomes

Because family support means providing services in natural environments, workers go beyond applying a skill-based model, beyond focussing on the toys, or utilizing the best developmental assessment. "Perhaps the key ingredient to successfully retaining disadvantaged families in support services is the development of a trusting, dependable connection between the parent and provider" (McCurdy & Jones, 2000, p. 111). Workers in high-quality programs have the ability to develop strong interpersonal relationships among parents, children and staff and are tuned into the culture of the community (CSSP, 2004). They recognize that relationships are central to the success of the centre (Pilkington & Malinowski, 2002). It is important that workers develop a level of trust with the family as early as possible (Kakli, et al., 2006; McCurdy & Jones, 2000). A trusting relationship is based on respect and leads to lasting collaboration. Trust is enhanced when workers approach families in an open and non-judgmental way and treat them as trustworthy and responsible.

Parenting education programs tend to succeed when trust is built between and among parents and staff members and when individual and cultural differences are respected (CSSP, 2004). In addition, parent participation increases when families perceive the staff as dependable and trustworthy (McCurdy & Jones, 2000), when parents feel safe and welcome (Silver et al., 2005) and when parent-child activities are offered frequently (BCAFRP, 2004). Fun activities also help families connect. A group outing such as a picnic may help put families at ease and ready for other programming (Lang & Krongard, 1999).

An accepting and respectful atmosphere also allows parents and caregivers to share learning about child development and parenting, thus contributing to family well-being (Silver et al., 2005). Participants link this positive environment with improved school readiness, pro-social skill development, enhanced parenting skills, decreased levels of stress for caregivers and parents and more positive family home interactions (Silver et al., 2005). Beneficial child outcomes are most likely when caregivers are well-trained, responsive, warm, communicative and sensitive to children (Groark et al., 2002).

The relationships built through family support services are flexible, trusting and reciprocal - the type of relationships required to create social capital and reduce the incidence of child maltreatment (CSSP, 2004). Parents who succeed in improving their parenting do so mostly by developing the capacity to empathize through the medium of a warm relationship (CSSP, 2004). By providing an example of dialogue and reflective listening skills, family support workers have the opportunity to develop the safe, caring relationships with parents that are required to learn to empathize with others and with themselves. 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). By engaging families with patience and acceptance, staff

members provide the environment for families to grow and flourish.

Maintaining engagement

Several approaches help keep families engaged over time. For example, families tend to return when family support organizations help them meet their basic needs (Onyskiw et al., 1999). Parents are more likely to continue to participate in activities if they are hopeful and feel that they are increasing their competence (Lang & Krongard, 1999). Staff members can also stay in contact with families through phone calls, mailed reminders and newsletters (Lang & Krongard, 1999). Perhaps most importantly, families are more likely to come back to a place that is welcoming and where staff members put people at ease (FRP Canada, 2004). Also, the more welcome people feel, the more likely they are to volunteer (Hillian & Reitsma-Street, 2003).

Annotated References

Kakli, Z., Kreider, H., Little, P., Buck, T. & Coffey, M. (2006) Focus on families: How to build and support family-centred practices in after school. Retrieved March 14, 2006 from http://www.gse.harvard.edu/htrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families/promising.html

This guide to understanding how to engage families in after-school initiatives offers a research base for the importance of family engagement, concrete program strategies for engaging families, case studies of promising family engagement efforts and an evaluation tool for improving family engagement practices. Available online at: http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school

McCurdy, K. & Jones, E. (2000). Supporting families: Lessons from the field. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

This book presents the evaluation of the Philadelphia Child Abuse Prevention Initiative which was comprised of nine different family support programs, including parenting education, parent-child playgroup and parent support groups. The authors present challenges to family support program implementation, discuss the lessons learned in the project and make recommendations for engaging families in family support programs.

Onyskiw, J. E., Harrison, M. J., Spady, D. & McConnan, L. (1999). Formative evaluation of a collaborative community-based child abuse prevention project. *Child Abuse & Neglect,* 23 (11), 1069- 1 081.

