

Promising Practices in Family Literacy Programs

by Maureen Sanders and Janet Shively

An old school bus, painted like a Holstein cow, trundles into a city housing project in northeast Edmonton. Rose and her two preschoolers wave excitedly to the driver as she pulls into the parking lot. Janice, the Classroom on Wheels (C.O.W.) coordinator, jumps down the steps of the bus smiling warmly and says, "Well, it's nice to see you all so bright and early again!" Four-year old Kayleigh clambers onto the bus and rushes to the carpeted area at the back shouting, "Let's sing rhymes." Joshua, aged two, heads straight for the basket of board books, quickly digs out *Where's Spot* and chants, "Read, read, read." As Janice welcomes two more families, Rose browses the shelves of books lining the bus and takes several to share with Joshua and another child who has joined him. The family stays for about an hour participating in a rhymes and songs session, listening to *Owl Babies* read with gusto by Janice, and chatting with other families about neighbourhood events and registration for kindergarten.

As Rose checks out six new books she quietly confides in Janice, "The C.O.W. bus has been the best thing ever for us. The regular library is two bus rides away but you come right to us. I never knew how much young kids could learn about books and reading." She pauses for a moment and then adds, "I'm afraid they'll soon be better readers than I am. How will I be able to help them then?"

Janice uses this as an opener to share information about the other literacy programs offered by the Centre for Family Literacy, and by the time Janice returns to the office the next day Rose has phoned and made an appointment to be matched with a tutor. Two weeks later she is meeting with her new tutor and already developing enough confidence to begin talking about entering a college upgrading program.

The Edmonton Literacy C.O.W. is a family literacy partnership program between the Centre for Family Literacy and Success by 6[®]. Running for the past seven years, it



Photo Courtesy of the Centre for Family Literacy

travels to ten communities weekly, bringing books, informal programs and literacy support to families who lack resources and services. It is one example of innovative family literacy programs across the country that focus their attention on the importance of family, home and community in supporting the development of literacy and positive attitudes towards learning.

Studies worldwide show that family influences on student achievement outweigh the effects of either school or community. Learning takes place in all families, among all generations, in all kinds of unique ways. It happens naturally in the daily process of "getting things done" and sharing experiences together. The intention of family literacy programs is to address the learning needs of all family members by building on home and community literacy practices, and to provide appropriate supports for parents in their powerful and challenging role as the first and most important teachers of the next generation.

In recent years, family literacy providers across Canada have developed guidelines and quality standards for family literacy programs to ensure they support the needs of a wide range of families in a wide range of communities. This article focuses on five central statements of principle that form the foundation of promising practice in family literacy. Each statement is followed by examples of its implementation in actual programs. This is in no way a comprehensive look at family literacy programs in Canada, but rather a glimpse into some of the excellent work that is being done in every province and territory – in community centres, libraries, health centres, youth centres, schools, literacy centres, church halls, and other community spaces.

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Families Learning Together: A family literacy program with Mi’kmaw Communities in Atlantic Canada was developed to involve parents in nurturing literacy skills with their children in a way that reflects the strengths of participating families as well as the indigenous context and history. Researchers from the University of Prince Edward Island partnered with members of three Mi’kmaw communities using a process that involved constant feedback and adjustment to ensure that the program met the specific needs of Mi’kmaw families and their children.

From 2003-2006, approximately 31 families from Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia participated in the development and implementation of ten comprehensive, theme-based, culturally appropriate literacy modules. Facilitators were members of the community, participants were considered the experts on their own families, and the rich family histories and experiences of parents were used to develop the literacy program. Themes relevant to the community were identified by community members, elders and aboriginal education experts, and then linked to specific skills that needed to be learned. Culturally appropriate resource packs were designed for the parents to complement each module. Magazine articles, tips, strategies, and question and answer-type resources were rewritten in clear language for home reference. The additional resources provided supplemental support for the parents’ literacy and skill development.

Following the pilot, the assessment results showed that children experienced significant gains in listening comprehension and literacy levels. Feedback from parents revealed that they continued to use the strategies with their children and other family members. Parents also commented on the special one-on-one time with their child. “Before it would be, O.K., let’s read the book, then it’s time for bed... Now you read a book and talk about it a little bit more and... there’s a little bit more conversation between us.”

Without exception, every family wanted their children’s literacy skills to improve and stated that literacy is a high priority for their family. “I don’t want my kids to get

stuck,” said one parent. “I just look at my friends now and some of them can’t even read, and it scares me. So I try my best to make any effort to read to my kids.”

The next step is to hire and train additional facilitators to conduct programs in their own communities, thus building capacity within Aboriginal communities and supporting the revival of Aboriginal heritage and culture through language and literacy.

On the other side of the country in Chilliwack B.C., *The Central Gateway for Families Project* has developed a unique approach to family literacy that integrates a number of programs into an inner-city elementary community school during school hours. All programs under the project umbrella build on the existing knowledge, strengths, skills and cultural practices of the participating families.

