

# What Works in Parenting Programs for Parents of Young Children Living with Multiple Stressors

## Helping Participants to Sustain Learning

Even if a program is well designed, with good, evidence-based content, it can still fail to show positive results because of the way it has been implemented. To make a worthwhile program truly effective, you need to pay attention to process variables, like recruitment, retention, engagement, maintenance and ongoing support, as well as to the content of the program you offer.

Evaluations carried out six months to a year after the end of a program commonly show that effects of the program have diminished, as compared to an evaluation done as soon as the program ends. This is not surprising since research in the area of adult education and training indicates that while people may remember what they learned, any change in actual behaviour will require ongoing support if it is to be maintained over a longer period of time. Changes in attitudes and beliefs are even harder to make and maintain.

Here are some ways suggested in the literature to maintain the positive effects of participation in a parenting program for parents of young children living in situations where they face multiple stressors:<sup>1</sup>

- Build a **support network** that participants will continue to have access to after the end of the program. You can, for instance, link participants to other organizations from whom they can continue to receive support and information about the topics covered in the parenting program.
- Encourage **links among participants**. For instance, you might suggest an exchange of contact information among participants or offer a place for participants to meet informally after the end of the program.
- Embed the **parenting program in a larger context of continuing support**. It will be easier for parents to maintain their learning if the parenting program takes place in an organization that offers other activities, such as a collective kitchen, early childhood education and care, a parent-child drop-in or family outings. Participants will thus have easy opportunities to see each other again, to see staff members model skills and to ask questions that may arise after the program finishes. They may also take advantage of other parenting programs offered by the organization.

“Groups of single moms who met at the program formed an informal ‘co-op’ in which they pool their money to make bulk purchases.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

“Higher risk parents/families do better with a multi-dimensional support approach. One parenting education class or series is not going to have a huge impact. But having that series as well as a parent-child drop in, one-to-one support, and concrete resources such as food, clothing, etc., over a longer period of time, as well as a relationship with staff that can be flexible over time, makes for a large impact.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

<sup>1</sup>This is the fifth in a series of five documents which summarize practices that have proven most effective when working with parents of young children living in circumstances with multiple challenges. Complete references for all the suggestions here are provided in the document *What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parent Education* by Betsy Mann, published by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada). To view *What Works for Whom?*, as well as the other four summaries, go to [www.frp.ca](http://www.frp.ca).

- Offer “**booster**” sessions. While participants are often initially reluctant to sign up for a program that lasts many weeks or months, when it ends, many say they wish it could last longer. Bonds have formed, schedules have been adjusted and people now look forward to getting together. “Booster” sessions, where a group continues to meet at more infrequent intervals, are a way for parents to maintain social support for new attitudes and behaviours. The group can also help participants faced with multiple challenges deal with their stress, giving them the energy to maintain new learning and avoid falling back on old habits. Some policy-makers appear to believe that “a little is better than nothing,” when in fact “a little” may result in minimal impact and no long-term change.

“In my singles group, the parents wanted to continue meeting after the series was finished so one of the participants became the ‘volunteer facilitator’ for the group and since has been hired on by our organization.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- Offer “part two” for the **next stage of development**. A number of programs are designed for successive ages so that parents who have taken a program relating to their preschoolers, for instance, can continue on in a familiar format when their children reach school age.

“We have witnessed very tight groups and have had to create a new program for them as their children get older so they can continue to come.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- **Distribute a newsletter.** Some organizations keep in touch with former participants through a newsletter. You can include short articles about topics related to the parenting program, handy parenting tips and news of parent-child activities in the community. It may also serve to encourage former participants to refer their friends to an upcoming program.
- **Model methods for approaching challenges.** One aim of parenting education is to give parents the tools to make choices for their own families. Learning an approach to problems, not just pat answers, will help participants find their own solutions when the age-specific techniques they learned in a program for young children are no longer adequate. Some authors suggest that this ability to use strategies flexibly and to adapt to changes as children get older should be specified as a desired outcome of any program.

“Once they begin to experience success at parenting, their confidence increases and they are able to pursue training or employment opportunities.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- Link participants with **significant institutions in their child’s life**. Some researchers have found that results are better for low-income families when parents’ social support networks are strengthened and they make connections with the schools and the community.
- **Model techniques for finding and obtaining sources of help in the community.** When parents face multiple stressors, attendance at a parenting group will not answer all their needs. It is essential to connect them with a continuing network of practical supports.