



Outcome: Positive child and youth development

FCSS Calgary has adopted a social sustainability framework to serve as a blueprint for its social planning, investment decisions, and funding practices. Within this framework, FCSS has identified two investment priorities for the next decade: strengthening neighbourhoods and increasing social inclusion.

This research brief is one in a series of research and best / promising practice summaries commissioned by FCSS Calgary to assist the organizations it funds to provide high-quality, evidence-based, prevention programs that contribute to the achievement of specific outcomes that will align with the social sustainability framework, strengthen neighbourhoods, and increase social inclusion among vulnerable Calgarians.



FCSS Calgary Research Brief No. 1 | June 2009 |

The issue

Over the past 20 years there has been a growing interest in child and youth developmental outcomes; that is, the particular outcomes achieved during childhood and adolescence that are believed to be instrumental to success, health, and happiness in adulthood. A thorough and comprehensive discussion of the literature on child and adolescent development is beyond the scope of this discussion. In brief, although there are distinctions among the models, there is general consensus about the primary pathways of development and the critical factors and conditions that foster or inhibit the achievement of important outcomes, abilities, and personal characteristics at different stages of life.

Interest in developmental outcomes has been bolstered by advances in prevention science. Technological and other advances in brain research over the last decade have both confirmed many early speculations and led to new insights into the relationships between exposure to both risk and protective factors and physical brain development from the prenatal period to early adulthood, and between physical brain development and developmental outcomes over the entire life course. New studies documenting and explaining how this works are legion. For example, a retrospective study of 17,000 adults found that adverse childhood experiences (e.g., neglect, abuse, loss of a biological parent, household dysfunction, violence against the mother, parental alcohol or drug use, parental depression or mental illness) appear to result in structural changes to the brain in childhood, which are linked with serious illness, addictions, obesity, depression and suicide even 40 and 50 years after the adverse experiences occurred.¹

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Longitudinal cohort studies from England, Sweden, Australia, and elsewhere have confirmed the associations between poor socio-economic conditions and exposure to other risk factors in early childhood and both health and psychological problems (e.g., addictions, cardiovascular illness) in middle age, along with life expectancy.² New Canadian research indicates that childhood physical or sexual abuse can permanently alter both the brain and the genes involved in the brain's stress response.³ New American research has found that the disproportionately lower academic performance of poor children and youth appears to be linked to chronically-elevated levels of stress which cause neurobiological changes and impair working memory—considered to be a reliable indicator of reading, language, and problem-solving ability—in both childhood and adulthood.⁴ A growing body of research suggests that children who display aggressive behaviour and conduct disorder are more likely to be violent adults, including becoming perpetrators of domestic violence and child abuse.⁵

Clearly, preventing young people's exposure to risk factors and increasing their exposure to protective factors is the most effective way of preventing myriad health and social problems for both individuals and society as a whole down the road, including crime, poverty, addictions, lack of education, early childbearing, and perpetuation of the cycle of children growing up in less than optimal circumstances.

New knowledge about child and youth development has served as the foundation for the multitude of programs intended to prevent risk factors and bolster protective factors to help children and adolescents to achieve their potential in life. These include programs targeting parenting skills and family functioning, programs to improve family economic well-being, and programs targeting positive child and youth development. Roosa, among others, recommends that prevention programs to benefit younger children should focus on the family; programs for adolescents should target adolescents in addition to their families.⁶

Programs targeting child and youth development

Programs to improve child and youth development include a broad range of weekend, evening, summer, and after-school (or "out-of-school-time" or "critical hours") developmental programs; mentoring programs; and academic support programs. By addressing risk factors and, more often, protective factors, many of these programs have been demonstrated by research to directly or indirectly prevent a wide range of social ills, including high school dropout, criminal involvement, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse, and to promote physical and mental well-being, responsibility, self-esteem and self-efficacy, engagement, responsibility, and pro-social attitudes.

In addition, research shows that opportunities for youth to participate outside of school in clubs, sports, music, the arts, fundraising, volunteer activities and other community organizations and activities facilitates community engagement and sense of



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belonging, which are important for all children and youth, and especially important for newcomer children and youth and other young people who often feel — for good reasons—excluded from the mainstream.

