

PERSPECTIVES ON PARENTING AMONG NEWCOMER PARENTS

PROMOTE HEALTHY PREGNANCY & CHILD DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE: PARENTING CAPACITY
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KEY POINTS

- Parents indicated the following specific parenting and child development information needs: raising children in Canada, improving communication with their children, information about the Canadian education system, accessing daycare, and healthy eating strategies for their children.
- The majority of parent concerns related to financial difficulties (e.g. food security, clothing expenses, affordable housing, medication costs, etc.), and communication challenges with service providers (i.e. doctors, children's school teachers, daycare providers) due to language barriers. Parents require additional support regarding their financial concerns, and would benefit from the involvement of interpreters and/or exploring other options to support them in their interactions with health and education providers.
- Most parents had no awareness of organizations and agencies within London that provide parenting information and support. However, parents were very interested in finding out about programs and services that are offered to assist them in the parenting role.
- Offering programs that have childcare assistance, transportation assistance, interpretation services, and are conveniently timed would increase the likelihood that parents of culturally diverse backgrounds could participate in parenting programs.
- Parents with diverse cultural backgrounds would like to receive information to help them raise their children in the Canadian culture, but at the same time would like acknowledgement and understanding of their home culture.

BACKGROUND

In 2003, the Early Child Development Parenting Capacity Initiative conducted ten focus groups with parents/caregivers in Middlesex-London. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather parent/caregiver thoughts on the following topics:

- barriers and challenges to parenting information,
- normalcy of parenting classes,
- parenting needs,
- communication about parenting information,
- and awareness of parenting resources.

The findings of the focus group sessions suggested the need for a collaborative strategy to increase awareness and education to parents/caregivers of children birth to 6 years of age.

While there was some information found in the 2003 focus groups about the needs of culturally diverse parents, the focus was primarily on identifying the barriers and challenges that all parents face in attending parenting programs. In follow-up to these initial focus groups conducted at the beginning of the Parenting Capacity Initiative, there was a need identified to gather information about what supports, if any, parents from culturally diverse backgrounds require to help them in their parenting role. It was the aim of the focus groups conducted in 2006 to gather experiences of newcomer parents who may or may not be aware of parenting programs, and may or may not have been involved in parenting programs. The local steering committee for the

Parenting Capacity Initiative, entitled Promoting Parenting Capacity Action Group (PPCAG), provided direction on the purpose of the evaluation and methodology.

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation was two-fold:

- To increase understanding of parenting issues and needs of newcomer families with culturally diverse backgrounds.
- To inform decisions about priorities for program planning related to the provision of parenting information and resources.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The following evaluation questions were developed to increase our understanding of the parenting issues and needs that families from culturally diverse backgrounds face.

- Have you ever been in a situation when you felt that you needed more help with being a parent, and learning what to do? Please explain.

- Are there people or organizations that you ask for help with parenting?
- When you were looking for help or support with parenting, what did you find to be helpful or how was it helpful? (Or) If you were looking for help with parenting, what would be helpful? What makes it more helpful?
- Do you know any organizations and agencies in London that help people with parenting?
- Would you be interested in learning about services and information that may be helpful to you in your role as a parent?
- If you wanted to learn more about parenting (e.g. get questions answered, find out how to do some things differently), would you consider going to a program or agency?

In addition, questions also asked parents to provide direction about the provision of parenting resources and information to families from culturally diverse backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY

A focus group approach was chosen as the method in order to allow parents to respond to questions that cannot be easily asked or answered on a written survey. Furthermore, many members of the intended population face English language barriers and may not be literate in their own language. Focus group sessions were chosen because interpretation was the preferred method versus translating written materials into the various languages spoken by participants. A focus group approach would allow newcomer parents to share their in-depth experiences and opinions in order to inform the development of future initiatives to support culturally diverse parents.

At the same time that plans to conduct focus group sessions with newcomer families were established, the evaluation team became aware of another project in the City of London that was conducting focus group sessions with families from culturally diverse backgrounds to learn more about their parenting issues and needs. This project was led by Huda Hussein from Childreach, a parent and child resource centre. Through discussions with project staff, a partnership to share the findings of each other's focus group sessions was established between Childreach and Middlesex-London Health Unit. Due to a slightly different purpose of our projects, there were differences in the focus group questions and differences in the parents who were involved in the focus groups.

More specifically, the project supported by Childreach involved parents who are currently involved in existing

programs and services. The focus group sessions supported by the PPCAG made a deliberate decision not to go to existing parenting programs with the aim of reaching parents from diverse cultural backgrounds who are not currently involved in any parenting-related programs. Discussions with the project leader ensured that we did not approach the same agencies for recruitment in the focus groups.

