



How to Engage Families in Services

This is one in a series of Best Start Resource Centre “How To” resources that focus on skill development to help service providers address specific strategies for preconception, prenatal and child health.



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“A parent had an idea, ran with it, and organized a large conference. Everyone benefited – the individual, the program and the community.”

Program facilitator



INTRODUCTION

Engagement goes beyond involvement of families. Families are engaged when they are motivated and empowered to identify their own needs, strengths and resources. Parents move from attending with caution to offering ideas and contributing time and energy. They take on an active role in making positive change (Steib, 2004).

There is a misperception that if a parent receives services they will feel complete. On the contrary, it is when a person gives or is of service to others that there is a sense of accomplishment, confidence builds, and a feeling of self-worth. Engaged families are more than passive participants or consumers. Engaged families may be anything but compliant. Engaged families are empowered families and know that what they offer and receive is important and makes a difference. This spirit of reciprocity brings a different level of energy and acknowledges parents and staff as equal partners in improving services for families.

This resource shares information about how service providers can engage families in services including ideas, tips, examples and programing ideas. It provides key information about parent engagement, determining the needs of parents, responding to parent needs, promoting services to parents and retaining parents in services. The resource is designed for service providers who work with parents and/or children, for example organizations offering parenting programs or childcare services.



“The secretary at reception knows all participants by name. They feel acknowledged, welcomed, valued and can just be who they are.”

Program manager

FAMILY, SERVICE AND COMMUNITY

The family, the service and the community all affect the level of support that a family receives. These three participants also have great influence on a family’s engagement in services. Think about the family, the service and the community when considering strategies to invite, welcome, and fully engage families in your program.

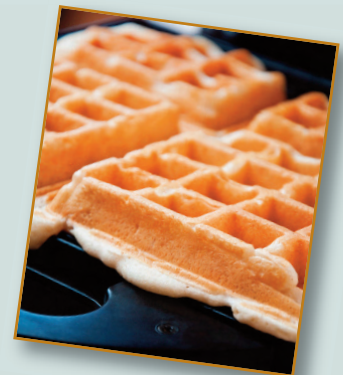
The Family

There are a wide variety of family structures and families function and support each other in different ways. Key elements to consider when creating and implementing programs that will involve families as fully engaged partners include:

- It takes time for parents to move from cautious interest in a service to full engagement.
- Parents have strengths and experience.
- Parents have different interests and personalities and will want to be engaged in different ways.
- At some times and stages, parents may have less interest and ability in being engaged, for example when parenting a young infant.

A MOMENT IN TIME THAT CHANGED FOREVER

Two friends with small children realized there was a child friendly place where they could meet – a family resource centre with a drop in program. One day was particularly hectic and between the coats and boots, traffic, and the last minute details they wondered if the effort was worth it. On this day it was. When they arrived at the drop in centre one of the staff mentioned that a waffle iron had been donated and asked if she could make waffles for them. This woman could have been anyone’s Grandmother – someone who is cherished and missed. This was a moment in time that altered one parent’s life and career path. This is what she wanted to do; provide space where parents are cared for and supported. She now manages one of the major family support services in Ontario.





The Service

Parents indicate that staff are the greatest strength in early years programs, followed by the breadth of supports and services that are offered (Underwood, Killoran, Webster, 2010). Relationships between parents and service providers are a key foundation to successful parent engagement. Creating a welcoming environment is also an important step. Parents need to trust that they will be respected and heard, in order to consider increasing their engagement in services. Strategies that services can use to support a welcoming environment include:

- Remembering and acknowledging each person by name.
- Providing refreshments as a symbol of caring.
- Valuing the parents' time by keeping to the schedule.
- Beginning each program with an icebreaker to open up discussion and allow families to transition from their busy daily life.
- Identifying and meeting needs of families.

Examples of strategies that services can use to help move parents from merely participating to full engagement include:

- Providing opportunities for parents to volunteer in the program or service.
- Providing opportunities for parents to build their knowledge and skills related to involvement in the service.
- Providing decision-making opportunities for parents and opportunities to provide input.
- Learning about and incorporating best practises.
- Addressing barriers and challenges for parents.
- Encouraging staff to remain open to new information and different ways of understanding including an awareness of their own biases and prejudices.

