

Families and Schools Together Canada

Introduction

Much has been made over the last few years of the stresses experienced by the nuclear family. Rising rates of divorce and an uncertain economic and political climate take their toll, and parents under stress may experience difficulties in providing for their children's emotional well-being and scholastic success. Fortunately, our publicly funded school system is ideally suited to partner with organizations that can offer school-related and social skills support to families in need. As a way of levelling the social skills and scholastic playing field, Family Service Canada, a national, voluntary organization that represents the concerns of families and family serving agencies, is working with local schools and boards to offer a family involvement program called Families and Schools Together Canada (F&ST). Since 1997, Family Service Canada has partnered with the Alliance for Children and Families (formerly Family Service America) in the United States to replicate this American-developed model.

Families and Schools Together Canada recognizes the importance of supporting parents in order that they may encourage their children to become the best they can be. Working together in a comprehensive partnership, families, schools and community workers join together to reduce risk factors and improve outcomes for children.

Strong families

"Hellooo, Lisa!" a gymnasium full of families and volunteers say to me with an exaggerated wave. "Hellooo, Families and Schools Together families," I wave back. I am at Willow Glen Public School in Mississauga as a guest to observe the program in operation.

Families and Schools Together has operated in nearly 100 schools in close to 30 communities across the country since 1996. A child, usually between the ages of 4 and 8, who might benefit from F&ST is identified at school. The

child and his or her family are offered an invitation to attend the program. Participating families come to the host school one evening a week for eight to 14 weeks, depending on the age of the identified child. On average, eight to 12 families are involved in each session, usually creating an energetic crowd of 50 parents and children each evening. Everyone takes part in specifically designed activities, which are meant to build parents' confidence while offering them new tools for effective parenting. Rather than offering a formal learning experience, this is an interactive experiential program that includes and benefits the whole family, the school and the community.

The school's Families and Schools Together Team – which includes the principal, a teacher, a family service counsellor or mental health professional, a parent partner, an addictions counsellor and other volunteers – leads the activities and supports each program.

Sessions always start with the Families and Schools Together hello. Each family sits together at a table. Someone in the family introduces their members to the group and all the other families welcome them with a big 'hellooo.' Eric is a shy 7 year old boy. He has a speech impediment and usually lets his older brother do the talking for him. Today, for the first time, he stands up and introduces his family.

Following the F&ST hello, everyone eats dinner. Once the meal is cleared away, families remain together to play games. In a game called Scribbles, family members draw pictures and then ask each other questions to identify one another's drawings. There might be a school bus, a racecar, a house, a totem pole or a blood-sucking robot. Asking questions of one another helps strengthen the families' communication skills in a safe environment.



A Families and Schools Together family on graduation night.



A Families and Schools Together child playing Feeling Charades with her family.

After Scribbles, brightly coloured cards are spread out on a table at the front of the gym. On each card is a word for an emotion, and above the word is a cartoon face that matches the word. Children run up to the table giggling. Two brothers push to be the first to pick a card. The children pick a card and go back to their families to act out their ‘Feeling Charade.’ The family’s job is to guess the feeling. A little girl sticks out her tongue and wrinkles her nose to show “disgusted.” This game allows families to talk about feelings in a non-threatening context.

After charades, preschool children are taken to the kindergarten room for a free play period. The older children remain in the gymnasium. Both groups are supervised by volunteers and are given the chance to organize their own games and activities. The kids’ time is designed to build their self-esteem and social skills.

Parents move along to the library for an unstructured time where they are free to chat with one another. This portion of the evening functions as a support group meeting for parents. Beverly Dunkley, mother of two, says parent time is her favourite part of the evening. “It gives me a break from the kids and a chance to talk and interact with other parents that I otherwise wouldn’t get,” she says.

As a visitor, I am not invited to parent time since my presence likely would limit conversation, but I am invited to join the kids playing on scooter boards – yellow plastic boards with four wheels that spin and roll in all directions. Children use their hands and feet to push themselves across the gymnasium floor.

After scooter boards, the children listen to a story and make crafts. Children who have been identified for the program then join one of



Families and Schools Together families at their tables with family flags.

their parents in the library for Special Play. This activity allows one-on-one time for the parent and the identified child.

