

Creating a Collective Approach to Implementing Best Start Child and Family Centres



Family Supports Institute Ontario

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Advancing the well-being of families by
connecting and supporting those who
work with families.



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As an organization that supports family support programs across Ontario, the Family Supports Institute Ontario embraces the vision of the Best Start Child and Family Centres and the guiding principles that support this vision. The guiding principles outlined in the Ontario Early Years Policy Framework are closely aligned with the Guiding Principles of Family Support as developed by FRP Canada in 2002 and adopted by almost all family support programs across the province. Hence, there will be almost no disagreement within the family support sector no matter what their “brand” with these principles, however, it is a complex sector that is somewhat fragmented. With each new government has come a new exercise in branding. This has resulted in the fragmentation of the sector, an inequity in funding and resources and an inequity in influence in the development of new programs and services. The Family Supports Institute Ontario believes that if our focus is centred on “collective impact” rather than a selection of “best brand” then we can collectively create a system of services that is integrated and cohesive.

A major challenge as we move forward toward an integrated system is one of gaining alignment amongst constituent groups who have somewhat different mandates, operating criteria and funding structures. Straw, Scullard, Kukkomen & Davis (2013), identify three fundamental responsibilities of leaders: to craft a vision, to build alignment, and to champion execution. The alignment phase requires critical opportunities for dialogue amongst all constituents. For it will be only through exchange and dialogue that we are able to seek clarity and greater understanding of the collective BSCFC vision and thereby set the stage for greater ownership and invested “buy-in” to an integrated and cohesive system for children and families in Ontario. *FSIO recommends the creation of communities of practice whereby professionals can come together to dialogue, seek clarity and gain inspiration that will facilitate alignment amongst all sectors in order to achieve a collective vision for families and children in Ontario.*

CONTACT

Family Supports Institute Ontario

Please contact Valerie Kenny at valerie.kenny@dpcdsb.org or
Jay Fedosoff at jay.fedosoff@peelsb.com

Mailing address: 489 College Street, Toronto, Ontario M6G 1A5



Universally Accessible Programs

Family support programs embrace the principle of universality in program delivery. The principle that ALL families are welcome in programs has been embedded in our modus operandi for over 30 years. This not only applies to the physical location but also to the families that we serve who are socially, economically, culturally and linguistically diverse.

Family support practitioners across the province continuously strive to reach ALL families. Research in family support suggests that 30% of families do very well without accessing programs, the middle 40% participate and benefit significantly from them and the final 30% of parents and children who need our programs most, will be unlikely to “cross the door” without specialized, intentional outreach and assured program characteristics (e.g. offering of material supports). (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1994). The 30% of families who will never “cross the door” of family support programs are often referred to as marginalized or “hard to reach”. This group of parents can include but is not limited to: young parents, Aboriginal and First Nations families, fathers, Francophone families, families from the LGBTQ community and families involved with the child welfare system. We recognize that there are specialized services available for families (e.g. Native Child and Family OEYC, Centre Francophone de Toronto), however, these are not universally accessible in every community across Ontario.

FSIO believes that through early childhood systems' integration, stronger collaborative partnerships will facilitate increased awareness of how best to attract and meet the needs of "hard to reach families". For example in an OEYC in Huron County, a program was specifically developed to welcome families involved with CAS in order to facilitate more family-friendly access visits and provide parenting and family support at the same time. As a result of this partnership, more CAS involved families are now looking to the OEYC as an important community support. While in a PFLC in eastern Ontario, staff is drawing on the knowledge and wisdom of experts in harm reduction and mental health to make better connections with families unlikely to participate in programs of their own accord. FSIO believes that full inclusion is one of our major challenges and opportunities going forward.

Creating welcoming and accessible spaces is also a critical issue for family support programs. Family support programs are located in a variety of spaces which include: schools, community centres, faith organizations and childcare centres. Mobile units such as the LION in the Region of Peel are utilized **to** bring programs and resources to families in suburban, rural and remote communities where programs and transportation are limited or non-existent. *FSIO recommends that consideration be given to further resourcing communities where programs are scarce or non-existent as well as to augmenting the practice of "taking the program to" the community especially in suburban and rural communities where access to transportation is an issue.*

To improve universality, it is also essential that a system be created in the BSCFCs to provide access to services for families whose children have extra support or special needs. Currently, the province has a system to support children with disabilities who are in licensed early learning and care settings with no consistent system for children accessing family support programs. During the implementation of the OEYCs, some of these programs built in services for children with disabilities (e.g. with the creation of resource educator positions), however, this was not the reality across the province. There is a fairly consistent practice of making referrals especially to public health nurses and speech language services but because there is no consistent intake process for these children there is limited follow-up. Some attempts have been made, with the support of external funding, to create common intake processes but these are dependent on the resources available in a given area. *FSIO recommends the development of a system to support children with disabilities outside the licensed early learning and care sector to ensure that ALL children with disabilities have access to the same level of service no matter where they enter the system.*