Two English as a Second Language (ESL) schools within the City of London were approached to determine interest in participating in focus groups. ESL schools were chosen because of the availability of new immigrants who are parents from culturally diverse backgrounds. The focus group sessions were arranged with school administrators. The administrators contacted teachers to ask them to invite students within their classes to participate in the focus groups. The criterion for involvement in the focus group session was parents with at least one child between the ages of birth and six years.

Three interpreters were involved in the first two focus group sessions, and one interpreter was involved in the third focus group session. Interpreters provided interpretation in the following languages: Spanish, Arabic, Dari, Farsi, and Swahili.

Due to the various languages that were spoken by participants, written informed consent was not feasible. Informed consent was obtained verbally by participants.

Two of the focus group sessions were facilitated by Muriel Abbott (PHN, Family Health Services), and one focus group session was facilitated by Melissa McCann (Program Evaluator, REED Services). The sessions were recorded on flip chart paper and were recorded individually on lined paper by Nancy Summers (Manager of Family Health Promotion Team, Family Health Services).

At the beginning of the focus group sessions, an ice breaker question asked participants to share their first name, ages of their children and to state how long they have lived in London (or in Canada). Participants were informed that personally identifying information would not be shared, and that only grouped data would be presented in any reports that are developed from the sessions. Focus group data was analyzed by each question and common themes were identified.

PARTICIPATION & PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Three focus group sessions were held at two ESL schools within the City of London. Two sessions were held on May 11th and one session was held on October 5th. There were 15 participants in total, including six parents in one session, five parents in the second session, and four parents in the last session.

There were 13 mothers and two fathers involved in the sessions. The number of children in each family ranged from one child to eight children. Parents had children ranging in age from eight months to 20 years old. All parents were new immigrants to Canada. The length of time that parents had lived in Canada ranged from seven months to four years. Of the participants who disclosed their country of origin, the following countries were represented: Columbia, Pakistan, China, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Syria.

FINDINGS

Parents' Identified Needs

EVALUATION QUESTION: Have you ever been in a situation when you felt that you needed more help with being a parent, and learning what to do? Please explain.

Parents described many situations when they felt that they required help in their parenting role. Their responses have been categorized into three main themes: parenting and child development needs, financial challenges, and communication challenges.

Parenting and Child Development Needs

There was a feeling of loneliness expressed by some parents who felt very isolated living in Canada as they tried to deal with the many challenges of providing for the needs of their family. Parents wanted to know more about how to bring up their children in Canada, including how to improve communication with their children. Parents also indicated a need to find out more about the Canadian education system. They recognized that there are differences between the Canadian education system and the education system in their country of origin.

Accessing daycare for their children was also described as a challenge. One parent noted the need for a full-time daycare, so that she would be able to attend school full-time rather than part-time. Another parent indicated that it was difficult to attend school, because her children are young and she has difficulty accessing daycare.

Some parents also noted challenges that they face in determining food portion sizes, encouraging their children to eat healthy, and in some cases to eat at all. It was noted that techniques (e.g. allowing children to play with toys or watch t.v.) in order to get their children to eat their meals were not working effectively.

Financial Challenges

Many parents are struggling financially. For example, one parent explained that she had to leave school in order to go to work because of financial difficulties. Many other parents identified a need for additional financial

support to purchase such items including: food, clothing, shoes, diapers, games, transportation for their children, medication for themselves and their children, and registration fees for children's sports and recreation activities. Several parents indicated that they are receiving financial support through Ontario Works, but the financial assistance is not sufficient to meet the demands of their family's basic needs. Some parents noted the difficulties that they faced in dealing with the Ontario Works program.

Food security was expressed as a concern for some parents. For example, one parent needed to use the food bank, but noted that the food is not healthy for his/her child.

Another parent noted that they have young children who do not get enough food to eat, because of the limited amount of financial support that they receive from Ontario Works.

Communication Challenges

The majority of parents identified challenges that they face in communicating with others due to language barriers. For example, one parent described struggles in being able to communicate with a doctor, because of illnesses that the family members' face. Another parent noted difficulty in communication with Ontario Works.

Several parents also identified their needs in communicating with their children's school or daycare. Due to language barriers, many parents were not able to understand what their children are learning in the classroom, and are unable to communicate with teachers and principals when they have questions or when difficulties arise in their children's education. Some parents feel that the school does not fully understand their situation of not being able to help their children with homework as a result of the parent's low level of education coupled with language barriers. They find it difficult to answer the teacher's questions. They feel there is no one available to help support parents. One parent explained that her child is not happy going to daycare, but she does not know the cause of her child's unhappiness. She is not sure exactly what happens in the daycare setting. She is also not sure whether her child does not understand what the daycare providers are saying, because of the language barrier. It is a challenge to openly communicate with the day care providers to discuss this issue due to the language barrier.