Codi-Lyn is almost 5. She and the other children collect a plastic bag from the front of the room. She brings the bag to her father and dumps its contents on the table in front of him. Out fall a clothespin, two plastic film cases, a chunk of green play-doh, a stone, a green plastic basket, four wooden spools and other assorted treasures. Codi-Lyn looks at her father. “I want you to act funny. Build a house with these,” she says pointing to the objects on the table. During Special Play, Codi-Lyn is in charge of the play activity. She tells her father how to play and he must listen to her instructions. On the floor nearby, a boy plays a hockey-like game with his mother. They use Popsicle sticks to shoot a stone back and forth on the floor between them. “I’m in charge,” he tells me with a bright smile. Special Play lasts for 15 minutes. Families are encouraged to have Special Play with each child

every day at home. Studies have shown that the one-on-one interaction increases the child’s self-esteem by opening communication between parent and child, and increasing the child’s sense of control in the family.

When the 15 minutes are up, everyone is brought into the library. There is a draw for a basket full of gifts chosen specifically for the members of one particular family. “The draw is rigged,” Patty Bingham, the Families and Schools Together coordinator, tells me in a whisper. “It is set up so that each family will win once. They know that if they win this week, they have to make the dinner next week. This way they understand that you not only get something from your community, but you are able to give something back.”

The evening ends with everyone standing in a circle for a closing ritual before saying goodbye until next week.

Healthy communities

Giving something back is part of healthy community living. Families and Schools Together helps families build connections with their neighbours. Carrie Carswell participated in F&ST with her daughter four years ago. Before that experience, she did not feel connected to her community and she rarely volunteered at her child's school. "I felt so isolated," she says. Today, she is a regular school volunteer, has joined the school council and volunteers as a parent helper for Families and Schools Together. She has made friends in her community and feels a new sense of belonging. "F&ST opened so many doors for me," says Carrie, "This program should be offered in every school."

Carrie is not the only Families and Schools Together graduate to report an increased involvement in her community. A program review conducted for the period between 1998 and 2000 found that 86 percent of the 222 participating families had made new friends, and 91 percent said that they were more involved in their school communities as a result of their participation in F&ST. By mid-2002, more than 5,000 Canadians in seven provinces and one territory will have benefited from participation in Families and Schools Together.

To continue the social support and strengthen the connections families make at Families and Schools Together, graduates join the two-year aftercare program called F&STWORKS. Parent volunteers and members of the Families and Schools Together team organize F&STWORKS' monthly meetings and events. Follow-up studies in Winnipeg have shown that one year after completing Families and Schools Together, 26 percent of parents reported obtaining further education, 46 percent obtained employment and nearly 30 percent joined a faith community.

Crime prevention through social development

Children and families are invited to participate in Families and Schools Together if the child is considered to be at risk for future academic and social problems. The survey results for the first five years of the program in Canada, 1996-2001, demonstrate that participation in the program reduces that risk. Using the Quay-Peterson Revised Behaviour Problem Checklist, 75 percent of parents in the program reported a significant decrease in overall behaviour problems in their children after eight weeks of Families and Schools Together. Using the same measure, teachers reported a 25 percent improvement in participants' school behaviour after the eight-week portion of the program. Families and Schools Together helps prevent future juvenile delinquency by improving social cohesion, increasing children's academic success and reducing the stress felt by isolated families.

Family Service Canada member organizations originally piloted Families and Schools Together in their communities in 1996-97. Catholic Family Services, Calgary, the Family Centre of Winnipeg and Family Services of Peel Region in Ontario were among the first to secure local funding to launch their own pilot programs. As more and more Canadian agencies heard about the program, it was evident that national endorsement and support for its replication across the country was needed. Family Service Canada, in partnership with Family Service America, became the Canadian sponsor and secured funding for national training, quality assurance and program support.

Since 1997, Families and Schools Together Canada has received funding from several sources, including Human Resources Development Canada, the National Crime Prevention

Centre, Health Canada, Canadian Pacific Charitable Foundation and, more recently, Clarica Life Insurance Company. Family Service Ontario has received funds from the Trillium Foundation to train F&ST trainers and develop a long-term sustainability plan. The Canadian School Boards Association has taken an active role in promoting the program to its members, and has provided valuable assistance to the program's Advisory Committee. In March 2002, the National Crime Prevention Centre committed to funding a four-year demonstration project to adapt the program to pre-adolescent children and their families.

The program's results to date and plans for future expansion bode well for the improved health and well-being of Canadian children and their families.

Lisa Pridmore

Lisa Pridmore writes on behalf of Family Service Canada.

Contact information

For more information about Families and Schools Together Canada, contact Family Service Canada at 1-800-668-7808 or on the Internet at: www.familyservicecanada.org

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