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Community Action Committee for Bay St. George

Introduction

The Community Action Program for Children (CAPC) is an initiative of Health Canada. Its purpose is to fund community groups to establish and deliver services that address the developmental needs of children from birth to age 6 who live in conditions of risk. The program is based on the principle that communities are best positioned to recognize the needs of their children and have the capacity to draw together the resources to address those needs.

CAPC is one of three community-based programs delivered by Health Canada to ensure that children have a healthy start in life. The other programs are the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) and Aboriginal Head Start.

'Flexibility' is a guiding principle of CAPC. In order to respond to the diversity of communities across Canada and the particular circumstances and changing needs of children and

families, CAPC and the projects it funds must be flexible. CAPC also encourages the involvement of participants in program design and delivery. Parents must be involved in a variety of meaningful ways in programs intended for them.

The following story is an example of a community in rural Newfoundland that actively engaged parents, caregivers and community organizations and adapted the traditional family resource centre model to meet the needs of families throughout a sparsely populated geographic area.

Bay St. George Community Action Committee

Bay St. George is located on the southwest coast of Newfoundland. It consists of more than 50 small rural communities with a total population of approximately 25,000. Stephenville is the central, largest community, with a population of 8,000.

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A farm visit by children, parents and caregivers from St. Fintan's Family Resource Centre.

This area once had a thriving economy with many residents self-employed or working in the fishery, farming or forestry industries. However, with the decline in these industries, many families have become dependent on government income support programs in order to meet their needs.

Due in part to the rural isolation and lack of employment opportunities, the Bay St. George region has a lengthy history of both economic and social community capacity-building initiatives. Long-standing community-based programs/services include: mental health community services; drug dependency services; sexual abuse community services; the Coalition to End Violence; Rural Economic Development Councils; and alternate learning programs. These services were brought about through grassroots efforts and community collaboration.

The Community Action Committee's hub model of family support programs, using Family Resource Centres, is yet another example of com-

munity collaboration in responding to identified needs.

History and philosophy

With assistance from Health Canada's Community Action Program for Children, the Community Action Committee for Bay St. George was formed in 1993 to respond to the needs of young children and their families in the region. The Committee was formed from two existing coalitions – the Community Education Initiative and the Coalition to End Violence.

The Community Education Initiative (which included representatives from the local school board, local businesses, community agencies and individuals) had been instrumental in establishing preschool programs in the region, and in 1993 had established the first Family Resource Centre at St. Jean Vianney School in Piccadilly. The Coalition to End Violence (which consisted of a

wide range of community partners) had been involved in a number of local school-based initiatives, including the piloting of a Caring Communities Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Kit.

The Community Action Committee includes parents, caregivers and community partners. It is committed to supporting community-driven Family Resource Centres which help meet the health, social and developmental needs of young children and their families. Since 1994, the Community Action Committee has been facilitating the development and implementation of community-based programs aimed at young children and their families. In recent years, the Committee has expanded its mandate to include a Prenatal Nutrition Program (funded by the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program) serving the Port au Port Peninsula and outreach services to isolated communities in southwestern Newfoundland outside the Bay St. George region.

In isolated rural communities, schools are often the only available public meeting place for children and their families. In addition, exposing children and their parents or caregivers to the school environment during the early years is a positive step which helps create true community schools. An important goal of the Community Action Committee was to establish Family Resource Centres in all primary schools in the region. With funding and support from Health Canada, this goal was realized in 1997.

People helping people

To strengthen parent participation in the decision-making process, a representative group of parents from Family Resource Centres throughout the region was invited to become part of a team to explore community involvement, ownership and sustainability. During a six-week period from



Having fun at the children's summer program of the Stephenville Family Resource Centre.

February to April 1996, 16 parents took part in a series of training workshops and sharing activities. The participants rolled up their sleeves and put their heads together to discuss ideas and explore options to increase awareness of, and participation in, their local Family Resource Centres. The work of the group has established the framework which has guided ongoing planning, evaluation and action at the local level.

"I feel the Family Resource Centre has helped prepare my son for his big day when he starts Kindergarten. But not only is the Centre special for my child...but for me too. It's nice to get out of the house and talk with other parents who are going through the same things with their preschoolers."

A parent

Representative parents from Family Resource Centres throughout the region, as well as community partners and staff, now meet every six months to evaluate the program and plan for the future. Local Family Resource Centre Parent Advisory Committees also meet on a regular basis to discuss needs and share ideas more specific to their Centre.

This approach of 'people helping people' has facilitated ongoing input from parents and has helped ensure community involvement. Feedback from participants continues to reaffirm the positive difference that local Family Resource Centres have made in the lives of young children and their families.

Programs and services

program delivery

The Community Action Committee had to be creative in order to ensure that our programs

were accessible to families throughout the Bay St. George area. We adapted the traditional single centre family resource model into a 'hub' model of family support programs.

