

Brief to the Standing Committee on Finance
from the
Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)
707 – 331 Cooper St., Ottawa, ON K2P 0G5

Executive Summary

The federal government is invited to take the long view in this budget, identifying priorities and strategies for solving long-term complex problems rather than focusing on short-term results.

FRP Canada has over 35 years' experience serving the needs of those who work with families and young children in communities across Canada. Member organizations offer a wide array of services to thousands of families each month. Program components include pre-natal programs, adult-child activities, family literacy programs, clothing exchanges, toy and equipment exchanges, community kitchens, parenting groups, ESL groups, school readiness programs, referral to other services and more, as identified by community needs.

Parents and families exert the most powerful influence upon their children, even more powerful than their teachers and schools. The period from conception to around three years of age is especially sensitive to positive or negative influences, and effects are long-lasting. For example, well-respected research has clearly demonstrated the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and higher rates of adult health problems such as heart disease, liver disease, obstructive pulmonary disease, depression and more (see www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm).

If the federal government wants to reduce costs of systems such as health, child protection, education, social services and the criminal justice system, it should consider increasing strategic investment in supports for families with young children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Maintain or, if possible, increase financial resources for federally-funded family support programs such as Community Action for Children (CAPC), Canada Pre-natal Nutrition Program (CPNP) and Aboriginal Head Start (urban and reserve).**
2. **Allocate resources to support the development of a comprehensive national family policy.**
3. **Continue support for the collection and analysis of NLSCY data.**

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“Nothing is more important in the world today than the nurturing that children receive in the first three years of life, for it is in these earliest years that the capacities for trust, empathy and affection originate. If the emotional needs of the child are not met during these years, permanent emotional damage can result. ...it’s like pouring cement. If you don’t mix the batch right, you are stuck with it, and you have to get at it with a sledgehammer later – it’s a slow, difficult and almost impossible process. In the first three years of the child’s life, the cement is setting, and [we] ought to set every other priority aside to do [our] best.” Elliott Barker, M.D., presentation to the Senate Subcommittee on Childhood Experiences as Causes of Criminal Behaviour, Senate of Canada, Dec. 6, 1977

Taking the long view

FRP Canada acknowledges the challenges faced by the Standing Committee on Finance as it develops a budget which will encourage Canada’s continued growth and prosperity, while at the same time trying to ensure the well-being of all Canadians.

Sometimes, budgetary and policy decisions appear to be driven by a focus on short-term results with the primary goal of winning the next election. This distracts the government from developing longer range strategies to address complex problems that Canadians really care about.

FRP Canada believes that the government has an opportunity to take a new approach thanks to the current political stability. A thoughtful budget which focuses on strengthening the basic structures of society and uses incremental approaches to reach desired outcomes five, fifteen and even fifty years from now will demonstrate the government’s ability to plan for the long term to ensure a strong future for our children and grandchildren.

About FRP Canada and its members

Since 1976, FRP Canada (www.frp.ca) has provided information, resources and learning opportunities to staff members at hundreds of community-based organizations across Canada. These practitioners in turn offer services to many thousands of families with infants and pre-schoolers. Family resource programs or centres are known by many names such as Early Years Centre, Parent Link Centre, Military Family Resource Centre, Family Place and organisme communautaire à la famille. These organizations support families during the stages of pregnancy and early childhood development, periods very critical to long-term outcomes for children. For many parents, the local family resource centre takes the place of the traditional extended family. It becomes their trusted source for parenting information, a friendly access point to other community services, and a place to build skills and confidence.

Parents and families are the greatest influence on children's development

Our personal experience tells us, and many studies confirm, that parents and families exert far greater influence on their children's well-being than any other individuals or institutions including child care providers, health professionals, teachers or schools. We know that if a child is well-supported from conception to about age three, he or she is likely to do well in life and contribute to, rather than draw upon, the financial resources of the nation. Factors such as parental warmth and structure contribute to healthy child development; factors such as poverty, depression, harsh parenting, poor nutrition, child abuse and neglect often lead to costly negative outcomes.

