

Family Literacy in Ontario

THE STATE OF FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMMING
Executive Summary of a Provincial Survey



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Executive summary

Literacy in Ontario

Literacy is fundamental to Ontario's economic performance and is crucial to individual, family, and social prosperity. Literacy skills are integrally related to all other aspects of life, from educational achievement and employment status, to health and social welfare, to civic engagement. Yet, according to the 2005 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 3.3 million adults in Ontario do not have the literacy skills necessary to meet the demands of a modern knowledge-based society.

Family literacy

Family literacy is about the way families use literacy and language in their daily lives to do ordinary tasks. There is a well-established link between parents' literacy levels and the subsequent school achievement of their children. Ontario needs programming that deals directly with the intergenerational cycle of educational disadvantage by improving parents' and children's literacy skills and helping parents develop a learning culture in the home.

About this study

Using focus groups and a province-wide survey of more than 100 family literacy practitioners, this study takes a snapshot of family literacy activity in Ontario. The study is designed to identify issues and gaps in the current family literacy infrastructure and to identify effective and sustainable options for family literacy delivery.



Findings

Few existing family literacy programs are adult-and-child-focused.

Little stable funding is available for adult-and-child-focused family literacy programs.

Few partnerships exist between child-focused and adult-focused programs.

More professional development opportunities are needed.

A solid majority of family literacy practitioners support accreditation.



Introduction

The importance of family literacy programming

Family literacy is about the ways families¹ use literacy and language in their daily lives. According to the 2005 Federal Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, “Children are born into a world of language. They are immersed in the words of their parents, their siblings, and those who care for them. Their speech emerges gradually and naturally as they learn to respond to the people around them. Most children speak their first clear words sometime during their second year of life. Their vocabularies then grow very quickly.

Lives of literacy begin in a family setting.” (p. 35)

Given how early literacy development begins, parents play a crucial role as a child’s first and most important teacher. The literacy skills, attitudes, and behaviours of parents and caregivers have a powerful impact on children’s acquisition of literacy and their subsequent achievement in school. The intergenerational cycle of low literacy skills is ever more serious with modern demands for increasingly higher levels of literacy.

Family literacy programming is an innovative and effective strategy that focuses on developing a learning culture in the home and improving both the children’s and parents’ literacy skills.

Research questions

What types of family literacy programs currently exist in Ontario?

What is the level and nature of funding for family literacy programming in Ontario?

What types of organizational partnerships do family literacy programs engage in?

What are the training and professional development needs of family literacy practitioners?

Is there support for accreditation in the family literacy field?

¹ The word “family” is used broadly here as two or more people related by blood, marriage, adoption, or commitment to care for one another. When speaking of “parents,” all caregivers are included.



How the study was conducted

This study used two primary methods. The first method was a comprehensive online survey designed to get a picture from past and present family literacy workers and administrators from across Ontario. The second method was a series of online focus groups organized to solicit a deeper level of input on the study topics from a sub-group of survey respondents.

Online survey

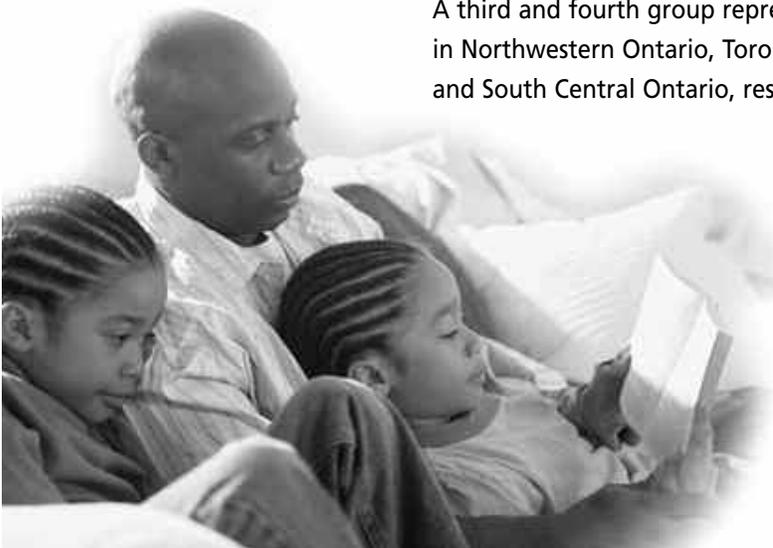
Using lists from a variety of literacy sources, the researcher sent the link for an online survey to more than 600 addresses representing family literacy programs, adult literacy programs that support family literacy programming, Ontario Early Years Centres, and libraries across Ontario. One survey per program was requested. Between January 11 and February 4, 2005, 106 usable surveys were submitted.