PICTURE DAY AT SCHOOL

Pretty much everyone has experienced this. Get out your best clothes, comb your hair and put on a big smile; it's picture day at school. Then a number of weeks later, the pictures arrive and you bring your money. But what if your family doesn't have enough money for all their children to get their picture? One community decided that they would have FAMILY picture day which could include whoever you invited to be a part of your family (pets included) in the picture. This has become a yearly event which now includes just about everyone living in this small community. Simple tweaking of an old practise has morphed into an annual community event.





The Community

Involving the community can also help to support family engagement. Working together with other services can enhance program delivery, link parents to needed services and address community level concerns. Some examples of community strategies to support parent engagement include:

- Involving community services in your programming for example workshops facilitated by other organizations.
- Setting up networking meetings for service providers to share information.
- Building a system of cohesive services. Agencies should have a sense of where their clients come from and a conscious plan to flow families to the next appropriate service.
- Forming partnerships to enhance and strengthen community resources.
- Being aware of local issues and working together with other agencies on solutions.

A GOOD IDEA IS A GOOD IDEA!

A Public Health Nurse at Peterborough County-City Health Unit offered a group for teen mothers. They met regularly to gain support from one another, get advice about the health needs of their babies and to think about their future. One young mother was adamant that they needed to get back to school in order to advance their situation; however, this required on-site childcare and transportation for the students and their children. At the time, the Public Health Nurse was unsure that she would be able to establish a classroom that would accommodate the need for upgrading academics, transportation and childcare. This public health nurse listened, the school board agreed and services now meet the needs of teen parents.



**“Engaging parents may be gradual.
It depends on the openness of the parent.”**

Home Visitor

ENGAGING PARENTS IN SERVICES

It is important to have an unconditional positive regard for families – they have an inherent value and worth as human beings regardless of life choices or challenges. Many parents have had horrific childhood experiences, and may have internalized their negative beliefs into adult lived experiences. They may believe that they are unworthy. Parents may face enormous daily challenges, for example living well below the poverty line while trying to raise their children. It is important not to judge the choices made by parents, but recognize that negative choices often come from negative beliefs about who they are and about their worth. Start where the parents are. They are the experts on their own life experiences and what they need from services.

It means so much for people to have someone believe in them, so much that they can learn to believe in themselves. It means focusing less on doing and focusing more on being with. We don't always know the stories of the people we work with, their history and their current situation. We may never know all of the details, but we can never assume everything is normal, no matter how they look or how successful or happy they appear to be. We must always assume that we need to treat them with great care as we don't know how hard it was for them to walk through the door.





Tips for Building Parent Engagement:

- **Understanding power** is very important in helping relationships. Workers may not understand that their power can be an agent of change or a reinforcer of negative beliefs. Parents see workers as professionals and experts, and often as gatekeepers to key information and services that they require.
- **Friendliness is fundamental** to engaging parents. Experts who tell parents what is best, without listening to parents and learning from them, tend to alienate parents. A genuine interest in parents and children can influence whether or not the parents return.
- **Interacting with unfamiliar people** may be required when attending parenting programs. This is a significant accomplishment if you are shy, a new parent or new to the community.
- **Staff must be community workers**, out making contacts, building partnerships, thinking about community needs, and connecting with parents.





CHILDCARE AND MASSAGE

One service provider partners with a local college that provides childcare through students in the Early Childhood Education program as well as massage for the parents through students in the Massage Therapy program.



- **Drop in programs** accommodate unpredictable parenting schedules, early risers and those who need the extra time to get moving or get their older children to/from school.
- **Partnerships with agencies** such as Children’s Mental Health, addiction services, etc. are key. Families may need to turn to these agencies in the future. Increased familiarity will facilitate ongoing support for families. Collaborating with local colleges and universities can bring in new skills and talents.
- **Fathering programs** recognize that in order to reach fathers, program activities often need to be different than other parenting programs – hiking in the park on Saturdays, meetings at the hockey rink or on the soccer field.
- **A non-threatening appearance** is important. Wear casual clothing and create a welcoming atmosphere.
- **Clear, simple language** is a way to be inclusive. Language is powerful and will leave an impression...one way or another!
- **There needs to be value for the family.** Some keep coming back because they have outstanding questions and are looking for answers while others will attend because of social support from other parents, because their children enjoy the activities, or due to the family’s involvement with child protection services and the courts.
- **A dinner** one night a week can be a welcome break for parents. Plan the program from 4-6 pm with a warm up activity, circle time and finish with a meal.
- **Programs that span ages and stages** provide a continuum of resources and services to interest parents. A parent attends prenatal classes, then is connected with early baby supports, and is transitioned to a parent and tots group, then stays connected and participates in community recreational activities.