The research shows that, for at-risk children and youth, participation in youth development programming can afford protective or “buffering” factors that can offset multiple risk factors.⁷ For those who are not at risk, the opportunities afforded through youth development programs augment and enhance their existing supports, and contribute to good developmental outcomes. Focusing on prevention programs that fall within FCSS’s mandate, after-school, mentoring, and family literacy programs are discussed below.

After-school programs

In the 1990s, American research began to explore and identify the developmental benefits of participation in comprehensive youth development programs, such as those offered by Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Girls Incorporated, and YMCAs. Very briefly, several large studies found that these sorts of long-term, structured, and progressive programs helped children and youth to build strong peer groups, helped them to learn a wide range of skills and personal and practical competencies, provided reliable and predictable relationships with positive adult role models, and fostered sense of accomplishment and self-worth. The studies revealed that participation improved outcomes in areas such as academic achievement and educational aspirations, self-efficacy and self-agency, sense of personal value, and hopefulness,⁸ and that the benefits appeared to accrue to all youth, regardless of poverty or risk profiles.⁹ One comprehensive study concluded that “[y]outh who experience these types of developmental opportunities and supports are more likely to have a healthy, hope-filled and productive adolescence, and ultimately, to mature into responsible, skilled and competent adults.”¹⁰

On the basis of these and other similar early, broad studies, it was initially inferred that all kinds of programming for children and youth would produce positive outcomes. However, most of these studies were not methodologically rigorous or longitudinal, nor did they consider participants’ length or degree of involvement in programs or the nature and quality of individual programs. Recent, evidence-based evaluations of after-school programs in particular have revealed that, while some programs improve the academic, social, emotional, physical health, and other outcomes of participants, particularly disadvantaged children and youth, other programs appear to have no significant effects.



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Best practices in after-school programming

As summarized by researchers at the Harvard Family Research Project,¹¹ large-scale studies using an experimental or quasi-experimental design have shown that sustained participation in high quality programming, along with strong family, school, and community partnerships, are associated with positive developmental outcomes for children and youth. It is recognized that a great deal of research is currently underway, and more information about best practices should be available within the next few years.

Sustained participation

Research has consistently demonstrated that children and youth experience greater gains across a wide variety of outcomes if they participate with greater frequency (more days per week) in a more sustained manner (over a number of years).¹² There appear to be no clear findings yet about the precise “dose” of participation that is required to effect change; we only know that occasional participation, even in a high-quality program, is unlikely to be effective,¹³ and that the developmental outcomes of children and youth who participate in high-quality after-school programming four or five days a week are generally better than those of children and youth regularly spend time with no adult supervision after school.¹⁴ On the other hand, short-term participation in very intensive programming can also be effective, at least in the short term.¹⁵

High-quality programming

Elements of programming that are linked to positive outcomes were first identified in the 1990s. For example, effective programs were believed to include activities that are deliberately structured to provide a set of operational procedures, values, and mores that teach and encourage prosocial behaviour.¹⁶ Subsequent research has echoed and further clarified these earlier findings, and they are reflected in a burgeoning number of program quality assessment tools.¹⁷ As summarized by the Harvard Family Research Project,¹⁸ the key elements of after-school program quality as they relate to positive developmental outcomes are currently identified to include:

Appropriate supervision and structure

Appropriate structure and supervision are necessary to keep youth on an upward trajectory and out of trouble. In fact, some studies have shown that failure to provide appropriate supervision and structure can result, not only in failure to achieve positive developmental outcomes, but in problematic behaviour and other negative outcomes.

Key features of quality associated with retention and sustained participation

Analysis of participation patterns among 13,000 New York City youth in 176 Department of Youth and Community Development-sponsored after-school programs revealed that programs with higher rates of youth retention over 2 years of operation differed from programs with lower retention rates in the following ways:

- Higher director salaries
- More advanced education credentials
- Parent liaison on staff
- Youth reported a greater sense of belonging
- More positive interactions between youth and staff
- Higher academic self-esteem
- Strong academic or arts focus
- Improved academic performance through enrichment*

* Russell, C.A.; et al. 2006. Evaluation of DYCD's Out-of-School Time Initiative: Report on the first year. (Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates).

Text box reproduced from Little, P.M.D.; Wimer, C.; Weiss, H.B. 2008. "After-school programs in the 21st century: Their potential and what it takes to achieve it." *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation*, Research Brief 10, Harvard Family Research Project.

