



THEME 8

Worker Satisfaction

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Related survey items

- My work at this centre is meaningful to me and contributes to my organization. (Staff and Volunteer Survey #1)
- When I wish to do so, there are opportunities for me to become involved in day-to-day program decisions, strategic planning, policy-making and program development. (Staff and Volunteer Survey #2)
- This organization provides opportunities for me to develop my knowledge or skills. (Staff and Volunteer Survey #3)

Related family support principle

- Family support programs continually seek to improve their practice by reflecting on what they do and how they do it.

The effectiveness of early intervention programs in family support organizations depends to a great extent on the personal relationships of trust and caring that grow among staff, volunteers and participants

(Gilkerson & Kopel, 2005). When staff members change jobs, families may even stop coming because participants tend to relate to people more than they do to programs. It follows that it is crucial for family support organizations to minimize staff turnover in order to create long-term connections with the community (BCAFRP, 2004). Furthermore, when staff are satisfied with their work, they are better able to serve families (Lang & Krongard, 1999; Weiss, et al., 2005/2006).

Working conditions

However, it is not easy to maintain worker satisfaction in conditions where heavy workloads, inadequate salary, limited working space and role uncertainty are far too common (Weiss et al., 2005/2006). Family support organizations attempt to improve conditions for their staff by creating a worker-friendly organization. Whenever possible, they strive to provide adequate salaries and benefits, to require reasonable workloads and to create a pleasant and supportive working environment (BCAFRP, 2004; Groark et al., 2002). In particular, workers are generally treated respectfully as individuals (BCAFRP, 2004). This may be even more important in situations where space is tight and people must work in close quarters (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998).

Budget limitations and uncertain funding may nonetheless make it difficult to improve certain aspects of working conditions; staff morale can suffer (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998). Family support organizations compensate for less than ideal conditions by emphasizing the meaningful impact of the work that is being done, by involving workers and volunteers in planning and decision making, and by providing opportunities for workers and volunteers to learn new information and skills.

Staff find work meaningful

Workers find satisfaction in knowing that the work they are performing is meaningful and making a real difference. Years of research have shown that children and families benefit greatly from participating in the programs offered by family resource centres (Groark et al., 2002). Children who have participated intensively in early childhood education programs later show higher scores on life skills tests and are less likely to drop out of school and to be involved in the juvenile justice system when compared with those who didn't participate (Reynolds et al., 2001). Parents of children who attend family resource centres have higher rates of parent involvement than parents of children in the comparison group (Reynolds, Miedel, & Mann, 2000). This makes family resource centres cost effective over the longer term, with pay-offs to society far greater than the cost of the program (Reynolds et al., 2002).

Effective family resource centres can also be called relationship-based organizations. Staff learning requires quality interpersonal relationships among centre staff and volunteers (CSSP, 2004). In such an environment, workers and volunteers can receive supervision and training to update their skills in the ever-changing environment of family support. Workers in a relationship-based organization also report more satisfaction with their work (Gilkerson & Kopel, 2005).

Staff are involved in organizational decisions

Staff and volunteers need to feel that they are valued.

One way to foster this feeling is to seek their input in decision making. For instance, workers sometimes feel a tension between their first-line work with families and the requirements of the organization. This is diminished when they have the chance to contribute their opinions regarding policies and procedures (Maier, 2005).

It is a principle of family support that interventions are adapted to the needs of each family, rather than services being determined by organizational dictates. Because they have built close relationships with participants, staff and volunteers are in a position to contribute valuable information to day-to-day decisions and program development. Workers who embrace this flexible approach can find the work quite satisfying (Charles & Charles, 2003; Nilsson, 2003).

In organizations that lack core funding and must operate on short-term grants, workers experience the stress of uncertain employment. Staff turnover and the rate of burnout is higher in organizations with lower wages and fewer benefits (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998). When staff have the ability to contribute to the stability of the organization through fundraising, policy making and planning, they feel more in control over the organization's future (and their own) and have a higher stake in its success.

Staff development and learning

Workers stay longer with an employer that can be described as a learning organization. A learning organization is one "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge, 2000, p, 51). A learning organization has been defined by Watkins and Marsick (1993), as one that learns continuously and can "transform" itself as it empowers people, encourages collaboration and team learning, promotes open dialogue and acknowledges the interdependence of individuals and

the organization.