At the present time, there are nine school-based Family Resource Centre sites in the Bay St. George area. In addition, two satellite sites have been established in isolated rural communities in southwestern Newfoundland outside the Bay St. George region. A number of other satellite communities are provided with consultation services, toys, books and parent workshops as needs are identified and resources are available. In total, the Community Action Committee for Bay St. George provides services to some 60 small rural communities.

Programs rely heavily on parent and community partner involvement. To assist with administration and facilitation, there are five full-time staff: a Program Coordinator, an Administrative Assistant, two Early Childhood Educators and a Healthy Baby Club Resource Mother.

The Committee has looked for innovative ways to assist communities in meeting their needs. With support from various funding programs, youth (age 18-30) have been hired to work with parents and staff at the various Family Resource Centre sites. The youth benefit from their experiences with the young children, and the children and parents benefit from the energy, enthusiasm and giving spirit of the young people.

child-parent programs

Programs are child-focussed, with an emphasis on positive parent-child interaction and strengthening of the parent-child bond. Programs vary from centre to centre, depending on the number of families, the needs of the community



Canada Day preparations at the Stephenville Family Resource Centre.

and available resources. Child-parent programs offered include the following:

Drop-in Play: This is an informal, parent-led play time for children from birth to age 6 and their parents or caregivers. Scheduled times are made available for children and parents to visit their local Family Resource Centre to play and socialize.

Little Explorers: These programs are designed for 3- to 5-year-olds and their parents or caregivers. The *Little Chefs Program* provides enjoyable learning experiences as parents and children cook and share food together. The activities are easily transferable to the home. *Pre-K Capers* is designed to prepare preschoolers for the upcoming primary school years. The purpose of the program is to provide opportunities for peer socialization and development of self-esteem and basic

skills, through hands-on learning as part of play experiences.

Playtime Pals: These programs are designed for infants to 2-year-olds and their parents or caregivers. *Ready-Set-Go* is an interactive program based on music and movement for children ages 1 to 2 and their parents or caregivers. The purpose of the program is to provide a broad range of the musical, language and self-awareness experiences which are so important to growth and development in this age group. *Tickle Tickle* provides stimulating activities which encourage the mobility development and intellectual growth of children between the ages of 6 months and 2 years. *Music and Movement* involves movement-related activities, songs and games that promote coordination and body awareness for children from birth to 35 months. The interactive language play helps enhance the bond between parent and child.

Rhymes, songs and dance can help children deal with difficult times during the first three years of their lives.

programs for parents

A number of programs are facilitated by staff, community partners and/or parents or caregivers to provide parents with information, skills and support in a nonthreatening, friendly environment, in order to assist them in their challenging role as parents of young children. In addition, these programs facilitate the building of peer support networks and positive social interaction for both parents and children. Programs include:

- Childsafe Safety and First Aid Program
- 1,2,3,4 Parenting
- Early Childhood STEP Program
- Nobody's Perfect (a Health Canada program)
- How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk
- Parent workshops on topics such as child development, creative play and positive discipline.

Healthy Baby Club

The Community Action Committee also coordinates a prenatal program with funds received from Health Canada's Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program. The Port au Port Healthy Baby Club serves low-income expectant mothers living in 22 communities on the Port au Port Peninsula in the Bay St. George region. This area is rural and

isolated, with many residents dependent on government income support programs. It also has a very high rate of teen pregnancies.

"I moved with my boyfriend to Newfoundland. I was pregnant and scared. I didn't have any friends, anyone my own age to talk to. The public health nurse told me about the Healthy Baby Club. I am very happy, the club gives me the support I need. I am not alone anymore."

A pregnant teen

Members of the Healthy Baby Club receive weekly food supplements (seven litres of milk, one dozen eggs and one dozen oranges) and are visited on a weekly basis by a Resource Mother. The Resource Mother, who is an experienced mother living in the community, provides information and support, and serves as a 'surrogate mother' to many of the expectant moms who do not have family support. Other activities of the Healthy Baby Club include cooking/nutrition sessions, prenatal classes, information workshops with guest speakers, breastfeeding support groups, follow-up and referral services.

Our vision — toward 2000

As we move into the next century, the Community Action Committee (along with all CAPC-funded Family Resource Programs across Canada) is in the process of reflection and planning. Parents, caregivers, community partners and staff together are reflecting and evaluating the past three years (1997-2000). We are developing a workplan to serve as a framework to guide the program over the next three years (2000-2003).

It is the Committee's hope that the program will continue to build on existing strengths, and increase communities' capacity to meet the needs of young children and their families. Health Canada's CAPC and CPNP Programs have become a successful model of collaboration between government and community.

Bernice Hancock

Bernice Hancock is the Coordinator of the Community Action Committee for Bay St. George. She can be reached at (709) 643-5399.

For more information about Health Canada's community-based programs, visit the website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/childhood-youth/>

Cet article est également disponible en français.

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7
phone: (613) 729-3340 fax: (613) 729-3896
e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
website: <http://www.caledoninst.org>

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