Competent, qualified staff

Echoing the findings of many earlier studies, the after-school research shows that “[y]outh are more likely to realize the benefits of programs if they develop positive relationships with the program’s staff, and staff can only build these relationships through positive, quality interactions with youth.” Such positive relationships are generally found in programs where staff:

- model positive behavior,
- actively promote mastery of the skills or concepts presented in activities,
- listen attentively to participants,
- frequently provide individualized feedback and guidance during activities, and
- establish clear expectations for mature, respectful peer interactions.¹⁹

Intentional programming with opportunities for autonomy and choice

The most effective programs are explicitly focused on the achievement of specific outcomes. For example, programs that provide more hours of structured social skills training and more hours of focused academic content achieve better social and academic outcomes than programs providing unstructured recreation time.”²⁰ A 2007 meta-analysis of 73 after-school programs²¹ found that positive impacts on academic, social, emotional, and other developmental outcomes were concentrated in the programs that used strategies which are now commonly referred to in the literature as “SAFE” strategies:

- sequenced (using a sequenced set of activities designed to achieve skill development objectives),
- active (using active forms of learning to help youth develop skills),
- focused (at least one program component is devoted to fostering each desired outcome), and
- explicit (the program is very clear about the specific outcome(s) it seeks to achieve).

The meta-analysis found that, as a group, programs missing any of these four characteristics did not achieve positive results.”²²

There are no clear rules about the content of programming, but activities that are explicitly linked to the desired outcomes are more likely to produce the desired outcomes. For example, a comprehensive evaluation of *The After-School Corporation* (TASC) programs in New York found that the most effective programs had a clear intent to promote academic learning, and generally engaged participants in project-based, interdisciplinary learning experiences that differed from those of the regular school day, in conjunction with opportunities for exercise and recreation.²³

Other research showed that effective programs were likely to be staffed and managed with a clear intent to promote academic learning, often through project-based, interdisciplinary activities that engaged students in learning experiences that differed from those of the regular school day, as indicated in survey data. Effective projects also provided opportunities for exercise and fun after school.¹¹



“Intentional programming” means programming that is

Sequenced

Active

Focused

Explicit

Strong partnerships

Strong partnerships are essentially a means to the two ends of sustained participation and high quality programming. Programs are more likely to exhibit high quality when they effectively develop, utilize, and leverage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders like families, schools, and community. This is because systems of partnerships between various programs (i) make it easier to pool and individually and collectively leverage resources, which can reduce overhead costs and increase revenues, and (ii) help to ensure that youth stay engaged, motivated, and continuously learning across a wide variety of contexts over time. For example, as children age they can be smoothly referred from programs that they have outgrown to programs that offer new experiences, or programs that are offered only once or twice a week might share participants with another program that operates the other days of the week.

Additional considerations for immigrant and ethnocultural minority children and youth

In general, the positive youth development framework has paid little attention to the ways in which discrimination, racism, and other barriers affect immigrant and ethnocultural minority youth. The places where youth development occurs—schools, community organizations, entry-level employment, formal politics—may simply disregard issues of race, identity, and empowerment; at worst, they themselves be the sources of racism and, therefore, of youth disempowerment and disaffection.²⁴

It must be stressed that most immigrant and ethnocultural minority youth in Canada are doing very well: they are emotionally strong, engaged in community, succeeding at school, pursuing post-secondary education, and maturing to become the healthy, responsible, productive adults who will fully participate in, benefit from, and contribute to all aspects of Canadian society. However, some immigrant and ethnocultural minority youth need help to overcome the language, cultural, and other challenges that they face.²⁵

Newcomer youth can benefit from participation in traditional youth development programming, provided that the programming adheres to best practices and that they are not subject to racism in the process. Such programming may, in fact, be the most suitable approach to youth development and basic community engagement for recent immigrant youth, for whom basic acculturation, making friends, and the acquisition of English-language and Canadian life skills is paramount.²⁶ The following promising practices in programming for newcomer children and youth (to supplement the best practices identified above) have been identified by research:



Inter-program partnerships help to sustain participation and increase program quality

The large-scale evaluation of New York's Department of Youth and Community Development programs found that after school programs that also offer summer services are more likely to be able to retain youth, suggesting that continuities of service and developing systems of supports around youth may be critical. These entities already work with many youth, so they can be a source of referrals and of contact with youth that can be leveraged to promote sustained participation.