History of federal funding for family resource programs

The federal government has long understood the importance of family support, especially during the years when children are young. The earliest family resource pilot programs in Canada were supported by funding from Health and Welfare Canada in the mid 1970s. More recently, through agreements made as part of the Early Childhood Development Initiative in 2000, the federal government has transferred funding to provinces and territories to support various early child development initiatives. This funding has been partially directed to family resource centres. As well, several hundred projects for families with young children are funded directly by programs of the Public Health Agency of Canada, for example, Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), Canada Pre-natal Nutrition Program (CPNP), and Aboriginal Head Start. Since the mid 1990s, the Department of National Defence has funded Military Family Resource Centres at every wing and base. These centres provide a range of much-valued supports to the families of military personnel.

Prevention as a cost-saving approach

Family resource programs focus on health promotion. As prevention initiatives, their cost-benefit is difficult to quantify. However, when we look at the known costs of some preventable outcomes such as low birth weight, child maltreatment, maternal depression, repeat grades and remedial classes in school, social isolation, unemployment and even criminal behaviour, we begin to see how cost-effective these community-based family support programs can be.

For example, low birth weight babies incur much higher hospital costs than 'normal' births, and are more likely to have health and developmental problems later in life including learning difficulties, hearing and visual impairments, chronic respiratory problems such as asthma and chronic diseases. Life-time health costs associated with LBW have been estimated at over \$300,000 per birth. Community initiatives which are designed to reduce incidents of low birth weight, such as the Canada Pre-natal Nutrition Program, reduce risks of LBW through provision of emotional support to low-income mothers, nutrition supplements, smoking cessation programs and other supports, both tangible and intangible.

The famous ACE studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente in the U.S. and supported by Canadian researchers show a strong association between adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and higher rates of health problems

later in life. These include chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, drug use, heart disease, liver disease and others. (See www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm).

By assisting parents as they face tough challenges while raising young children, family resource programs reduce short and long-term expenditures in the mental and physical health systems, in the child protection system, in the educational system and in the criminal justice system. Although some of these responsibilities are outside federal jurisdiction, leadership from the federal government with fairly modest financial contributions could have an enormous ripple effect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Maintain or, if possible, increase financial resources for federally-funded family support programs such as Community Action for Children (CAPC), Canada Pre-natal Nutrition Program (CPNP) and Aboriginal Head Start (urban and reserve).** CAPC and CPNP funding has not increased since the programs' beginning about 12 years ago, although the breadth of programming and the numbers of families served continues to increase. These organizations are stretched to the limit and uncertain of the government's commitment to the future. They are cost-effective, address basic problems in society, and deserve the government's continued and enthusiastic support.
- 2. Allocate resources to support the development of a comprehensive national family policy.** Unlike many other countries, Canada does not have a comprehensive family policy that aims to ease the burdens of parents and ensure the best possible beginnings for its youngest citizens. Couples are facing challenges such as staggering student debt, women's career aspirations, the high cost of raising children and difficulty in finding quality affordable child care. These pressures are leading to delayed first pregnancies (with higher health costs) and lower birth rates. The federal government currently depends upon revenue from income taxes of mothers who are in the workforce while their children are very young. Parents of young children are under enormous pressure, and children are more frequently being identified as suffering from anxiety and depression. Children's increased sedentary activity and hours of screen time, combined with parents' inattention due to the distraction of personal technological devices and work demands, are contributing to future health and emotional problems which we ignore at our peril. FRP Canada would be pleased to take part in discussions which aim to identify a range of options that will support all Canadian families, including parents who wish to spend more time with their young children.
- 3. Continue support for the collection and analysis of NLSCY data** The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth has been enormously helpful in revealing factors that contribute to healthy and unhealthy outcomes. The large data set, which follows approximately 20,000 children from an early age through young adulthood, has identified effective (and ineffective) parenting styles and has produced much insight about factors that contribute to healthy child development.

Best wishes to the committee as it determines government priorities for the coming year.
Respectfully,

Janice MacAulay, Executive Director