To support both the adult participants and their children, a Preschool and an Infant/Toddler program run alongside other program components. These programs give the children who attend a chance to grow physically, cognitively, socially and in language/literacy. Prenatal nutrition, understanding child development, academic skills, English as a Second Language, computer literacy, family reading, communication skills, life skills, parenting skills, and employment readiness are available to adult participants. Parents and children also enjoy important time together, including library visits and other educational field trips. In addition, the project offers a community kitchen now run solely by parent participants and a summer recreation program. The most recent evolution of the project has parents going into K-7 classrooms, volunteering to work alongside their older children.

With all this going on, it’s hardly surprising that it can look “somewhat chaotic” at times, according to Director Julia Dodge. “If you walked down the hallways most days, things would be very busy and noisy – could be babies crying, could be children and adults laughing, could be singing, could be cooking and sharing a meal. If you asked participants, you would likely find it is the calmest, sanest part of their day.”

Families report that their participation in the program has given them a new understanding of what nurtures children’s learning development and has encouraged them to make supportive changes in their home environment and practices. A number of parents have attested to the change they see in themselves. As they attend programs in an environment that recognizes and respects their knowledge and abilities, they readily offer one another many types of support including friendship, encouragement, time for self-care, child care and meals. Their participation fosters a sense of connection and commitment not only to the school but also to the community as they begin to envision the kind of trustworthy, caring, friendly place in which they want to live and work.

Family literacy programs reduce barriers to participation and retention.

Like the *Literacy C.O.W.* program in Edmonton, accessibility is an important goal of *START* (Set Time Aside to Read Together), a family literacy program in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. This eight week program takes place in seven locations, each with different clientele, and provides activities for adults and preschool children both separately and together. All activities focus on improving the literacy skills of both the adults and pre-school children and developing a lifelong love of books and reading. Program facilitator Emilie Wall, affirms: "We adjust our program according to our clientele. We travel to the Young Parents' Resource Centre for single moms and dads, and to the Hutterite Colonies, as they feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings. The sessions at the Hutterite Colonies are ESL sessions because the preschoolers speak only German at home; as a result we do a lot more repetition and encourage the children to do a lot of speaking."

All of the family literacy programs described place a strong emphasis on encouraging retention of families by providing a combination of appropriate supports such as babysitting service for families with young children, food and snacks for families during each session, transportation to and from the program, and calling families each week the night before the program. One parent describes how they support each other in attending the program, reporting that if a parent/family missed a session, when she saw them at the market she would say, "Where were you last night? We missed ya. You gotta come next time, it's fun." Facilitators often award certificates of participation at the end of the sessions, and give families books as celebratory gifts.

Family literacy programs encourage community involvement, partnerships, support and referrals.

Quality family literacy programs recognize the interrelatedness of education, health, economic and social issues. As such, they strongly encourage a range of partnerships and collaborations among service providers that support both adults and children in reaching their full potential. This approach provides increased and more accessible opportunities for families, and maximizes resources and services.

Organizers of *The Central Gateway for Families Project* in B.C. comment that their program is a "living example of how numerous interested parties can engage in partnerships that bring about an opportunity for multi-layered learning and support to take place at an inner-city elementary community school." Four key partners collaborate to deliver the project: University College of the Fraser Valley, School District #33, Chilliwack Community Services, and Fraser Health Authority. Other local organizations involved through financial contributions, volunteering, or referrals include the Society for Community Living, Kiwanis, Restorative



Justice, university nursing and social work programs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Community Access Program and a local restaurant.

Get Set Learn!, a family literacy program offered by Project READ Literacy Network in Ontario, has been running successfully in three different sites twice a year since 2004. Coordinator Lorri Sauv , states: "In 2003, the local adult literacy service providers noticed that there was a lack of family literacy programming in the Waterloo Region since the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities would not fund such programs. With this need in mind, we approached a family resource center and the Municipal Government to see if a partnership could be worked out. They were enthusiastic and offered child care plus a parent room so that the program could begin." Creative collaborations are essential to family literacy programs and consist of sharing costs, resources, space, personnel, participants, information, statistics and ideas. *Get Set Learn!* now operates in partnership with three host sites, the local welfare agency and a native resource center.

Family literacy programs engage in ongoing assessment, evaluation and documentation strategies.

One of the greatest challenges for the family literacy field in Canada has been the lack of research to support the claims for the differences that programs make in families' lives.

The 2006 results of a study by the Canadian Centre for Research on Literacy at the University of Alberta (*Family Literacy Matters: A Longitudinal Parent-Child Literacy Intervention Study*) demonstrate the effectiveness of the *Learning Together: Read and Write with Your Child* program offered by the Centre for Family Literacy. The study was

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undertaken in the fall of 2001, extended over five years and compared five participant groups of children and their parents to a comparison group of children and parents. In all, 158 adults and children from five communities participated in the study.