EVALUATION QUESTION: Are there people or organizations that you ask for help with parenting?

Several parents explained that they do not have anyone to help them in Canada. They have no one that they can talk to or ask for help. A few parents expressed their feelings of being completely alone. The majority of parents indicated that they have not asked anyone for

help. One parent noted the language barrier as the main issue in being able to ask for help by stating “How can I ask when I cannot communicate?”

Some parents indicated that they have no family or friends in Canada. One parent explained that she calls her family member back home who is also a doctor from in her country of origin. Other parents mentioned that they have “Canadian friends” who they can talk to about parenting concerns and who take their children places. One parent also noted that there are people within her church that also provide assistance, and Ontario Works offers financial support. One mother also described her eldest daughter who shares parenting information with her that she has learned at school. Another parent explained how he/she could ask his/her sponsor about parenting concerns, and that sponsors may be able to help connect him/her with the right resource.

Of the few parents who indicated that they have asked professionals for help with parenting, one parent indicated that he/she had called the health unit to seek advice, and another parent noted that he/she had gone to his/her child’s school to discuss problems with teachers. One parent also indicated that he/she has asked their paediatrician about specific parenting issues including healthy eating, and has received referrals to health professionals, such as a dietician. It was noted that the degree of helpfulness of speaking to a paediatrician depends upon the individual paediatrician.

Some parents indicated that they have not had any problems that they have needed help with so far, so they have not had a need to ask anyone for help.

Parents reflected on how their experiences of being a parent in Canada differ from their country of origin. One parent explained that it was easier to raise children back home because children obey their parents. She identified that in Canada children’s attitudes are different from children in their country of origin.

EVALUATION QUESTION: When you were looking for help or support with parenting, what did you find to be helpful or how was it helpful? (Or) If you were looking for help with parenting, what would be helpful? What makes it more helpful?

Participants noted several strategies that they have found helpful in dealing with parenting concerns. One parent noted that she solves problems with her family by discussing the issues with her children. Another parent explained how she found it helpful to talk to a friend who provides advice to her about the importance of her children going to school, because it is not customary in her home country for children to attend school. One parent also indicated that it was very helpful for her friend to provide some financial support for sports registration and transportation costs.

Some parents explained that they ask for parenting advice from friends and family back home. One mother questioned whether or not a Canadian friend would be helpful if she does not accept the advice that she does not feel is right from the friend. She commented on her willingness to listen to the advice of Canadian parents, but she may not follow the advice if it does not fit with her own cultural practices.

Parents explained the challenges that they encounter in obtaining support in their parenting role. Some parents explained that if they wanted to find out more information about parenting by going to an agency or by attending an event, they would be unable to do so, because they cannot afford to pay for childcare. Many parents also indicated that it is difficult to find the information that they need. They noted that going to the hospital takes too much time, and that it is difficult to find information in the Yellow Pages. One parent indicated that he/she knows that there are calling centres, but was uncertain if they can help with information regarding children.

Parents noted the following ways that organizations could let them know about parenting programs and resources, including:

- Post information in public libraries and grocery stores
- Send flyers and distribute information through the ESL school
- Share information at events such as the Children’s Festival
- Develop a resource specific for newcomers and distribute through the ESL schools
- Develop a special “communication bag” for children to take home from school to share with their parents
- Publish information in community newspapers that are available in other languages
- Provide information on the Internet.

One participant noted that many new immigrants use the Internet frequently. Even if information is provided in English, there are translation features on the Internet that allow information to be translated in their own language.

Awareness Level of Parenting Programs and Services

EVALUATION QUESTION: Do you know any organizations and agencies in London that help people with parenting?

Almost all participants were not aware of any organizations and agencies in London that would help people with parenting. In fact, many parents were surprised that there were parenting programs in London. They noted that they are not sure what to ask

or who to ask for help if they needed it, because of the language barriers that they face. Of the few participants who were aware of organizations and agencies that could help people with parenting, one participant was aware of the Ontario Early Years Centre because of a conference that he/she was hoping to attend. Another participant knew about the health unit and had called the health unit to seek advice. One participant also mentioned a church that he/she attends and another participant was aware of a place within their neighbourhood where children can go to receive help with their homework.

Interest Level in Learning about Parenting Information and Services

EVALUATION QUESTION: Would you be interested in learning about services and information that may be helpful to you in your role as a parent?