Quality Learning Environments with a Dual Emphasis on **Early Learning** and **Family Support**



FSIO believes that quality learning environments must have a dual emphasis of early learning and family support. FSIO agrees that the principles outlined in the Early Learning Framework (ELF) and the Ontario Early Years Curriculum Framework (OEYCF) provide a strong foundation upon which to build quality inquiry-based learning opportunities in BSCFCs. The concept of inquiry-based learning and the importance of practitioners as “provocateurs” of children’s learning is highly desirable, however the challenge for practitioners will be to become fully conversant with this pedagogical approach and to find ways of helping parents/caregivers to not only understand inquiry-based learning but to also creatively engage in this journey of co-constructing learning with their children. Similar to the learning curve that is currently underway in FDK classrooms, staff in BSCFCs will need resources and support to achieve evidence-based practice consistently across Ontario. In order to achieve “collective impact”, it is essential that all programs come together to establish a common vision, develop common language and determine strategic implementation strategies.



FSIO recommends the establishment of a cross-sector provincial subcommittee that will engage programs in using the principles of ELF and the OEYCF along with other documents that have been developed throughout the sector (see www.frp.ca) to create benchmarks upon which we can measure our success.

Notwithstanding the importance of high-quality early learning environments, standing alone, they will fail to serve the needs of

children and families without a strong parent engagement – family support component. Researchers often cite three landmark studies that attest to the benefits of investment in children's long term social and educational achievement: the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child Parent Centres. It is important to note that these studies did not offer **early education alone** to children but rather embedded family support and adult education into the programs to achieve the desired outcomes (Washington, Ferris et al. 2005). Building relationships with parents and caregivers, supporting and enabling them to offer “their best possible” to their children is the constant and enduring work of family support and must be retained if lasting benefits are to be attained in the BSCFCs. There is no dearth of evidence to underscore the long term value of parental engagement as it has been positively linked to student achievement, lower drop-out rates, lower rates of grade retention and higher participation rates in advanced study (Henderson & Mapp, 2007). Less is known, however about the motivators of parent engagement namely: parental-role construction and development of a sense of self-



efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parental-role construction is defined as parent beliefs about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children's education and wellbeing. Family support programs facilitate positive parental-role construction by welcoming parents into an empowering environment where they learn from each other and receive a personal invitation to become active participants in their children's learning from the earliest days. A sense of self-efficacy also takes root as the family support strength-based model empowers parents, even those on the weaker end of the continuum, to believe in themselves and in their ability to parent and to see themselves as "their child's first and most influential teacher".



Family support programs, and the Best Start Child and Family Centres in particular, hold the promise of positively affecting both of these belief systems known to motivate parent engagement over the long term. The Family Supports Institute of Ontario believes that safeguarding the family support component in the BSCFCs will ensure that these critical motivators of parent engagement will continue to be accrued to parents and caregivers as program participants. *FSIO recommends that at least two staff be present in BSCFCs to facilitate a high-quality early learning and family support environment and to ensure that this dual emphasis is maintained and strengthened.*

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Qualified Staff Teams

FSIO believes that in order to ensure best possible outcomes for children and families, the BSCFCs will require qualified staff in the areas of early childhood education as well as family support. Prior to 2000, operating within an empowerment model, staff working in family support programs frequently came up through the ranks moving from program participant to program staff with varying professional qualifications. In order to honour their years of service, FSIO favours a “grandfathering” of those who have contributed significantly to the field and believes that staff in this situation must be supported to retain their positions for as long as they see fit. Committed to ensuring the highest quality of programs for children and families, FSIO embraces the idea of promoting the establishment of professional learning communities as well as ongoing in-service and pre-service learning opportunities. FSIO welcomes the opportunity to continue our leadership role in the area of professional learning through the provision of an annual conference as well as continuous learning opportunities for practitioners. Access to ongoing education and training will ensure that programs have the best possible outcomes for children and families. *FSIO recommends “grandfathering” of staff with varying qualifications to ensure that their positions are supported and retained.*

To honour the expertise within the family support sector, it will be important to offer sector leaders the opportunity to have input into the design of professional learning. This is a critical strategy that will serve to enhance alignment and “buy-in” to the vision as set out by the Early Years Division. For example, in 1994, the sector of Family Support approached Ryerson University to create an Advisory Committee with the sole purpose of



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creating a professional learning certificate that would meet the needs and better prepare the practitioners working in the field. To that end, the Family Supports Certificate was created and launched in 1996. (www.ryerson.ca/ce/familysupports). This opportunity enabled the sector to co-construct their own learning and bridge theory and practice thereby building a deeper understanding of the complexity of the work for those in the sector. *FSIO recommends further investment in resources and in-service learning opportunities using all possible modalities, as well as professional workshops for all programs as an essential component of successful implementation and alignment, drawing on the expertise within the family supports sector to inform the process.*

