

play + parenting

FRP Canada



www.frp.ca

Fall | 2005, excerpt

Participating in National Projects

by Betsy Mann

The following is an interview with Janice MacAulay, Director of Policy and Research for FRP Canada. She answers questions about how members of FRP Canada can contribute to national projects.

Mann: How can the member organizations of FRP Canada participate in the ongoing work of the national association?

MacAulay: Here at the national office, we regularly submit proposals to funders for projects that will fulfill our mission to advance social policy, research, resource development and training for the field of family support. Many of these proposals are approved because our funders know we are able to gather up-to-date, reliable input from our wide membership base across the country. This input both informs and guides our projects. Over the years, it has proved invaluable in making our products relevant and practical.

Mann: So how do you go about getting this input?

MacAulay: There are four basic ways our members can share their experience and expertise: by completing a survey questionnaire, by serving on a project committee, by receiving researchers to do a case study and by testing the preliminary products of a project.

Mann: What kind of response do you get from members when you ask for their input?

MacAulay: Our member organisations have been very generous with their time. Outside researchers are always surprised at the high rate of return of our surveys and the rich detail that people provide in their answers. As for committees, case studies and test sites, we often have more members interested in participating than we can accommodate.

Mann: Let's start with surveys. When you need to gather data through a questionnaire, how do you decide who to send it to?

MacAulay: We really appreciate all the information that we receive through completed questionnaires. I can't tell you how helpful it is, not just for specific projects but for keeping us in touch with what's important to our members in the field. On the other hand, we know that our members have other things to do than fill out questionnaires, so we really think carefully before asking them to do so. We don't want people to feel overburdened.



Janice MacAulay, Director of Policy and Research for FRP Canada

In the near future, we plan to try out electronic surveys which may be more convenient for some members to complete and submit.

Mann: Can members look forward to receiving any questionnaires soon?

MacAulay: We have two projects in the works right now that will require members' input, probably from two different questionnaires that will each be sent to half the membership. One will ask what people consider to be good practices related to parenting education and support, especially as regards parents facing multiple challenges. The other will ask organizations what parenting and parent-child programs they use or that they would like to know more about.

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

Mann: You mentioned membership on advisory and steering committees for national projects. What does that usually involve?

MacAulay: That is obviously a considerable commitment for members since time spent on such committees is always volunteer, and only related expenses are reimbursed. The extent of committee members' involvement varies a lot from project to project. Sometimes a steering committee sets the tone of the project at the beginning and guides its activities closely. Other times, the role of advisory committee members is more to review draft products and give extensive feedback.

In the current evaluation project, we have a small task group whose members have met several times to work together to develop a set of core and expanded indicators that are appropriate for the family support field. For most projects, committees meet by teleconference, though there is sometimes funding for one or two face-to-face meetings during the project.

Mann: How are people chosen to sit on these committees?

MacAulay: Project committees are quite small, usually six to eight people. Sometimes the make-up of the committee is determined at the proposal stage. If a proposal is developed in partnership with other organizations, obviously they will have representatives on any advisory committee. Occasionally, the funder will suggest who should be represented on such a committee.

When FRP Canada puts together a project committee, our goal is to make up a group that can contribute significant knowledge on the topic and that is also representative of our membership in different areas of the country. We don't usually put out a general call for applications. We look to leaders in the

field, people and organizations who are recognized by their peers for their innovation and experience.

Depending on the project, we may also strategically choose people for their expertise in other fields, such as academic research, health and literacy. Of course, we also look for a balance between regions, cultures and languages, urban/rural locations, types of programs, etc. That can be a major challenge when our committees are made up of under ten people!

Mann: What about when a project requires organizations to participate actively, either as sites for case studies or for testing what the project produces?

MacAulay: I can think of two recent examples in those categories. The project on integrated approaches involved case studies of five programs in different regions of the country. Our researchers went there and did in-depth interviews with program participants, volunteers, community partners, funders and with first-line and administrative staff. The project's findings, published in *Synergy: Integrated Approaches in Family Support*, are strongly grounded in this first-hand information from the field.

Our current evaluation project needed a slightly different kind of participation. It began with the development of some core indicators and tools, as well as an on-line database for analysing data and producing reports. Researchers then wanted organizations to put these products to the test in their real-life operations. Feedback from these members will then allow refinement of the tools and the database system before they are made available to the entire membership.

Mann: How do members get selected as case study or test sites?

MacAulay: Our usual method is to invite participation through either a flyer included in a mailing or through an article in the newsletter, as was the case for the evaluation project test sites in the Summer issue of *Play and Parenting Connections*. As usual, we got many expressions of interest after that invitation. We were pleased, as always, to have such an enthusiastic response, but then we had to take the hard step of making selections. Our criteria are basically the same as for membership on the project committees. We're looking for broad representation by geographical region, types of programs, cultures and languages, etc.

We regret that some people will be disappointed, but our budget can never accommodate all the interested members. In the case of the evaluation project, we are keeping a list of everyone who expressed interest in testing the tools. In the next stage of the project, we will make sure they get the information about the closest training to their location.

Mann: Any final words to members about participating in national projects?

MacAulay: I just want to repeat how lucky we feel at FRP Canada's national office to have the support of such a dedicated and enthusiastic membership. We could never accomplish our projects without the commitment of time and energy that they give so freely.

I'd also like to say that there are many ways to contribute to the work of the national association. Anyone who would like to get more involved, either in national projects or in the work of the Board of Directors, should get in touch with our Executive Director, David Young, at 1-866-637-7226, ext. 223 or by e-mail at dwyong@frp.ca. □