Family support programs continually seek to improve their practice by reflecting on what they do and how they do it (Malcolmson, 2002a). Reflective supervision, coaching and employee self-evaluation strengthen relationships among staff members (Gallacher, 1997; Pilkington & Malinowski, 2002). Reflective practice is a common approach in family support, where workers meet regularly to review what they do and consider how they could bring their practice into line with family support principles (BCAFRP, 2004). As well, coaching can be a very helpful technique among colleagues to promote reflection (Gallacher, 1997).

Ongoing training and professional development lead to stronger family support organizations (CSSP, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2001). Family support work requires a unique set of worker skills (Norton, 1994; Garfat, 2004). Workers must be able to respond to a variety of situations and demands with knowledge, skills and experience. There has been a recognition that staff members, particularly directors and coordinators, may require enhanced training in family support to prepare them for their roles in a family support organization (Nelkin & Firth, 2002). This training would be in addition to their previous experience and professional training in related sectors, for example in health, social service, or education (Hallam, Rous, & Grove, 2005). Recently, family support training and learning opportunities have become more available (Malcolmson, 2002b; Family Support America, 2002). The skills in which family support staff often take particular training include avoiding labelling and blaming program participants, being positive in interactions with families, working in an integrated manner with other agencies and adopting a conflict resolution and problem-solving approach (Park & Turnbull, 2003).

Ideally, organizations would have the ability to provide a range of educational opportunities which are responsive to the needs of individual staff members and volunteers (Smythe & Malcolmson, 2002).

Since professional development can be expensive, organizations often seek outside funding and join with other agencies to design and conduct training (Pilkington & Malinowski, 2002).

Family support organizations favour an adult learning approach to professional development. This approach builds on equal relationships between learners and trainers, a recognition of learners' previous experience and opportunities for active involvement. Lang and Krongard (1999) suggest that staff development include a variety of learning activities, including chances to:

- listen to and learn new information (through didactic presentations)
- analyze and discuss new learnings (through paper-and-pencil exercises and small-group discussions)
- observe new skills, especially interactive skills (through direct observation and videotapes)
- practise new skills (through imitation and role play)
- debrief the practice and receive corrective feedback (through small-group discussions)
- apply new skills to new situations (through simulations)

The same authors note that training in family-based strategies works best when it includes modelling of effective actions and skills that are needed to interact with families (Lang & Krongard, 1999).

Annotated References

Gallacher, K. (1997). Supervision, mentoring and coaching: Methods for supporting personnel development. In P. Winton, J. McCollum & C. Catlett (Eds.), *Reforming personnel preparation in early intervention: Issues, models and practical strategies* (pp. 191-414). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

In this book chapter, Gallacher presents specific supervision, mentoring and coaching models that can work well within early intervention and family support organizations. Promoting staff reflection opportunities, these three techniques can be helpful for increasing staff awareness, deepening learning and creating positive relationships within a family resource centre. This is a practical presentation and is helpful for incorporating coaching, mentoring and supervision personnel development strategies within a family support organization.

Gilkerson, L. & Kopel, C. (2005). Relationship-based systems change. *Infants & Young Children: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Special Care Practices*, 18 (4), 349-365.

This article presents the evaluation of an early intervention model based on the importance of relationships. They found that social emotional development was improved in Part C early intervention programs in the US in a cost-effective way when this relational-based model was implemented. During a comprehensive program to identify, serve and support the social emotional development for children, relationship based training was provided; coordinators participated in reflective consultation, reflective supervision and case consultation. Professional development and networking was provided for staff. Positive changes were identified in staff knowledge, practice and role satisfaction.

Kyle, I. & Kellerman, M. (1998). *Case studies of Canadian family resource programs: Supporting families, children and communities*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

This report on a case study of 15 family resource programs across Canada discusses the ideas, principles, history, description and structure of these programs. Key findings include lessons learned from interviews with family support staff regarding collaboration, funding, grassroots community involvement, program governance and program operations.

Weiss et al. (2005/2006) Pathways from workforce development to child outcomes. *The Evaluation Exchange*, XI (4). Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved March 19, 2006 from <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue32/theory.html>

This article provides a summary of the issues of quality workforce within family support organizations. Describing their ambitious current research project that aims to connect child outcomes to staff workforce, they also provide methodology and a logic model that is helpful for understanding the important connections between child outcomes and attention to workforce issues. They hypothesize that child outcomes will improve with increased staff knowledge, skills and competencies,

improved organizational supports for staff and improved policy to sustain a quality workforce. The article also provides a useful bibliography for further examination of worker satisfaction and work force development for human service, which can be found at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue32/bibliography.html>

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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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