At the same time, the colleges and universities have a significant role to play in pre-service training as they prepare graduates to work in the sectors of health, early learning and care, family support and education. FSIO believes that experience working with families is a vital part of the training and additional opportunities for “hands-on” experience in family support programs is an important pre-requisite to effective practice. This will ensure that the graduates coming into the field develop the necessary skills and knowledge to work effectively with families in all settings. *FSIO recommends creating pre-service learning opportunities for students in all schools of education and training in order to provide on-going “hands on” learning in preparation for their future work with children and families.*

Access to Information and Referral (Building Strong Community Partnerships)

The work in family support programs includes providing a play and inquiry-based program for children and families as well as one that works to support families in dealing with other life issues. This can mean providing information and referral and linkages to other services, for example, supports in regard to children with disabilities, connecting a parent dealing with post-partum depression to a mental health service or by providing information to parents regarding available educational opportunities.

It is incumbent upon all of us working with children and families to ensure that families are provided with the right information and supports at the right time. This requires the building of strong community partnerships. Many family support programs across the province have made considerable gains in linkages within the health, early learning and care and education sectors at the local and neighbourhood level. This knowledge will assist us as we strive to integrate services and support families in navigating the system of services available. Best Start Child and Family Centre practitioners will need time built into the workday that will enable them to collaborate with all community partners to ensure appropriate referrals and linkages are made to other services in their communities. *FSIO recommends that the work of the staff within BSCFCs includes community development and engagement to support the integration of services across multiple sectors.*



Flexible and Adaptable Programs

Family Support Programs across Ontario have embraced the principle of responsiveness to community need since they were first established 30 years ago. Family support programs have taken small steps to be flexible to community need (e.g. responding to requests for parent education opportunities). However, if a need is identified which requires financial resources to implement, programs are often challenged to respond.

Currently, many programs feel constrained to rigid adherence to program deliverables. This stands in the way of “true” responsiveness to community needs. Traditionally, programs have written contracts which state their program activity with little flexibility. There needs to be a clear statement of understanding between the Early Years Division and programs that allows for the ability to respond without the fear that funding will be reduced. Programs need assurance that the Early Years Division will regard community responsiveness and possible program adaptation as valued practices in the implementation of the Best Start Child and Family Centres. *FSIO recommends a strong commitment by the Early Years Division that community responsiveness and adaptation will be key components of the Best Start Child and Family Centres.*



Community responsiveness and adaptation –key components of the Best Start Child and Family Centres



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Summary of Recommendations

The Family Support Institute of Ontario, on behalf of our member organizations, puts forth the following recommendations to the Early Years Division of the Ministry of Education for your consideration as you undertake the challenging work of envisioning, aligning and implementing the Best Start Child and Family Centres as “places where all families can meet, share, play and feel supported”. In putting forth these recommendations, the Family Supports Institute Ontario's Board of Directors has confidence in, and applauds, the “listening stance” of the Early Years Division at this critical time in the development of policy pertaining to the BSCFCs and would welcome the opportunity to further discuss these recommendations with you at your earliest convenience.

The Family Supports Institute Ontario respectfully submits the following recommendations for your consideration:

- 1. FSIO recommends the creation of communities of practice whereby professionals can come together to dialogue, seek clarity and gain inspiration that will facilitate alignment amongst all sectors in order to achieve a collective vision for families and children in Ontario.*

- 2. FSIO recommends that consideration be given to further resourcing communities where programs are scarce or non-existent as well as to augmenting the practice of “taking the program to” the community especially in suburban and rural communities where access to transportation is an issue.*

- 3. FSIO recommends the development of a system to support children with disabilities outside the licensed early learning and care sector to ensure that ALL children with disabilities have access to the same level of service no matter where they enter the system.*

- 4. FSIO recommends the establishment of a cross-sector provincial subcommittee that will engage programs in using the principles of ELF and the OEYCF along with other documents that have been developed throughout the sector (see www.frp.ca) to create benchmarks upon which we can measure our success.*

5. FSIO recommends that at least two staff be present in BSCFCs to facilitate a high-quality early learning and family support environment and to ensure that this dual emphasis is maintained and strengthened.

6. FSIO recommends “grandfathering” of staff with varying qualifications to ensure that their positions are supported and retained.

7. FSIO recommends further investment in resources and in-service learning opportunities using all possible modalities, as well as professional workshops for all programs as an essential component of successful implementation and alignment, drawing on the expertise within the family supports sector to inform the process.

8. FSIO recommends creating pre-service learning opportunities for students in all schools of education and training in order to provide on-going “hands on” learning in preparation for their future work with children and families.

9. FSIO recommends that the work of the staff within BSCFCs includes community development and engagement to support the integration of services across multiple sectors.

10. FSIO recommends a strong commitment by the Early Years Division that community responsiveness and adaptation will be key components of the Best Start Child and Family Centres.

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