This is a case study of a family resource centre demonstration project designed to prevent child abuse and neglect in Edmonton, Alberta. It reports that although clients found the parenting and other services useful, the most beneficial aspect of the project was the informal support provided by the staff. Families valued staff members' ability to be accepting, non-threatening, non-judgmental and available to help clients discuss and cope with stressors.

Silver, S., Berman, R. & Wilson, S. (2005). *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 to uncover what participants most value about family resource programs. This first section of the project's report highlights the process of engaging families. Interviews and focus groups, conducted across Canada, resulted in four main themes, groups of factors that contribute to the success of family resource programs. These themes are the importance of engaging families, empowering participants, building social support and social capital, and building community. The project used these themes to develop a set of evaluation indicators for use by family resource programs.

References

BCAFRP (BC Association of Family Resource Programs). (2004). *Working to make a difference: Guidelines for best practices in family resource programs.* Vancouver: BC Association of Family Resource Programs.

The Centre for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP). (2004). Protective factors literature review: Early care and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect: Strengthening families through early care & education. Retrieved February 18, 2006 from http://www.cssp.org/uploadfiles/horton.pdf

Chen, P. & MacAulay, J. (1999) *Improving Facilities: Innovative approaches for community programs.* Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

FRP Canada. (2004). *Synergy: Integrated approaches in family support.* Ottawa: FRP Canada.

Groark, c.. Mehaffie, K., McCall, R. & Greenberg, M. (2002). From Science to Policy: Research on Issues, Programs and Policies in Early Care and Education. Report prepared for the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Education, Universities Children's Policy Collaborative & Pennsylvania State University. Retrieved February 16, 2006 from http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/publications/govtaskforce1.pdf

Hertzman, C. & Kohen, D. (2003). Neighbourhoods matter for child development. *Transition Magazine* 33 (3). Vanier Institute of the Family. Retrieved February 2, 2006 from http://www.vifamily.ca/library/transition/333/333.html#1

Hillian, D. & Reitsma-Street, M. (2003). Parents and youth justice. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 45 (1). Retrieved March 14, 2006 from http://www.utpjournals.com/product/cjccj/451/451hillian.html

Kaldi, Z., Kreider, H., Little, P., Buck, T. & Coffey, M. (2006). Focus on families: How to build and support family-centred practices in after school. Retrieved March 14,2006 from http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families/why.html. Available from http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school

Lang, C. & Krongard, M. (1999). Strengthening families and Protecting Children from Substance Abuse. Newton: MA: CSAP's Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. Retrieved March 4, 2006 from http://www.preventiondss.org/Macro/Csap/dss_portal/templates_redesign/start1.cfm?page=http%3A%2f%2fcaptus.samhsa.gov%2f&topic_%20id=O&sect_id=1&indv_proj_id=&CFID=168913&CFTOKEN=54477167. Click on Resources, then on Library.

McCurdy, K. & Jones, E. (2000). *Supporting families: Lessons from the field.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Onyskiw, J. E., Harrison, M. J., Spady, D. & McConnan, L. (1999). Formative evaluation of a collaborative community-based child abuse prevention project. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23 (11), 1069-1081.

Pilkington, K. & Malinowski, M. (2002). The natural environment II: Uncovering deeper responsibilities within relationship-based services. *Infants and Young Children: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Special Care Practices*, 15 (2), 78-84.

Silver, S., Berman, R. & Wilson, S. (2005). *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

Smith, M. (2003). What about the Dads? Issues and possibilities of working with men from a child and youth care perspective. *Child and Youth Services*, 25 (1/2), 149-167. Retrieved March 14, 2006 from http://www.haworthpress.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/store/E-Text/View_EText.asp?sid=0TUS9AMWF04C8LBW8D5A2U7BXJPQ3GUC&a=3&s=J024&v=25&i=1%2F2&fn=J024v25n01%5F10

Statham, J. & Holterman, S. (2004). Families on the brink: The effectiveness of family support services, *Child and Family Social Work,* 9, 153-166.

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