



# bulletin

## for Parent Educators



Strengthening Parent Education  
Across Canada

SEPTEMBER 2004

### Tips and Tools for Parent Educators!

Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) and Family Service Canada are grateful to Health Canada for supporting the development of resources for parent educators: a Handbook for Parent Educators, an inventory of resource materials and four Bulletins for Parent Educators.

This is the fourth Bulletin in the series and, like the June 2004 edition, focuses on the characteristics of adult learners. (All four Bulletins are available on our Web sites.)

In addition to developing practical resources, we also wanted to build or strengthen the sense of professionalism and belonging among parent educators. Although the project is now coming to an end, we remain as committed as ever to supporting your work with parents. Your ideas about useful resources and promoting parenting education will always be welcome.

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### Characteristics of Adult Learners

The previous issue of the Bulletin focused on four characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults decide what they will do with the material presented by the leader or by other group members.
- Adults bring ideas, questions and concerns that arise from their own values, cultural traditions, personal experience and knowledge.
- Adults in a group will be resources for one another.
- Adults are stimulated by things they can use right away.

Working with adults is exciting. We can't control what people learn or what insights they glean but we can encourage people to think for themselves and express their own ideas. Every group member including the facilitator benefits and learns from hearing stories and ideas from the full range of perspectives represented in any group of parents.

In this Bulletin, we focus on four more characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults bring emotional baggage from previous learning situations.
- Adults have different learning styles – visual, kinetic, auditory.
- Adults have different comfort levels with written materials.
- Adults want to evaluate their own learning and the effectiveness of the sessions.

#### Adults bring emotional baggage to learning experiences – some positive, some negative.

Develop a curriculum but keep it flexible so you can follow up on topics raised by participants. Offer all the relevant resource materials you can

get your hands on. Plan activities but make changes to maximize participants' comfort level and learnings. Formal and informal feedback from participants is your best planning guide.

If your group is mixed, some parents will want to pick up a few skills or confirm that they are on the right track. Some will be there because what they are doing is not working. Others will not want to be there at all! Most often, people feel good about being in a parenting group. They expect to share ideas with the group, benefit from your skills and knowledge and learn something that will help them enjoy their parenting role.

Engaging participants will be your primary goal for the first session. Draw on your own experience, search the literature, and talk with other facilitators about how to make the first session sparkle. Those who are there under duress may have a special need to know that you respect them and value their contribution. That usually means listening actively and showing that you take what they say seriously. Promise that the parenting issues and concerns they raise will be heard and discussed.

Give notice of topics that you are not willing or able to discuss. Since you are bound by law to report situations involving mistreatment of children, ensure that to participants. You will be reinforcing their awareness of unacceptable practices and behaviour.

Provide a comfortable space, choose appropriate activities, and introduce

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relevant and important topics. Keep flip chart notes during discussions – echoing participants' own words. This is especially important during the first few sessions to demonstrate that participants' contributions have been heard and acknowledged. Post the session goals and agenda on a flip chart to help keep the group on track.

## Adults have different learning styles – visual, kinetic, auditory.

You know that parents come to a parenting group with widely varying goals and with different ways of learning. Win their respect and attention by offering a variety of exercises and activities and a range of resource materials from which they can choose.

Be creative in planning activities for the group. Visual learners need to see things – videos, print material and flip chart records, and skits or simulations. Kinetic learners need to get involved – to be in the skit or role play, active in discussion groups, taking their own notes. Auditory learners need to hear what you and others have to say.

Feedback from the learners will be the main way you can check whether you are choosing relevant and effective material and activities. Don't hesitate to ask.

## Adults have different comfort levels with written materials.

Many Web sites offer practical suggestions for ensuring that print materials are accessible to all learners including those with low literacy skills or poor eyesight. Visit [www.transcend.net/low-lit/](http://www.transcend.net/low-lit/) for advice. Here are some suggestions:

- Use headings and point-form.
- Use short, simple sentences and uncomplicated language.
- Use serif fonts like Times New Roman for those who have trouble reading. Sans serif fonts are better for people with poor eyesight. This sentence is in Swiss, a sans serif font. The headings in this Bulletin are in **Swiss Bold**. Compare the fonts for "readability".

- Don't use all capital letters.
- Leave good spaces between words and between lines of text.
- Switch off your computer's automatic hyphenation.
- Use your computer's readability tool. (This Bulletin has an average of 5.2 characters per word and 13.5 words per sentence.)
- Give instructions verbally not just in writing.
- Combine pictures with written material. *Fundamentals of Graphic Language Practice Book* by David Sibbet provides easy-to-follow guidelines for using graphics – even for non-artists. You can order it through Grove Consultants International at [www.grove.com](http://www.grove.com).
- Go to [www.cal.org/ncle/health/](http://www.cal.org/ncle/health/) for more ideas about using simple line drawings to tell a story and stimulate discussion about parenting issues. Magazine illustrations would work too.

## Adults want to evaluate their own learning and influence the learning environment.

Give participants regular opportunities to take stock of their own learning. Ask for feedback about what they have learned and how the group is going. Explain how you will use their comments in planning future sessions. Give examples of how you have used feedback from other groups.

Be creative. You could invite parents to bring feedback about how things are going at home – through journals or diaries, a poster or drawing, postcards, even a video clip. Children and partners could also provide useful and relevant comments. Participants decide whether they want to share this feedback with the group.

Plan a program that you will enjoy facilitating. Plan thoughtfully, keep your focus on learning and look to the learners themselves for feedback about what works and what doesn't.

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## Principles and Values in Practice

In an article entitled *TrAAveling the TransCanada Highway* published in FRP Canada's new journal *Perspectives* (Volume 1, No.1), Carl J. Dunst calls on family resource programs – and parent educators – to articulate their guiding principles and select practice indicators consistent with these principles and values.

Dunst gives examples of principles and indicators. For example, family resource programs put a high value on "promoting wellness" and "strengthening individuals, families and communities". (These are two of FRP Canada's Guiding Principles.)

Practice indicators make the principles concrete. Focusing on another FRP principle, ask yourself to what extent your materials and workshop activities indicate an explicit emphasis on parents' competence and confidence. Do I invite parents to identify their strengths and share what's working well in their families? All parents? Only in the first session or again after they are more comfortable in the group? Operationalizing your principles in this way will strengthen your practice.

Dunst has written a thoughtful article. To read more, contact Janice MacAulay at FRP Canada about how to get a copy of *Perspectives*.