Russell, C. A.; et al. 2006. *Evaluation of DYCD's Out-of-School Time Initiative: Report on the first year*. Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

Text box reproduced from Little, P.M.D.; Wimer, C.; Weiss, H.B. 2008. "After-school programs in the 21st century: Their potential and what it takes to achieve it." *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation*, Research Brief 10, Harvard Family Research Project.

Promising practices for programs serving recent newcomer children and youth²⁷

- Deliver as early as possible following migration.
- Ensure the possibility of long-term involvement.
- Ensure that participation is open to all immigrant youth. Programs should not be specific to one ethno-cultural group.
- Employ staff who share the language and culture of the students and, ideally, have first-hand knowledge of the immigration experience.
- Encourage youth leadership and empowerment that support young people to challenge and change injustices in communities and society.
- Include a tutoring and mentoring component that provides intense personal attention and encouragement from successful and caring role models.
- May use traditional methods of assisting students academically, such as tutoring students in the academic areas, supporting English language development, and organizing programs to promote students' leadership skills and higher education goals.
- Provide special activities and supports to help students feel included and welcome.
- Include appropriate components for native language support and English language development.
- Demonstrate respect for the language and cultural backgrounds of the students they serve and for the positive qualities students bring to school.
- Foster awareness and appreciation of other cultures through cross-cultural and anti-bias learning that teaches explicit principles of respect, inclusion, understanding, cooperation and conflict resolution.
- Feature and foster family and community involvement.
- Services may include parenting classes that address the schools' expectations of parents and children and also help parents to develop English language and literacy skills.
- Address social factors that may interfere with students' achievement.

Research developments to watch for

For ethno-racial minority youth who were born in Canada or who have lived in Canada for a number of years, participation in anti-racism programming may also promote positive youth development. Anti-racism work is beginning to receive attention in the U.S. as a youth development strategy for ethno-racial minority youth to help them to develop a personal identity, a sense of responsibility, feelings of belonging, and a range of competencies, along with effecting concrete changes in their communities or in society.²⁸ The experience of racism means that "youth development goals (feeling of safety and belonging, and psychological wellness, for example) are more difficult to achieve. Understanding both the political and personal dimensions of racism allows youth to move away from self-blame and shame. It fosters a critical world view that is shaped by the particular social, economic, and political position."²⁹

The capacity to confront, resist, and challenge racism requires quite different skills from those ordinarily associated with youth development processes. "Confronting racism, for example, in police practices, school policies, and other aspects of life, provides a way for youth to engage in civic life that matters to them. As a result, young people develop a sense of agency to change things and foster a sense of purpose and future."³⁰



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American research has shown that “[t]he process through which youth develop a critical analysis of their circumstances and then develop both a personal and collective response can be deeply empowering.”³¹ Research also shows that youth “representation” in decision-making is not enough. Regardless of the type of organization, without “going to the next level,” engagement of young people is unlikely to prepare them to think and act in ways that challenge structural racism.³² Although this research is American, its significance in a Canadian context is clear: “The Canadian experience suggests that the inclusion and participation of all citizens in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the community is the necessary starting point for the successful management of diversity.”³³

Building on the work of the *Youth and Racial Equity Project*,³⁴ the Washington, DC-based Forum for Youth Investment explains that youth development programming with an anti-racist focus:

- offers an analysis of the racialized structures of power faced by youth and engages them in solutions;
- recognizes racism as an important factor influencing the life chances of youth and explicitly and intentionally addresses it in most aspects of program work;
- offers opportunities for collective action responses to individual problems and leadership roles for youth; and
- prioritizes a shared and evolving anti-racist political analyses that influences program development and implementation.³⁵

Mentoring Programs

Extensive research clearly demonstrates that parenting practices, parental love and support, and positive family communication and family relationships are among the most important, and probably the most critical, factors contributing to healthy child development at all ages. The presence of strong, non-parental adults acting as role models and/or providing support to children and youth is also vital to healthy development.³⁶ Some young people, however, receive little or less than optimal support from their parents or other caring adults, which can place them at risk of poor social, emotional, health, and cognitive developmental outcomes. Based on this research, mentoring programs provide a formal mechanism for establishing a relationship between a child or youth and at least one caring adult.

