



Healthy Families, Healthy Communities

Introduction

Healthy Families programs offer education and positive social modelling to families with young children. Based on the Healthy Families America model, which in turn originated with the Hawaii Healthy Start Program, these programs now operate in a number of communities in Canada. They offer home visiting services to families that are identified through the public health system as needing assistance. Healthy Families programming focusses on developing practical skills for parents including primary infant care, access to information and strengthening the networks of support around infants and parents.

The Healthy Families model looks at the whole child-raising system – the child, the family, the neighbourhood and the surrounding community. Caseworkers act as facilitators who make referrals to health and social programs, as required. Once initial health and support issues are addressed, parents are encouraged to participate in a career-planning program.

This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention series of community stories, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.

Three Healthy Families programs which serve varied rural and urban populations have received funding from the Crime Prevention Investment Fund. The results from these programs will be used to help determine whether links can be made between this type of early childhood intervention and positive crime prevention outcomes – in very different communities. 'Success by 6 Healthy Families' in Edmonton, 'Best Start' in Prince Edward Island and 'Healthy Families' in the Yukon are the three programs involved in this project.

Different communities, different needs

The three communities in the Investment Fund project differ from one another in size and location. Edmonton is a large city with large city problems – survey figures indicate that there are 44,000 children living in poverty in Edmonton. The Prince Edward Island program serves a small urban centre with a larger rural constituency, where it can be a challenge to maintain integrated, consistent services. The Yukon program serves an Aboriginal community in Canada's North which faces additional risk factors, such as higher rates of substance abuse and the emotional scars associated with residential schools.

In each community, Healthy Families programs conduct initial and follow-up screenings for families determined to be at risk. A schedule of weekly home visits is established. As parents

show greater abilities to cope with the demands of family life, they move to twice monthly, then monthly visits.

The Edmonton program is the largest of the three, offering assistance to three groups: a low-income community, an Aboriginal community and teen mothers. Some 150 families are involved in the program at any one time. Edmonton's Healthy Families program is part of a larger initiative known as 'Success by 6' which develops partnerships among community agencies that promote child health and development.¹ The Capital Health Authority (the local health board) coordinates initial contact with families using public health nurses, and Success by 6 mobilizes resources and acts as a program catalyst. The specific needs of each family determine the frequency and intensity of home visits. Caseworkers and parents agree on a schedule, with the understanding that support is available for between three and five years.

'Best Start' is the Healthy Families Program offered to residents in Queen's County, Prince Edward Island; it currently serves 116 families. The initiative is offered through the CHANCES (Caring, Helping and Nurturing Children Every Step) Family Resource Centre. In a first home visit, a public health nurse screens parents of every newborn child in the county. Those whose screening indicates a possible need for assistance then undergo a more thorough assessment. Families that would benefit from the program are offered home visitation services. The aim is to have families 'graduate' from the program within three years of their initial visit. All Best Start families are offered additional support through the existing range of child development and parenting programs offered by CHANCES.

The Yukon Healthy Families program currently serves 23 families in an urban setting. Many are members of one First Nation, but because the urban setting attracts people from all

National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of \$32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The Strategy focusses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.

over the North, the families involved are diverse in terms of their cultural and historical heritage. In many ways, this diversity offers programmers the same challenges as any other multicultural group trying to achieve a sense of community. “Our people suffer from a variety of difficulties which stem from cultural dislocation. In addition, the scars left by our residential school experiences are compounded by the easy access people have to drugs and alcohol in the city,” says one administrator. “Cocaine use, family violence and teen pregnancy levels have risen dramatically over the last 20 years.” Poverty and housing issues are also of great concern.

Evaluating the outcomes

A number of risk factors affect children’s vulnerability to victimization and early onset of criminal behaviour including: young single parents; inadequate family income and supports; unstable housing; parents with less than 12 years of education; a parental history of substance abuse, psychiatric care or depression; late or no prenatal care; and marital or family problems. The interplay of these factors is complex, however, and establishing a link between early intervention programming such as Healthy Families and positive crime prevention outcomes is an uncertain science.

Ideally, each child would be followed for a period of a dozen years to track the effectiveness of the Healthy Families model. In the shorter term, school readiness is one of the best indicators of a young child’s ability to manage the challenges of living and learning, and it is being used as the key indicator in this project. Evaluators from the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family have developed outcome measures which weigh the risk and protective factors that are present for each child and which could influence the child’s vulnerability to crime and victimization.² Based on the assessment of these measures, the Healthy Families programs can intervene with short-term supports to effect change. For exam-



Having fun at an Edmonton Healthy Families picnic.

ple, one indicator being used by evaluators pointed to extremely high levels of depression among some parents. Healthy Families workers were able to work with the parents to start directly addressing the problem.

Earlier research into child development has indicated the importance of such factors as the quality of parent-child interaction, parent-child attachment, the types of play opportunities the child receives and parental attitudes toward corporal punishment. The CAREY Temperament Scale, for example, allows a thorough tracking of a parent’s perception of his or her child’s temperament and the child’s actual behaviour. Research has shown that the better the match between parental perception and infant behaviour, the more likely it is that healthy family development will occur. As part of the Investment Fund project, Healthy Families workers are using the CAREY scale to provide positive feedback to parents, especially in cases where parents are managing very well despite having to care for a very difficult baby.

Because the Healthy Families programs in this project are closely involved with the evaluation research, they have greater capacity to track individual families over time. Evaluator Mike Boyes says: “The information system for managing basic files will add a referral tracking compo-

ment which will allow program workers to map out families' increasing connections within the community. We anticipate that the stronger these connections become, the more likely that positive social patterns will be established."

Joe Hornick, Executive Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family, reiterates that the evaluation tools developed for this project have strengthened the Healthy Families programs. Says Joe: "It took time to train program staff to use each tool, but as time passed, the level of understanding rose and our evaluation models have been adapted for use in clinical decision-making. This is exactly what is meant by community capacity-building – allowing new ideas to enrich current models of operation."

The Healthy Families approach appears to have promise in widely differing communities. An interim process analysis showed that all three programs are operating as planned, at full capacity. The model is being applied quite consistently across the communities, although the Edmonton program has made minor modifications for the group of teen mothers to accommodate their particular needs. Comments from participating parents indicate that they are benefiting from the Healthy Families programs. As one coordinator noted: "Families reported a better awareness of available services, they found the child development information very helpful and they really appreciated having someone knowledgeable to talk to."

Through these Healthy Families programs, communities are lending support to families in need, helping young parents develop the skills to further the healthy development of their children and reduce their susceptibility to crime and victimization. Ultimately stronger families mean safer, more healthy communities.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul works on the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute.

Endnotes

1. The United Way provides the financial management for the Success by 6 program and infrastructure support for the Council of Partners which governs program initiatives.
2. These measures have been gathered from a variety of sources and include the McMaster University Family Assessment Device, the Denver Development Inventory, the Maternal Social Support Index, the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory, the Home Observation for Measure of the Environment (HOME) Inventory and the CAREY Temperament Scale.

For more information on the Healthy Families in Edmonton, contact Lorraine Green at (780) 413-7972. In PEI, contact Linda Smith with Best Start: (902) 892-8744. Linda Johnnie coordinates the Yukon program: (867) 668-7289. For information on the evaluation of these Healthy Families programs, contact Joseph Hornick, Executive Director, Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family at (403) 220-6653.

For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272, or visit the website at www.crime-prevention.org.

Limited quantities of this publication are available in alternate formats (Braille, disk and audiotape).

Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.

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