
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE VULNERABLE FAMILIES AS E-CONSUMERS STUDY

In the fall of 2009, the **Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)** initiated a research project which received funding from Industry Canada's Contributions Program for Non-Profit Consumer and Voluntary Organizations entitled "*Vulnerable Families as e-Consumers: current attitudes, behaviours and barriers to e-information*".

The main objective of this exploratory and descriptive study was to provide a better understanding of current practices related to access and use of product safety information among three sub-groups of vulnerable families in four Canadian regions. The three subgroups of families recruited included; (1) low-income two-parent families; (2) low-income new immigrant families and 3) low-income female-led families.

The 115 parents participating in the study were from family resource programs in St. John's, NL; Hamilton/Cambridge, ON; Winnipeg, MB; and Fort St. John, BC. The average family net income of the respondents was \$23,000.

Each participant took part in a focus group and completed a survey. The semi-structured focus group questions expanded the topic of inquiry to include family health information. In addition, a survey was disseminated to practitioners working in family resource centres across Canada. This survey, completed by 184 practitioners, provided additional perspectives regarding current product safety practices among vulnerable families and by the practitioners themselves.

The study demonstrated that most parents in this sample are experimenting with the access and use of the Internet for product safety and other family health related information. Many of the study participants were quite sophisticated in how they search and seek out multiple sources to cross reference information. However, language, technological and other barriers seem to persist including: (1) caring for young children and therefore limited time to use the Internet or competition with other family members for access to the computer; (2) the perception of unreliable and confusing product safety and health information from the Internet; (3) the level of language needed to understand the information; and (4) preferring to speak directly with a person.

A brief summary of the findings from the parent *survey* is listed below (note that the survey questions were specific to product safety information):

- Percentage of respondents that have a home computer with Internet service: 72% in two parent low-income families; 77% in new immigrant low-income families; and 79% in lone female-led low-income families.
- Percentage of the Internet using respondents that found accessing e-information very easy or easy: 81% of two parent low-income families; 65% of new immigrant low-income families; 70% of female-led low-income families.
- Percentage of the Internet using respondents that found understanding e-product safety information very easy or easy: 50% of two parent low-income families; 42% of new immigrant low-income families; 37% of female-led low-income families.

These findings indicate that although a high percentage of the survey respondents are accessing information from the Internet, there is a significant barrier in comprehension of e-product safety information.

Moreover; comments in the *focus groups* indicated that the cost of having internet service is a heavy financial burden to these families but viewed as a necessity in today's environment. For example, several of the participants in the female-led families stated that they routinely disconnect Internet service in the months leading up to Christmas and at other times when the other household needs take priority. The participants from this group had an average yearly net income of \$12,682.

While there were some differences between the three family sub-groups (negligible between the four geographical locations), overall the groups provided similar suggestions for enhancing access and use of product safety and family health information.

Below is a brief summary of comments and key suggestions from the parent *focus groups*:

- Provide free computer and Internet training to reduce the technological barriers;
- Increase access to low cost Internet connections for the most financially vulnerable families (e.g. female-led families);
- Clarify and simplify product safety and family health information in general;
- Simplify the level of English used in product safety and family health information;
- Use colourful and eye-catching product safety and health information posters in public places;
- Use creative and targeted government/health officials sponsored campaigns relevant to families that could include flyers, brochures and direct mailings/e-mailings;
- Disseminate the information in other languages (in addition to English and French) in order to reduce the language barriers for immigrant families;
- Provide parents with the opportunity to discuss these topics with other parents (e.g., discussion/focus groups, forums, health fairs, parent groups, etc.);
- And, if necessary, revise existing government regulations for companies to ensure that they are held accountable for their products and for providing readily accessible and understandable recall information.

This modest study also revealed a consensus between the parents and family resource practitioners regarding the preference and need for the dissemination of product safety and family health information in a variety of ways. For the 184 *practitioners* that completed the survey, the preferred methods of obtaining such information are from brochures developed by government agencies (e.g. Health Canada), guest speakers (e.g. public health nurses) and the Internet.

Similar study parameters could be used within Francophone and Aboriginal communities across Canada for further exploration of enablers and barriers for vulnerable Canadian families around accessing and using product safety and family health information.