

An excerpt from the Alberta Children's Services document *Parent Links: A network of resource centres serving parents, caregivers and children in Alberta*, September 2004

Program Guidelines and Best Practices

The guidelines and best practices outlined in this chapter are first steps toward the establishment of comprehensive, province-wide standards to ensure that all Albertans have access to high-quality parent resource programs. The guidelines will be expanded and fine tuned based on lessons learned in each phase of the program.

The current guidelines establish minimum expectations with regard to the delivery, monitoring and evaluation of Parent Link centres. They also suggest best practices that service providers can incorporate in their long-term plans and in day-to-day work.

Note

The objectives, principles and requirements outlined in Chapter 4 underpin all standards and requirements for Alberta's Parent Link centres.

Community Connections

Alberta's Parent Link centres are part of a range of community-based services and supports designed to strengthen families, improve parenting skills and foster optimal child development.

To serve families as effectively as possible, the centres must be closely connected to their communities. Centre staff must be active participants in community-based local planning groups. They must build networks and partnerships with schools and community agencies that provide child protection, family literacy, school readiness, housing assistance, job training, public health, primary health care and other family services. They must also build partnerships with the parents and families who use Parent Link services.

Community partnerships help ensure that

- centre staff are knowledgeable about community resources and can refer families to the appropriate agencies
- staff of other agencies know about the Parent Link program and can refer families who would benefit from using Parent Link services
- program resources are used effectively and efforts are not duplicated across agencies
- families get the services they need through a coordinated, integrated, community-based approach
- parents and families have a voice in the centres' planning and decision-making processes
- Parent Link centres benefit from the talents and resources parents can offer as volunteers, advisors, facilitators, planners and evaluators of centre services

Best Practices

Parent Link centres participate in partnership-based community planning tables that serve families and children.

Parent Link programs build and develop informal support networks.

Parent Link program staff are knowledgeable about community resources.

Parent Links involve parents as valued partners in the planning, delivery and evaluation of the centres' programs and services. They encourage and support the involvement of parents in the planning of other community-based programs for families and children.

Parent Link centres develop and implement volunteer-management strategies designed to involve parents who are willing to volunteer their services. They identify community volunteers who are willing to work with parents and children within Parent Links programs.

Service Delivery Partnerships

Service integration increases a community's capacity to provide the services and supports that families need, when and where they need them. It tries to overcome barriers that separate formal and informal systems and restrict access to services. In a well-integrated system of services, families can access a range of supports easily and seamlessly.

—Community Supports and the Early Childhood Development Initiative
[position paper] (Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, January 2002), p. 4.

Parent Link centres are portals through which families can access other programs and services in the community. The centres provide families with information about these programs and services. They help families “make contact” by providing referrals, scheduling appointments or putting them in touch with other parents or with staff and programs offered by other agencies.

To coordinate service delivery, communities develop service agreements between Parent Link centres and agencies that provide family support and early childhood development services. Service agreements should outline

- the services each organization will provide
- the referral process
- reporting requirements
- how participant information will be managed
- mechanisms for conflict resolution

Best Practices

Parent Link centres work in partnership with other agencies to develop agreements for coordinating service delivery in the community. This gives families easy access to a range of services and supports.

Centre staff participate in community networks to ensure they remain knowledgeable about community resources and to develop appropriate referral systems.

Parent Link centres have up-to-date information about community programs and services available to families.

Centre staff provide information and referrals to formal and informal services and supports available in the community. They refer parents and families to community programs they can use in conjunction with those available at Parent Link centres.

Parent Link centres use one of the two recommended tools to provide on-site developmental screening for children. Alternatively, they make referrals to community agencies that provide this service.

Centre staff track and report all program referrals to the Ministry.

Recommended Developmental Screens

The **Nipissing District Development Screen** covers vision, hearing, speech and language, as well as motor, social and self-help skills for children aged one month to six years.

The **Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)**, for children aged four to 60 months, assesses five developmental areas: communication, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, problem solving and personal/social skills.

Both of the recommended tools are easily administered by parents or paraprofessionals.

Communication and Outreach

Parent Link centres must build public awareness about the importance of giving children a good start in life. Building awareness includes

- marketing and promoting the programs and services they offer to parents and children
- maintaining regular communication with current and prospective participants
- maintaining communication between program staff, between staff and participants, and between Parent Links and the community at large
- fostering inter-centre and inter-region communication

Best Practices

Parent Link centres celebrate and appreciate program participants through special events such as volunteer-recognition ceremonies or social activities.