All parents indicated that they would be interested in finding out more information about parenting services and programs that are available to them within the community. They were also interested in having a package of information and services available to them at the ESL program where they attend. At their request, follow-up information about parenting programs/services and other social services were provided. Parents were interested in learning more about the programs and services that the community offers.

Interest in Attending Parenting Programs and Services

EVALUATION QUESTION: If you wanted to learn more about parenting (e.g. get questions answered, find out how to do some things differently), would you consider going to a program or agency?

In two of the three focus groups, an additional question asked parents if they would be interested in attending a program where they could find out more information about parenting. All participants indicated that they would be interested in attending such a program. Some parents indicated that their participation would depend upon when the program is offered (e.g. weekends) and whether or not they are able to find childcare.

SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS

It is evident that the experiences shared by focus group participants helped to increase our understanding of parenting issues and needs that are encountered by newcomer families. While parents mentioned specific parenting and child development information needs that they had (e.g. Canadian education system, accessing daycare, healthy eating), the majority of parent

concerns related to financial and communication challenges. Many newcomer families are struggling to provide the important necessities of life (e.g. food, clothing, shelter, medication, etc.), and also face difficulties due to language barriers. Parents explained difficulties in communicating with their doctors, their children's school teachers, and their daycare providers.

Only a few parents were aware of organizations and agencies within London that help with parenting, including the Ontario Early Years Centres, Middlesex-London Health Unit, a local church and an after school program within their neighbourhood. However, most of the parents involved in the focus group sessions had no awareness of organizations and agencies in London that provide parenting information and support. This is not surprising considering that the concept of agencies offering programs to help parents is new to many people, especially for those that are from countries where social service agencies are minimal, and where support with parenting is provided by extended family members.

Some parents continue to seek information and advice from their family members and friends in their country of origin, and a few parents also have "Canadian friends" who provide support. However, there was a sense among many parents that they are completely alone and do not have anyone to help them in their parenting role.

There was some concern noted about the differences in parenting advice and information between the Canadian culture and the cultural practices of their country of origin. The findings from these focus group sessions are consistent with the previous findings in 2003 with regards to culturally specific programming. Parents with diverse cultural backgrounds would like to receive information to help them raise their children in the Canadian culture, but at the same time would like acknowledgement and understanding of their home culture.

The interest that parents had in finding out about parenting services and programs was overwhelming. Parents also indicated interest in attending parenting programs and services if some of their access barriers were addressed (e.g. timing of the program, childcare provided). It is also recognized that financial and language barriers would need to be addressed in order to support parents' participation in such programs.

Parents suggested several strategies to increase awareness level of parenting programs and information, including dissemination strategies. Parents suggested that information could be disseminated through ESL schools, public libraries, grocery stores, community events, elementary schools, community newspapers, and the Internet. Parents also noted strategies to increase the use of parenting programs and information among parents with culturally diverse backgrounds.

Information specifically tailored to newcomers and available in multiple languages would be beneficial for parents. Furthermore, offering programs that have childcare assistance, transportation assistance, interpretation services, and are conveniently timed would increase the likelihood that parents of culturally diverse backgrounds could participate. Parent feedback suggests that agencies and organizations need to be innovative and creative in how information is shared and disseminated.

While there was considerable interest among focus group participants about accessing parenting information, it is evident that many parents require additional information and support regarding financial concerns and food security. Parents need to know about sources of financial support and other services that provide free or affordable products (e.g. food banks, used clothing stores, etc.). Parents also require additional support with the communication challenges that they face. Providing interpreters and/or exploring other options to support parents' interactions with health and education providers is needed. While it is anticipated that parents' English language skills will improve with their participation in the ESL program, not all newcomers are able to participate in such programs and will require more intentional supports and sensitivity in communicating with others about their parenting concerns.

While the findings from these focus group sessions were helpful to increase our understanding of parenting issues and needs, there is value in repeating the focus group process with more newcomer families to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues. The findings are based on a limited number of participants' experiences. However, common themes emerged from the information gathered in the three focus groups. It is recognized that newcomers have varying needs and assets based on their individual experiences and the countries that they originated from. By inviting more newcomer families to share their experiences and discuss their unique parenting needs, a more comprehensive picture of the diverse needs of newcomer parents will be gathered.

This summary report will be shared with project staff working on the project supported by Childreach. Project staff and community partners will review the findings of both projects that involved focus groups with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds in order to compare the results and discuss implications for future program planning. In addition, this summary report will be shared with members of the Ontario Early Years Council in order for many agencies and organizations involved with early child development initiatives to be aware of the findings of the focus group sessions.

REFERENCES

Middlesex-London Health Unit. (2003). Promote Healthy Pregnancy and Child Development Initiative. London, Ontario. Authors: Simpson, K & Montague, S.

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