Motivation

Relationships between staff and the families can be built by removing barriers and providing supports. This leads to increased motivation for parents to be involved in the service. Motivation is not a trait or personality characteristic, but is something determined by the interaction between the parent and staff. A motivational counselling approach:

- **Is interactive.** It is based on the belief that everything the counsellor does affects the quality of the interaction with the client.
- **Places equal responsibility for change on the counsellor.** The counsellor's characteristics are among the most important predictors of success in interactions.
- **Is client-centred and empathic.**
- **Avoids labels,** such as alcoholic or drug addict.
- **Reduces client resistance** by meeting it with reflection rather than confrontation.
- **Fosters a commitment to change** and brings a client to greater awareness of, and responsibility for, their behaviour.
- **Emphasizes personal choice** and personal control over decisions by providing a range of possible alternatives for assistance.
- **Negotiates,** rather than imposes, goals between client and counsellor.
- **Removes barriers to change,** such as childcare, transportation and any other accessibility issues a woman might face.
- **Accepts relapse** as part of the process of change.

(Reynolds & Leslie, 2009)

HOSPITALITY IS KEY!

One successful program recognized that it took 3 staff to deliver the program. One person was needed to organize all the resources (e.g. bringing the toys for a play group, purchasing the food for a cooking program, setting up materials for literacy). The second person's role was to greet people at the door. The third person began delivering the specific program at the designated time to honour those who arrived. The Greeter remained available for any late comers to be welcomed and invited to join the program or to observe.





“For many professional home visitors, frustration at not being able to connect, is felt as rejection or a waste of time... The Home Visitor needs to be able to step back and assess honestly whether the services they represent truly understand the real needs of the family.”

(Invest in Kids, 2004)

DETERMINING THE NEEDS OF PARENTS

Most service providers have gone to school to be educated in their field of interest. They have received an academic credential saying they are now experts, ready to fix whatever is in need. At one graduation, the teacher congratulated the class by saying, “There, now you are ready to start learning.” This is the approach to take when working with families. Whether designing a new program or maintaining an existing program, staff need to continually learn from parents, assessing needs to ensure that programs meet parent concerns and interests.

SHE JUST SITS ON THE COUCH

Some programs do not have furniture for the adults to sit on because the intention is to have parents participating in programs with the children. But what if this is the only break a parent gets? What if there are other pressures? One program decided to re-evaluate how they were interpreting parent’s behaviour. One mother would come to the program and just sit on the couch. The program facilitators realized that maybe some parents need to have a chance to just sit. They realized it was important to support the parents so they could in turn be fully available to meet the needs of their children. This organization believes that if the parent is in good shape the family will be in good shape.





In order to create a program that is responsive to parent's needs, service providers must first learn about the interests of the participants and community. Consider learning from families who are involved in your services as well as those who are not. If there is a prize or honorarium for this investment of time and energy, the response can markedly increase. Here are a few ways to gather important information about parent needs and feedback about parent services:

- Tracking informal parent feedback and comments.
- Direct conversations with individual parents.
- Focus groups with parents.
- Surveys of parents.
- Evaluation forms about existing parent services.
- Suggestion boxes for parents to share ideas and comments anonymously.

NEVER JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER

A Neighbourhood Advisory Committee pilot project was initiated in an area of a city that was identified as having the greatest need. People were invited directly to participate and contribute. Two young men, a little rough around the edges, decided to attend. Their opinions were respected and valued and as they reported, "Why not, you give us food and there are fun activities." These two young gentlemen have changed, grown, and are now leaders in their community.



“I would be on the streets and wouldn’t have survived.”

Teen mother

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF PARENTS

Coming to Terms...

For some, parenting is as natural as breathing. For others, this breathing in and breathing out is difficult and painful. Most parents have times when they can benefit from parenting supports and services. Program facilitators report that some of their most gratifying experiences have been helping individuals overcoming the personal challenges they face in parenting.

