

Family is the Foundation

Why Family Support and Early Childhood Education
Must Be a Collaborative Effort



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Canadians are currently witnessing a significant change in the delivery of services for parents and their young children. In many jurisdictions, programs that relate to the care and well-being of young children are moving toward an educational model. Current policy has designated educational systems as the main producers of the skills required by the modern economy.

This paper summarizes FRP Canada's response to the reorganization of early childhood services. It emphasizes the need to complement school-based programs with a broad spectrum of community-based supports for families and young children and makes recommendations for collaborative solutions to ensure that all children in Canada have a fair chance for health and happiness in a prosperous economy.

The **Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)** has been the national leader in the field of family support since 1975. Each year, over 500,000 families with young children find resources, encouragement and a sense of belonging at family resource centres across Canada. FRP Canada and its members believe that families have the primary and most significant impact on children's development. Therefore, when developing initiatives aimed at improving lifelong outcomes for children, the fundamental role of families must be acknowledged and supported.

The recent proliferation of research in the area of early child development has heightened awareness about the critical importance of children's earliest experiences. From the prenatal period until about age 3, children are most profoundly influenced within their intimate family environments and through interaction with primary caregivers. In the preschool years, family factors continue to impact child development while influences outside the family begin to play a greater role. The groundwork for lifelong health, learning and well-being is formulated through these early experiences.

By the time children arrive at school in Canada, about 3 in 10 exhibit signs of vulnerability which may hamper their progress in school and later in life. Contributing factors include stressful or non-stimulating environments, poor nutrition, and unresponsive or harsh parenting. Rather than addressing the factors that contribute to early vulnerability, current early childhood policy emphasizes educational solutions, with improved educational outcomes as the primary objective.

Longitudinal studies from the U.S. provide substantial evidence of the positive effects of early school entry programs for disadvantaged children. However, the effectiveness of these carefully designed programs is due, at least in part, to the provision of extensive supports for parents in conjunction with educational programming for children. The fledgling early learning and care programs in Canada have not incorporated family support elements to anywhere near the same degree as these exemplary programs. Therefore, they cannot expect to achieve the same positive results as the landmark U.S. preschool programs which generated much of the evidence being used as their justification.

Since the foundation that supports children's lifelong learning is established very early, services and programs for families during the period from conception to school entry are vitally important. Child outcomes will be enhanced if all families have access to an adequate array of supports during this critical time. A comprehensive, multi-faceted policy that benefits from the expertise of community-based organizations and service providers is critically important if children in Canada are to receive the best possible start.

Policy Recommendations

“...the next round of intervention efforts should take an ecological approach seriously, investigating how to change the child-rearing context for the families rather than focusing primarily on changing the child.”

- Dale Farran, Another decade of intervention in *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*, 2nd edition, J.P. Shonkoff and S.J. Meisels, eds. 2000. Cambridge University Press.

1. Acknowledge the primary influence of the family

- Give priority to programs that support families during pregnancy and when their children are very young in order to promote optimal development and respond to potential problems as early as possible
- Incorporate family-centred principles and practices within all early learning and care programs
- Ensure that families continue to be offered comprehensive programs and services to assist them in their parenting role after children start school
- Ensure high quality environments for young children in their homes and early child care settings

2. Build an integrated system through partnerships

- Retain responsibility for the provision of comprehensive supports for families within the community sector where mandates, experience and practices have demonstrated success
- Develop meaningful partnerships between schools, community-based organizations and parents in order to avoid duplication of effort and provide the best possible support to families with young children
- Nurture mutually respectful relationships between early learning and care staff in schools and family-serving organizations in the community so that each understands and appreciates the other's role and expertise
- Encourage collaboration between schools and community organizations through sharing resources, participating in joint staff trainings, co-sponsoring events, sitting on joint committees and engaging in other integrative strategies
- Recognize the integrative value of both informal and formal partnerships

3. Retain and expand family support programs in the community

- Recognize the long-standing contribution of family resource programs and their unique expertise in addressing social determinants of health
- Provide adequate funding and support for community-based programs offering valued services in their communities
- Ensure that community programs have the option of maintaining autonomy within school settings and, if appropriate, operating under the authority of municipal bodies