Focus groups

All focus group events were held online during the week of April 11-15, 2005. Feedback was collected from 17 respondents from community-based family literacy programs and Ontario Early Years Centres.

A total of four focus groups were held. One group included the community of Kingston, Ontario, as an example of a medium-sized city with multiple family literacy service providers. A second group focused on issues of professional development with participants who had varied lengths of experience in the literacy field.

A third and fourth group represented new and established programs in Northwestern Ontario, Toronto, Southwestern Ontario, and South Central Ontario, respectively.



What the study found

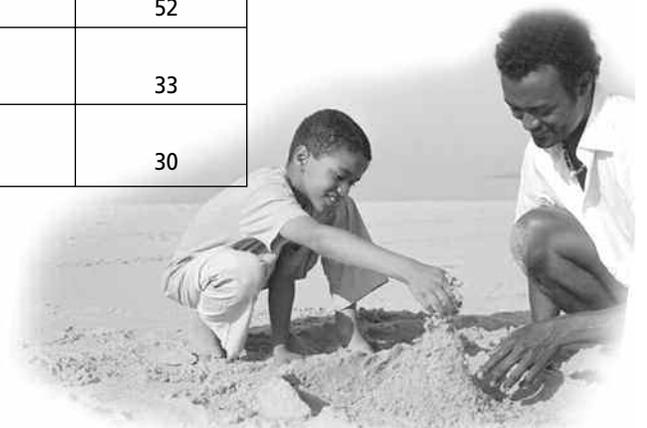
What types of family literacy programs currently exist in Ontario?

Few existing programs are adult-and-child-focused

Most family literacy programs deal with skills development and school readiness for children. The majority of current family literacy programs do not directly address the literacy skills of parents themselves. All but one respondent indicated that providing preschool children with developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that supported “school readiness” is the goal of their programs.

What Goals Do Programs Have? (multiple responses)

Goal	Frequency
To provide preschool children with developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that support “school readiness”	105
To promote reading as a valued family activity that encourages positive interactions and shared learning experiences	88
To provide resources and materials that promote family literacy	84
To enhance the ability of parents to support their children’s language and literacy development from birth throughout the school years	83
To provide information and support for positive parental involvement in all aspects of their children’s development and education	70
To promote collaborative school/community/agency/ government efforts to support the interrelated needs of families in family literacy settings	52
To provide the opportunity for parents to pursue their own educational goals	33
To provide training and/or consultation for practitioners who work in family literacy settings	30



What the study found

What is the level and nature of funding for family literacy programming in Ontario?

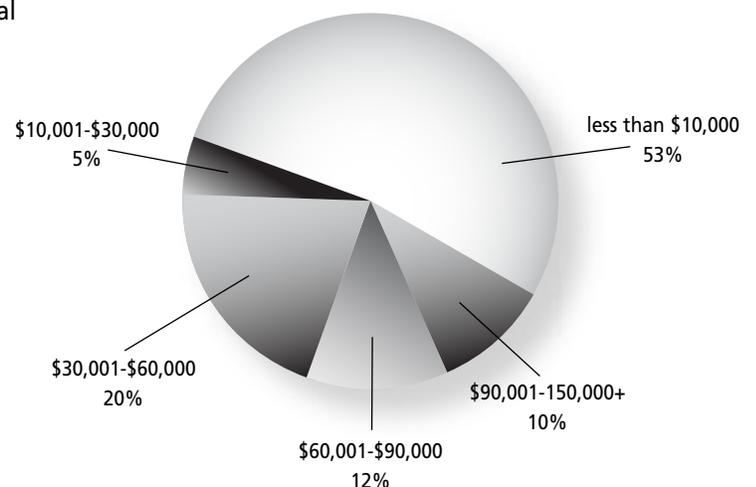
Little stable funding is available for adult-and-child-focused programs

The vast majority of family literacy programs run on project-based, shoestring budgets. Small budgets, along with a lack of core funding, make it difficult to do strategic planning, keep experienced staff, build ongoing partnerships, provide training and professional development, and implement needed improvements identified in program evaluations. Public funding goes primarily to child-focused literacy programs (birth to age six) such as Ontario Early Years Centres or Best Start Programs. A few adult literacy programs incorporate family literacy activities and approaches within their regular adult programming.

Funding for the few programs that are adult-and-child-focused comes mainly from the private sector and is particularly scant and precarious.

Regardless of the target age for programs, the majority of them (53 percent) report an annual budget of less than \$10,000. A further quarter report annual budgets between \$10,000 and \$60,000.

What is the Size of Program Budgets?