IT ALL TAKES TIME

Breaking the Cycle is a program that is focused on pregnant and/or parenting women struggling with substance use problems, and their young children. Their approach is grounded with a deep recognition of the importance of attending to the barriers faced by women. Staff at Breaking the Cycle honour the fact that making a decision to change is a gradual process; not something that is immediate.



The Stages of Change are categorized as:

- **Pre-contemplation** – not thinking about change
- **Contemplation** – maybe there is a reason to consider doing something different
- **Preparation** – decided to change and looking for ideas how to do this
- **Action** – make a plan and begin making changes
- **Maintenance** – continue with changes but still need to stay connected to supports
- **Termination** – do not need support any longer to continue new behaviour
- **Relapse** – returning to old behaviour can occur at any stage and is framed as an opportunity to learn and re-enter the process

(Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986)



Here is an example of a parent working through a parenting issue, based on the stages of change. A parent believed they are doing just fine until their child started having temper tantrums and nothing seemed to work. They talked to their doctor who gave them a pamphlet about parenting support services. The doctor told them about another family who went to this group and received help. The parent found the schedule of the drop in parenting group and asked a friend to go with them to check it out. Both parents met new people who were also facing similar concerns so they continued to participate for further learning and support. In time, the original family did not attend any longer and carried the new skills on to the next new venture in parenting.

Meeting Parent Needs through your Services

In order to meet parent needs it is important to consider your regular programming and interactions with parents, for example:

- **Gauge readiness for change.** Be careful with personal passion when promoting healthy behaviours. It is important to learn how to gauge interest or readiness for change. Watch for opportunities to provide information at appropriate times. Be careful not to lose parents by pushing an issue too hard or at the wrong time.
- **Find opportunities for conversation.** Conversations can occur when working on something together. Working alongside one another overrides the artificial barrier of professional and client, whether it is cooking together, sewing a quilt or making a moss bag for a newborn.
- **Consider programming implications.** Programming or funding mandates may or may not align with what parents need or want. If a parent is pressured and feels that they are being judged or challenged, it may result in losing a participant. For example it may take up to 3 visits to build sufficient trust to complete an intake form. Building a relationship is more important than getting a form filled out in the first visit.
- **Meet language needs.** Language is fundamental to identity. Consider ways to meet language needs through written materials, simultaneous translation of workshops, and/or facilitators or volunteers who speak the needed languages. In addition, make plain language information available for parents who have difficulty reading due to literacy or language.

LANGUAGE LEARNINGS

One Ontario Early Years Centre publishes their brochure in French with supporting translation in English. The Francophone community, families with children in French immersion, and newcomers in this community appreciate this consideration.





- **Make programs practical.** Provide practical and timely information for parents, for example, a visiting Public Health Nurse can talk about the growth of an infant, or a play therapist can demonstrate the benefits of play. Also, consider ways to meet basic needs of families, for example food, access to a newspaper so that parents can look at job ads and housing ads, etc.
- **Assess program timing.** Many families are not able to attend a program that is open only on weekdays. Talk to parents in your services, and those not attending your services, about timing that works for them.

RETURNING TO WORK

One program noticed that families attended programs until they returned to employment. The program adjusted their schedule to be open in the evening as well as on Saturdays to accommodate parents returning to work.

- **Be creative in addressing transportation.** Transportation can be a barrier to program attendance, whether parents live in a rural, remote or large urban area. You may need to think creatively about how to address transportation barriers in your community.

DOUBLING UP

When bus tokens are not an option, one organization gave gas vouchers of \$25. Some questioned the trustworthiness of people to use this voucher to attend the drop in program. Instead of taking advantage of extra gas money, they saw families doubling up and sharing their rides. Instead of coming to a program once a week, the families were able to attend two times a week.



- **Consider family structures.** In order to engage families, services need to acknowledge the wide range of family structures that exist in our society, including single parents, extended families caring for children, younger or older parents, families with two mothers or two fathers, biological parents etc. For example, fathers often feel the need to discuss their specific role. Offering services and information specifically for fathers can increase family engagement in services.



Meeting Parent Needs by Linking to Other Services

Parents carefully consider whether a program or activity is of benefit to them. They may require information and supports related to a wide range of concerns. If your program is unable to provide information and support in the following areas, make sure you provide referrals to those who can.