Mentoring is an evolving field using many new approaches, such as group mentoring and on-line mentoring, but the most common types of mentoring programs are one-on-one community-based mentoring, where mentors meet with mentees in community settings after school, in the evening, or on the weekend and, more recently, school-based mentoring, where mentors and mentees meet at the mentees’ schools at lunch time, after school or, in some programs, during school hours. Some mentoring programs focus explicitly on providing academic supports or preventing specific problems; others have broad child and youth development goals.



For highly at-risk youth, mentoring may be most effective when accompanied by other support services.

In what appears to be the only large-scale, randomized school-based mentoring study to date, researchers concluded that school-based mentoring was less effective than community-based mentoring, possibly due to the abbreviated time frame in which the mentoring is conducted, the fact that some school-based programs provide less training for and support to mentors than most community-based programs, and variations in the program at different schools.³⁷ Clearly, further research is required to truly assess the impacts of school-based mentoring.

Overall, however, the research shows that many mentoring programs are associated with the prevention of behavioural problems, such as drug use and school drop-out, and a wide range of positive developmental outcomes in the areas of behaviour, social skills, pro-social behaviour (helping others), emotional well-being, motivation, health, and academic achievement, although the effect size is generally small.³⁸ The largest effects appear to be in relation to mentees' attitudes (for example, toward education), interpersonal skills, and motivation; the smallest with respect to behaviour and health (e.g., drug use).³⁹ This has led some researchers to suggest that, for highly at-risk youth, mentoring may be most effective when accompanied by other support services.⁴⁰

A recent review concluded that the effects of mentoring programs are "likely to vary depending on an array of youth, mentor, and program characteristics as well as the quality of the evaluation methodology and outcomes measured."⁴¹ Research indicates that the most effective mentoring programs are those which adhere to promising practices¹ in programming. It is consistently noted in the literature that "numerous programmatic and other variables may be critical to attend to for the potential benefits of youth mentoring programs to be fully realized."⁴² Indeed, one meta-analysis found that, while no one feature or characteristic of programs could be singled out as responsible for positive outcomes, "[p]ositive effects of mentoring for these youth were evident when programs engaged in a majority of the relevant practices...; by contrast, when this was not the case, average effect size estimates were in a negative direction..."⁴³

¹ Described by Rhodes, et al. (2002) as "best practices" but only meeting FCSS's definition of "promising practices."



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Promising practices in mentoring

- The optimal “dose” of mentoring has not been established by research. However, we do know that regular meetings, ideally at least once per week, for at least a period of one year, are most beneficial. There is some evidence that brief relationships may actually be harmful to mentees, and one study found that relationships six months or less in duration were negatively related to mentees’ self-esteem, behavioral competence, and academic motivation.⁴⁴
- The “best candidates” for mentoring may be children and youth “who can be considered vulnerable by virtue of their present life circumstances, but who are not yet demonstrating significant dysfunction.”⁴⁵ Children and youth who are particularly vulnerable may need more intensive supports than those provided by a mentor alone.⁴⁶ There is evidence suggesting that youth with serious social or behavioural problems may benefit less from mentoring than youth who are less vulnerable.⁴⁷
- Mentoring programs that engage parents appear to have greater success in fostering positive developmental outcomes.⁴⁸
- Mentoring programs that use mentors whose background includes experience in a helping role (e.g., teachers, social workers) are usually more effective.⁴⁹ There is also substantial evidence that older adults can be very successful and effective mentors, although not all inter-generational programs have been successful.⁵⁰
- Some research indicates that, for young children and, especially boys,⁵¹ mentoring activities that focus on play and structured activities may be most effective.⁵² Programs for adolescents should provide opportunities to explore and learn new things for which they can receive attention and praise, and emphasize the development of social skills and positive connections with adults.⁵³
- “Prescriptive” mentoring relationships (i.e., those in which interactions are geared toward a specific goal set by the adult, such as improving school performance) appear to be less effective than relationships based on the changing needs and interests of the young person.⁵⁴
- A close relationship, characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy, between the mentor and the mentee is one of the best predictors of positive developmental outcomes and may be even more important than the frequency of contact between the mentor and the mentee.⁵⁵ Program practices that foster close relationships and good outcomes include:
 - careful recruitment, screening, and matching⁵⁶
 - ongoing⁵⁷ training and support for mentors⁵⁸
 - structured activities⁵⁹
 - high expectations for frequency of contact between mentor and mentee⁶⁰
 - ongoing monitoring of the relationship by the program⁶¹
 - youth involvement in deciding how time will be spent and attention to the youth’s need for fun⁶²
- Recommended components of a mentoring program⁶³
 - Orientation for mentors and mentees that includes program overview; description of eligibility, screening process, and suitability requirements; level of commitment expected (time, energy, and flexibility); expectations and accountability
 - Eligibility screening process that includes an application process and review, interview, reference checks, and suitability criteria, parental consent, signed commitment
 - Matching strategy with appropriate criteria for matches
 - Training curriculum, with skills development as appropriate
 - Monitoring process that includes records of activities, supervision, re-matching as required, closure steps
 - Recognition of participants and supporters