Learning Together was offered three mornings or afternoons a week, totalling 90 hours over three months. It comprised three integrated components: adult learning, preschool education and parent-child joint sessions. Participants were parents with low education and income and their preschool children who were at risk of not succeeding in school. *Learning Together* is built on the strengths of participants, and takes into consideration the social and cultural backgrounds and goals of the parents. It integrates into its curriculum elements that support positive early intervention programming, addresses both adult and child developmental needs, and offers parents oral language and literacy activities to incorporate within the family and community to enhance their own and their children's education.

The study confirmed the powerful combined effect of parents' education and parents' reading ability on their children's reading ability before starting school. The *Learning Together* program positively affected literacy development for those children at or below the 70th to 80th percentile. The results also showed that parents acquired and implemented more frequent and varied literacy activities in the home after participating in the program. Parents reported reading more often themselves and being more confident and secure in their abilities to help their children achieve pre-literacy skills. They also expressed a desire to learn more ways to improve their own literacy levels, which ideally is the two-pronged focus of comprehensive family literacy programs.

Family literacy programs recruit, train, and retain high quality staff who can meet the diverse learning needs of participating family members.

The need for training and professional development consistently arises as a critical issue among family literacy practitioners. In addition to program-specific training available throughout Canada, family literacy practitioners recognize the need for comprehensive leadership training that addresses the wide range of skills and expertise required for effective program delivery. They also cite the need for reflection on practice that training encourages. Promising practices are revealed through

research, but as one informant in a recent Research in Practice in Adult Literacy project put it: "Practitioners need to do more than just read about research – they need professional development to be able to implement it." Family literacy practitioners also want first-rate resources, tools and professional recognition to enhance the capacity of this complex field to fulfill its promise for Canadian families.

To address these needs, in 1999 Edmonton's Centre for Family Literacy developed a comprehensive practitioner training program. With a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat, this training was expanded when some of the most knowledgeable practitioners and academics from across the country were recruited to help develop *Foundational Training in Family Literacy*. The

intent of this core training was to provide the underpinnings of a wide range of program delivery, and to bring credibility and professionalism to this rapidly developing field.

In 2001, practitioners from across the country participated in a Train-the-Trainer Institute in Pictou, Nova Scotia, and returned to their home provinces and communities enthusiastic about the promise of *Foundational Training* for the literacy field. Over the next few years, several provinces

delivered over two dozen regional training sessions. The program is also delivered on-line to enable more access. Further, La fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF), in partnership with the Centre for Family Literacy, translated and adapted *Foundational Training* for a francophone minority context and is now regularly delivering the training.

Practitioners who have taken this training agree that it has had a valuable impact on their professional development and, consequently, on their programs. Donna Arnold, Executive Director and Family Literacy Coordinator of the Heday Association for Lifelong Learning in Alberta, says, "I felt the course content was put together exceptionally well... It took you through a wonderful journey of expanding your thinking ... as well as increasing your knowledge. I feel that my whole outlook has changed. Instead of family literacy groups, I am seeing individuals and family units... I have more insight into what makes them and their needs unique. I am more flexible in my thinking and my approach." Anne Ainsworth, Early Literacy Specialist for the Kenora/Rainy River Districts in Ontario, found that her attitude has changed since taking the training: "When working with families, what's important is focusing on



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their strengths rather than trying to go in and feeling I'll 'fix' the families. When implementing workshops, I try to incorporate feedback and input from participants, valuing what's being said and reminding them that they are the experts of their children."

Dr. Rosemarie Duguay from the Université de Moncton has engaged in an evaluation of delivery of *Foundational Training* in the francophone community and writes: "The training delivered by the FCAF was very well-received at the field level. Both practitioners and managers suggested that training sessions on family literacy be offered to other individuals working with francophone children and parents, including child care workers, kindergarten teachers and social workers."

Because of the growing interest in this training, plans are afoot to make additions and revisions to the training materials and hold two more train-the-trainer events. In addition, a steering committee is exploring options for obtaining certification for *Foundational Training* in college or university programs. Vancouver Community College, in partnership with the Centre for Family Literacy, 2010 Legacies Now-Literacy Now and Literacy B.C., is leading the way with a pilot *Foundations in Family Literacy* certificate program, running throughout the coming year.

If the guidelines for quality family literacy programming we have described are the foundation for family literacy in Canada, then the participant families are the building blocks reaching ever higher and the practitioners are the cement that binds it together.

A participant of *The Central Gateway for Families Project* speaks powerfully for all high-quality family literacy programs: "While there are many reasons I can give for recommending this program, the first is that you and your family deserve it... Everyone deserves to live a healthy and productive life... Even if you have come from the darkest, hardest, cruelest place, you deserve to be a happy healthy person. Everyone has a gift to share with the world; the trick is feeling secure enough to share it... By opening ourselves to the world a little at a time we can begin to see all we have to offer. We can change the world when we learn to be flexible and work with *all* those around us. Only with amazing teachers and the group support have I been able to grow so much. Each person has been an integral part of helping me grow and learn. My gratitude cannot be solely expressed in words."

This is the promise of family literacy fulfilled. ☑

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