- **Education:** Even though the parents are coming to the programs for their younger children, they may express concerns about the older children who are now attending school, or they may have interest in furthering their own education.
- **Nutrition:** Picky eaters, culturally specific dietary requirements, allergies and health concerns are opportunities to discuss healthy eating such as adding blended vegetables to cookie recipes and involving children in food preparation.

TRYING NEW FLAVOURS

Alphabet Soup is a program where parents and children can try new foods, take home the ingredients and include the new flavours at mealtimes.



- **Sleep:** Babies and parents can become stressed with interrupted sleep. Then there are late nights of teething, illness, and pacing the floors. Help parents keep perspective. Assure them that this phase will pass and sleep will return. Encourage parents to accept that resting during children's nap times is beneficial and a part of taking care of the baby.
- **Time management:** Families often wonder how they can get everything done. Even for the most organized professional, a baby brings change, and families need to put in place new routines and coping strategies. Encourage families to reach out for help from friends and relatives.



TEAMING UP

Parents have rallied together with one parent watching the children while the others cleaned the house.

- **Finances:** Many families are unable to meet basic family needs. Most families take pride in being self-sustaining, and feel embarrassed or shamed if they need to connect with support services such as food banks, emergency funds or emergency shelters. Increasing costs for housing, gas, hydro and heat are having a negative impact on family budgets. Assure parents that it is not their fault and provide information about services that can help.
- **Intergenerational relationships:** Many grandparents provide parenting support and information to their children and grandchildren. Other grandparents are unable to do so, and may require support from their adult children. Taking care of young children as well as aging or ill relatives can be a strain, physically, emotionally and financially. Information about services for aging parents is not usually considered important at programs for young families; however, this information may be critical to some parents.
- **Children with special needs:** Parents often express frustration about the lack of resources or limited access to services for children with special needs. A service might be available; however, parents may not have transportation to attend or the finances to purchase the service. Parents may have questions about available services in the community, how to qualify and associated costs.
- **Child behaviour and discipline:** Parents frequently want to know about child behaviour, why children misbehave and how to discipline. Other parents can be a source of help and can identify with the frustrations that come with parenting. It is comforting for parents to hear they are not alone.
- **Childcare:** The transition to childcare services involves an adjustment for children and for parents. Help parents make the most suitable arrangements for their children by providing information about local childcare options and about how parents can assess childcare services. Parents may also benefit from information about how they can help their children transition to childcare.
- **Court involvement:** Families may be involved in legal issues such as separation, divorce or custody issues. This requires a level of knowledge and referral sources connected to the justice system including contact information for legal aid.



A FATHER'S GOAL

For one father, his goal and incentive was clear. His 5 month old son was in custody of child protection services. His background had not given him the knowledge or skills to care for his child; yet he was determined to provide a different childhood for his son than he had. He joined a parenting program to prepare himself to be the best father he could be. He demonstrated his sincerity to achieve this goal by attending programs even though there were challenges. His child is now a priority in his life and he is willing to make sacrifices to be with his child. Having a meaningful vision of what the future can hold is a strong motivation that can overcome past hurts, misguided beliefs, and compromised skills. This vision helps in making choices that are purposeful and in the best interest of children.



- **Child abuse and partner abuse:** All staff can benefit from training on how to recognize abuse and how to respond.
- **Bullying:** This is a topic of concern for many families with young children. School boards have policies on bullying and are a good resource for a parenting group.
- **Culturally Relevant Information:** Families may benefit from referrals or linkages to culturally relevant information or services. Examples may include referrals to settlement services for newcomers, Aboriginal specific services, parenting resources in a range of languages, etc. Take the time to learn about the cultural groups in your community, and the services that meet their needs. In newsletters, parent handouts, promotions and decorations, include images that families in your community can identify with.

SEPARATE OR TOGETHER

One service provider recognized the potential interest in culturally specific programming. They set up meetings to explore the best approach. The service provider learned that participants did not want services to be delivered separately for specific cultural groups. The participants preferred services that were open to all families.

- **Mental health:** Postpartum depression, anxiety, and stress affect many parents. Watch for signs of mental health concerns and be ready with appropriate referrals.



Specialized Programs

A specialized program may need to be developed to meet the unique needs of a particular group whether it has a focus on autism, fathering, teen parents, or a particular language. One agency may not be able to provide a specific group on their own, but may be able to contribute. Collaborate with partner agencies to strengthen services. Specialized programs may be an entry point for families because they feel safe and comfortable with people who have common experience. Consider the needs of specific groups. Pizza, music and crafts may be distinguishing features that keep young parents coming back to a teen parenting support group and spreading the word to friends. Watch for parent's readiness to explore new roles. Acknowledge increased capacity and consider these parents as mentors for others.