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Additional considerations for immigrant and ethnocultural minority children and youth

Although same-race mentoring matches have not been clearly shown to be superior to cross-race matches,⁶⁴ cultural differences can have particular implications for immigrant youth. Youth may face language barriers if matched with a mentor who only speaks English. In addition, if a mentor identifies too closely with the mainstream culture, the young person may not receive the support they need to successfully form a bicultural identity.⁶⁵ Therefore, MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership offers the following additional recommendations for mentoring programs for immigrant children and youth:

- Provide specialized training for volunteer mentors and staff that heightens their cultural sensitivity and helps them understand the unique stressors that specific immigrant groups face.
- Consider pairing immigrant adolescents with mentors of the same ethnic background. That way, mentors can offer important guidance and role modeling as their mentees explore identity issues within multiple cultural contexts.
- When possible, recruit adult mentors who are immigrants themselves, or the descendants of immigrants. And, as with any prospective mentor, ensure thorough screening.
- Put special emphasis on gaining parental trust. Reach out to the entire family, not just to the mentee.⁶⁶

Family literacy programs

Repeated studies have shown that children's learning, literacy levels, and academic success are greatly influenced by their parents;⁶⁷ that children's educational attainment is highly correlated with that of their parents, particularly their mothers;⁶⁸ and that reading skills are a key pillar of the foundation of success in school and beyond.⁶⁹ When parents find reading challenging, it is often difficult for children in that family to engage in, learn to love, and succeed at reading, and children who experience difficulties with reading in the early grades often continue to struggle throughout the educational process.⁷⁰

As revealed by the latest International Adult Literacy Survey, about 40% of Albertans have insufficient literacy skills and 50% insufficient numeracy skills to participate in today's economy.⁷¹ Poor adult literacy skills are associated with a range of problems including but not limited to health problems (often associated with the inability to read labels and instructions),⁷² low levels of social capital,⁷³ high school dropout, low levels of employment, and low income.⁷⁴ These problems will grow as the economy becomes increasingly knowledge based. Therefore, literacy programs for children (and for adults) should be included as a pillar of any long-term poverty prevention strategy.

Family literacy programs are one approach to improving children's literacy skills to afford them a better chance in life. Family literacy programs seek to help children to develop language and literacy skills with the support of their parents, who have the opportunity to improve their own skills.



The most effective means of increasing young children's literacy levels would be to increase the educational levels of their parents.

Family literacy programs usually target pre-school-aged children or elementary school-aged children and they may be school-based, community-based, or offered in schools via school-community partnerships. In Canada, programs grouped under the family literacy banner range from reading circles to school-community partnerships to Parents and Children Together programs.⁷⁵ Most Canadian family literacy programs tend to focus specifically on increasing the literacy of at-risk children by encouraging parents to support reading in the home. As described by Thomas, "Canadian family literacy intervention has been characterized by relatively short-term low intensity programs."⁷⁶ Alberta's Parent-Child Literacy Strategy, for example, takes a "soft" intergenerational approach, targeting oral and early and emergent literacy development for at-risk children aged 0-6 and their parents via adult literacy and parenting instruction.⁷⁷