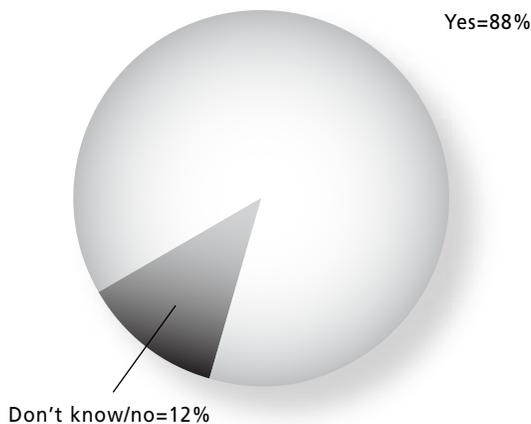
What the study found

What types of organizational partnerships do family literacy programs engage in?

Few partnerships exist between child-focused and adult-focused programs

Family literacy groups have a variety of partnerships, with libraries, schools, health and community agencies, and others. However, few partnerships exist among child-focused and adult-focused literacy programs. A majority (88 percent) of family literacy practitioners see value in building partnerships among child-focused literacy programs (e.g., Ontario Early Years Centres), and adult-focused literacy programs, for the purpose of information sharing, improving programs and outcomes, and avoiding duplication of services.

Do Practitioners Want to See Partnerships among Family Literacy Programs, Early Years Centres, and Adult Literacy Programs?



What Type of Partners do Family Literacy Programs Have?

Partnerships	Frequency
Libraries	27
Schools/school boards	25
Child/family support services	23
Provincial government/support services	17
Health organizations	13
Business sector	12
Community literacy services	11
Cities/townships/municipalities	10
Foundations	10
Churches/religious organizations	9
Individuals	6
Federal government programs	6
Provincial literacy associations	5
Aboriginal organizations	5
Provincial colleges/universities	3
National literacy organizations	2
Other	21

What the study found

What are the training and professional development needs of family literacy practitioners?

More professional development opportunities are needed

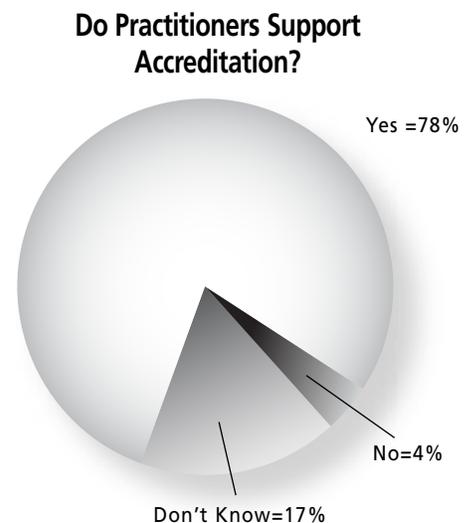
While there are some training opportunities for Ontario's family literacy practitioners, most practitioners identify a need for more in-depth training.

Focus group participants indicated that there are not enough training options available, either for novice or for experienced practitioners. When asked about the Foundational Training in Family Literacy program, most agreed that while it is a good course, it is only a start, and opportunities for more specialized training are needed. Ideally, this program would include assignments and a practicum component. The findings from the focus groups are amplified by the survey findings.

Is there support for accreditation in the family literacy field?

A solid majority of family literacy practitioners support accreditation

A majority of respondents support accreditation, especially if it comes in tandem with the type of field development that would follow from adequate funding.



Percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding.

Recommendations

At present, family literacy programming is inadequate to meet the needs of Ontario families. Given what we know about literacy acquisition, programming should ideally address adult and child literacy skills simultaneously. Integrating family literacy programming within adult-only programs would also be beneficial. The Ontario Literacy Coalition and its working group Action for Family Literacy Ontario recommend that the provincial government create a centralized, cross-ministerial directorate for family literacy to integrate and coordinate activities. This directorate should:

Support bridging and partnerships among adult-centred literacy programs, child-centred literacy programs, and Ontario Early Years Centres so that they can network and develop joint programming and referral protocols.

Expand funding for adult literacy to include family literacy programming or allow for partnership opportunities for adult programs to work with child-focused family literacy programs.

Commit to **adequate core funding** to allow programs to develop and operate effectively.

Support research and development, with sufficient funding and with an initial focus on models and approaches to integrate programming of adult and child literacy.

Create the conditions for ongoing, responsive professional development to encourage staff retention and professionalism.



Contact information

The **Ontario Literacy Coalition** (OLC) aims to find effective and respectful ways to help people in Ontario who have literacy challenges. We are committed to a future vision of Ontario where people with literacy challenges have access to high-quality supports and opportunities, and can find and use the information they need. **Action for Family Literacy Ontario** (AFLO) is a provincial working group of the OLC, committed to developing a plan to move family literacy forward in Ontario.

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