“You need to be ready to catch an opportunity to invite.”

Community Worker



PROMOTING SERVICES TO PARENTS

Nothing works in isolation. There is no magic singular secret method to attract parents to programs. Often, the wider the range of promotional methods, the wider the reach. The best promotion is of course, word of mouth – parents talking to other parents about how much they benefit from the program or service. Encourage parents to invite a friend to come along.

Staff have been identified as instrumental to successful program participation. Build communication systems with your partners. Be in their newsletters, linked onto their websites and attend networking meetings. Some programs require registration. Start advertising in advance to your partners and remind them of upcoming deadlines. It is also wise to consider holding spots for last minute requests from key partner agencies.

Public health nurse and midwife visits provide an opportunity to encourage new parents to attend infant programs. Many people go to programs on the advice of public health nurses.



DROP IN CENTRES AND HOSPITALS?

Who would have thought a hospital would be a drawing card to an Ontario Early Years Centre? Parents began dropping into the Ontario Early Years Program because of information provided at a prenatal hospital admission program. These parents now realize there are supports available once they leave the hospital.

In another community, a family needed to meet with a medical specialist. While they waited, they were invited to play at the adjacent drop in program. This family now comes 1/2 hour early for their medical appointment to participate in the drop in program.



Promotional methods can include:

- Making phone calls
- Providing monthly calendars
- Sending postcards as reminders
- Going door to door to let parents know about activities
- Emailing information – both initial announcement and weekly reminders
- Telling other service providers so they promote the service to their clients
- Giving participants flyers to give to their friends
- Posting information in libraries, recreation centres, daycares, grocery stores etc.
- Meeting parents where they are to invite them to your program (coffee shop, playground, hockey arena, in local parks etc.)
- Using social networking such as Facebook, blogs, twitter or text messaging
- Including relevant information on your website and encouraging links from other websites
- Planning special events such as free trips to the local gym or theatre/music performances
- Bulletin board to share information, pass on baby clothes, find sports equipment, or share special events



“Our Moms met at a library group when we were 3 years old and they thought we would make good play mates. That was 26 years ago”.

Lafe and Jesse – best buddies

RETAINING PARENTS IN SERVICES

Why Do Parents Leave?

Families may come and go for different reasons. There can be discomfort with the atmosphere, activities, facilitators or other participants. The program may move too quickly resulting in parents feeling overwhelmed. They may no longer meet the criteria to participate when their children reach age 6. The time of day may conflict with a baby’s nap time, an older child’s activity schedule, or school departures/arrivals. Attendance may be influenced by travel costs, weather conditions, or illness. Work schedules and long hours of employment can be a barrier. Exhaustion is a common experience for parents. Many families stop attending because they have received what they were looking for or they are too busy to attend. Individuals who face serious issues such as the over use of alcohol or violence in the family may have additional barriers that interfere with obtaining help.

Keep in mind that the top barriers to seeking help and supports include:

- Shame
- Waiting lists for services
- Fear of being treated prejudicially
- Feelings of depression and low self-esteem
- The belief or hope they could change without help
- Not having enough information about available services
- Fear of child welfare services or having a child removed from their care

(Reynolds & Leslie, 2009)

What Keeps Parents Coming Back?

A parenting group may be one of the few places in the community where a family feels acknowledged and accepted. Parents keep coming back if they feel welcome and the services meet their needs. Children and parents often develop affection for their program. They may see familiar staff as a part of their circle of trusted people. Regular attendance becomes a part of their routine and the space becomes theirs.

Parents appreciate what their children are experiencing. Families are often pleased that their children are more receptive to new foods, jump and dance to new songs, and have the opportunity to play with new friends and new toys.



Parents develop relationships with other parents. There are often unexpected outcomes. Parents may begin to make babysitting arrangements with one another, share skills and knowledge, start small businesses, share baby clothes, volunteer in community events. Consider incorporating Parent/Child time, Parent/Parent time and Parent/Staff time in the schedule. This allows for positive parent and child experiences as well as conversations of encouragement and mutual support between parents and with staff.