Because the nature of family literacy programs is so varied and most programs are run on minimal budgets by not-for-profit organizations, "the level of program evaluation in family literacy often amounts to little more than testimonials."⁷⁸ There are a few exceptions to this sweeping statement, however. For example, an experimental evaluation of *Learning Together: Read and Write With Your Child*, which consists of 90 hours of instruction over 12 weeks, revealed significant and sustained improvements in the reading scores of children with the lowest pre-test scores, i.e., the ones with the furthest to go. The researchers concluded that the program should target only those children with the lowest literacy levels. They also suggested that the most effective means of increasing young children's literacy levels would be to increase the educational levels of their parents, since many parents are unable to read to and with their children.⁷⁹ Likewise, several quasi-experimental evaluations of the intensive *Families Learning Together* program, first piloted in Atlantic Canada and with a version tailored specifically for Aboriginal families, have demonstrated large, significant, and sustained improvements in children's reading abilities.⁸⁰

In the U.S., an in-depth inter-generational approach to family literacy programs has been adopted into federal legislation.⁸¹ *Even Start*, a comprehensive, federally-funded American program, targets the most at-risk children and includes significant adult education among its components. The overriding objective of *Even Start* is to "break the cycle of illiteracy and poverty in low-income and low-literate families."⁸² Early evaluations of *Even Start* and several other intensive, long-term, multi-component family literacy programs showed very positive results for both children and adults. For example, adults who participated in family literacy programs increased their reading, writing, and math proficiency; oral communication skills; and their job skills and employment prospects.⁸³ Likewise, some evaluations found that pre-school children increased their literacy skills.⁸⁴ However, subsequent experimentally-designed evaluations of *Even Start* have been less encouraging, showing that *Even Start* families did not improve more than control group families, many of whom received other early childhood education or adult education services.⁸⁵ Family literacy advocates have questioned the methodology of these latter evaluations.⁸⁶



Promising practices in family literacy programming

- The most effective programs are high intensity and long term.⁸⁷ Even Start evaluations indicate that at least one year of participation is required to effect significant improvements, although the required intensity will vary in accordance with the needs of the family.⁸⁸
- Access to participation (e.g., childcare, transportation, no/low fees) must be ensured.⁸⁹
- The most effective programs combine written, oral, and visual learning opportunities.⁹⁰
- Families should be provided with materials and ideas to use at home (e.g., providing books and reading logs).⁹¹
- It appears that the most effective programs engage families in the design and delivery of the program. It is recognized that this can be very difficult, given the life pressures experienced by many low-literacy families.⁹²
- Programs should be culturally responsive, which is easy to say but challenging to actually implement.⁹³

Additional, more general and basic, recommendations for good practice in family literacy programs include the following. Programs should:⁹⁴

- work with parents and children, directly or indirectly, to establish an intergenerational cycle of literacy achievement;
- recognize the importance of collaboration, and are developed, delivered, and continually improved with participant and community input;
- build on literacy behaviors and strengths already present in families;
- introduce additional strategies to help further enrich literacy activities in the home;
- be flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of the families who participate in them;
- be culturally sensitive, and use resources that are appropriate for specific participant groups;
- offer activities that celebrate and emphasize the joy of learning;
- follow sound educational practices appropriate for the literacy development of children and adults;
- have qualified and trained staff appropriate to the educational needs of children and adults and appropriate to specific roles and responsibilities within a particular delivery model;
- be held in accessible, welcoming locations and address barriers to participation, such as lack of child care; and
- include an ongoing, manageable evaluation process that produces information useful for program development and accountability.



In this document:

- “Evidence-based” means that a program or practice has been tested in a well-designed and methodologically sound (ideally but not necessarily, experimental (RCT) or quasi-experimental) study (ideally, but not necessarily, more than one study and replicated in more than one site), and has been shown to produce significant reductions in poor outcomes or associated risk factors or significant increases in positive outcomes or associated protective factors.
- “Best practices” refer to programs or components of programs or delivery methods that have been identified as effective (i.e., produce significant reductions in poor outcomes or associated risk factors or significant increases in positive outcomes or associated protective factors) by repeated methodologically sound studies using an experimental (RCT) or quasi-experimental design.
- “Promising practices” refer to programs or components of programs or delivery methods that have been identified as effective (“effective” as defined above) in at least one well-designed and methodologically sound study using at least a pre-post design with a large sample of participants that has been subject to peer review.
- “Prevention” means creating conditions or personal attributes that strengthen the healthy development, well-being, and safety of individuals across the lifespan and/or communities, and prevent the onset or further development of problems in each of these domains. In the research-based risk and protection prevention paradigm, prevention occurs by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors.

This research brief was written for FCSS by
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Layout & design by Katherine Payne, citizen payne designworks.



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Endnotes

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