When considering ways to retain parents in services, keep in mind that the most common enablers to seeking help and supports include:

- Supportive professionals
- Supportive family members
- Children as motivators to get help
- Health problems as motivators
- Supportive friend/recovery group members

(Reynolds & Leslie, 2009)

PARENTING – LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Parenting can be humbling. One parent shared that they were very competent, confident, and could look up anything they needed to know on the computer. Attending birthing classes with a Doula felt stupid and was unnecessary, but they would attend to appease their partner. Well... what a surprise when they realized how much they enjoyed attending and how much they came to depend on the lessons and learning from the whole experience. They now have a much greater grasp of the complexity of relationships and the importance to support their partner. Thinking beyond an immediate reaction was a skill they planned on nurturing so they could feel strong, cared for and have the energy to face the day.



What Do Service Providers Need to Consider?

When families are inconsistent in their attendance or do not show up for appointments, service providers need to consider whether it is a lack of interest, a life challenge such as lack of transportation, sick children, or possibly aging parents, mental illness, abuse, addiction or other issues. Poor attendance may look like lack of interest. It can, however, be an indicator of a more serious situation. It is important to remember that families are dealing with multiple challenges. Service providers need to understand these challenges in order to respond appropriately and persevere with continued commitment in difficult situations. Poverty, abuse and other life challenges may make consistent attendance very difficult.



Low numbers or unpredictable attendance creates a dilemma for programs, particularly in justifying the funding and staffing. Develop the art of asking questions. Have the neighbourhood demographics changed from a neighbourhood of young families to a neighbourhood of teens or seniors? Does the bus route reach families who need it? Do people naturally flow between the communities or are they loyal to their distinct area? Is there another way to promote the program? Is the description of the program inviting?

Remember – it takes time to develop a program, it takes time to develop a reputation, and it takes time to build trust. It also takes ongoing attention to make sure programs continue to meet needs.

Staff should discuss how they define success for the program and participants. Success may not be based on large numbers but rather, success can be participants returning to the program, participants who start to ask questions, start to contribute, or take an active role in bringing forward ideas about programming. Individual empowerment demonstrates engagement and ownership at the grassroots level, affecting long-term participation, impact and sustainability.

Experienced staff are key to engaging and retaining parent participation in programs. This does not necessarily mean years of employment. This refers to staff having the innate ability to understand and recognize the approaches needed for different situations. They also need to know the delicate line when it comes to the boundaries between support vs. friendly vs. friend. Skilled staff can coach and guide staff learning this art in order to increase capacity and competency.

WELCOME BABY CELEBRATION

A First Nations community provides Welcome Baby Celebrations for new babies. The purpose is to honour family and home. An open invitation is extended to the family members and the community to attend to demonstrate the love of the community towards each new baby. At the welcome ceremonies there are gifts such as an eagle feather, small pouch of tobacco seed to grow for ceremony or yards of fabric for when the baby is ready to dance. Babies who are unable to attend are gifted through extended family members who bring pictures, talk about the baby and emphasize that they are remembered. This is followed by a traditional feast. Even though there is a broad invitation to participate, it is the personal invitation that brings people out.





TOP 10 TIPS

- 1 Be authentic.
- 2 Understand your population.
- 3 Know your community partners.
- 4 Provide drop in services for families.
- 5 Create space for adults to interact.
- 6 Model healthy relationships.
- 7 Keep learning – look for daily life lessons.
- 8 Love your work.
- 9 Attend to the whole person, not just the parent.
- 10 Listen. Don't be the expert.





KEY LINKS, RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario (ADCO)
www.adco-o.on.ca

Best Start Resource Centre
www.beststart.org

Canadian Child Care Federation
www.cccf-fcsge.ca

Engaging Families in Child & Youth Mental Health:
A Review of Best, Emerging and Promising Practices
www.bckidsmentalhealth.org

Family Service Canada
www.familyservicecanada.org

FRP Canada
www.frp.ca

Mothercraft – Breaking the Cycle
www.mothercraft.ca

Ontario Early Years Centres
www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/oeyc/index.aspx

Public Health units in Ontario
www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/contact/phu/phuloc_dt.html

The Canadian Father Involvement Initiative
www.cfii.ca

The Family Institute of the Family
www.vifamily.ca

The Family Supports Institute of Ontario
www.fsio.ca



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