Parent Link centres use a variety of strategies to build public awareness and keep current and prospective participants informed about centre activities.

- Reach strategies may use brochures, posters, bulletin boards, public service announcements, paid advertising and the Internet.

Parent Link centres work closely with schools to ensure that program information is available to schoolchildren and their parents, and to provide seamless, coordinated service delivery.

Parent Link centres ensure that parents have access to up-to-date information about centre programs and resources. They produce and distribute a monthly newsletter for parents.

Parent Link centres develop specialized outreach strategies to engage parents and children whose circumstances create barriers to their participation in centre programs and activities.

Parent Link centres encourage parents to provide formal and informal feedback about the effectiveness of programs and services.

Programs and Services

Parent Link centres provide a range of programs to meet the needs of parents, families, caregivers and children in their community.

Parent Link programs provide opportunities for parents and children to enjoy time together and engage in interactive play-based learning activities. They also provide opportunities for parents to interact with other parents, share one another's cultures and experiences, enjoy good fellowship and make new friends.

Best Practices

Parent Link centres offer a comprehensive range of high-quality, formal and informal programs that meet the diverse needs of families and communities.

The scheduling of Parent Link programs meets the needs of working parents as well as those who stay at home with their children. Services are available in the evenings and on weekends as well as during the day.

Services for parents and caregivers include

- education programs and access to a variety of resources that can help them learn about child development and parenting
- opportunities to develop peer-to-peer relationships
- opportunities to work, play and have fun with their children
- formal and informal sessions that facilitate adult interaction and reflect the interests of participants

Parent Link centres are expected to provide all of the following core services:

- parent education
- early childhood development and care
- family support
- information and referrals

Services related to early childhood development and care provide opportunities for parent–child interaction as well as child-only participation. They include developmentally appropriate play areas designed to

- allow children to make choices
- encourage cooperation and social interaction
- capitalize on children’s strengths

Parent Link centres involve parents as partners in the planning and delivery of programs and services.

Parent Link centres embrace a philosophy of continuous improvement and strive to create programs of excellence.

Staffing and Training

Staff who work at Parent Link centres have the skills and competencies needed to support families and foster optimal child development. They are capable of developing trusting relationships with all types of families. They understand and respect the cultural diversity of the communities they serve and are representative of these communities.

Best Practices

In accordance with relevant legislation, Parent Link centres employ fair practices for staff recruitment and advancement. They provide their staff with interdisciplinary training and professional development opportunities to expand their knowledge and keep them abreast of the latest research.

The staff of Parent Link centres have a human services diploma and/or appropriate life experiences and personal characteristics.

Parent Link staff understand both the theory and practice of family support service delivery and early childhood development.

Parent Link staff model appropriate interaction with children. The staff–participant ratio is small enough to allow one-to-one interaction between staff and the children and parents who use the services of Parent Link centres.

Staff Competencies

The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs suggests that the staff of parent resource centres should have “a good understanding about early childhood development, parenting, adult education, family systems, community development, ecological perspectives, family literacy, group facilitation, nutrition, volunteer management, counselling, community resources, cultural awareness, family violence, child abuse and neglect, managing not-for-profits, research methods, proposal writing [and] evaluation.”

—*Parenting and Family Supports: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric Together* [online], July 2001 [cited July 4, 2004] (Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs), p. 4, <www.frp.ca/PDFDocuments/positionpaper2001.PDF>.

Facilities

Providing relevant, accessible programs in a friendly, comfortable environment is an important aspect of the Parent Link approach.

Best Practices

Parent Link centres are easily accessible, warm, welcoming places where parents and children feel comfortable and secure.

The decor of each centre reflects the community and parents it serves.

Parent Link centres comply with relevant regulatory requirements for health and safety.

Parent Link centres have appropriate space to deliver their four core services: parent education, early childhood development and care, family support, and information and referrals. This space includes

- a welcoming reception area
- spaces for parents to gather together informally
- group meeting space
- private space for confidential meetings
- play/activity areas
- adequate space for staff

Evaluation and Performance Measurement

Alberta Children's Services and its delivery partners are committed to maintaining the quality of family support and early childhood development services in the province. Quality assurance serves a number of purposes:

- It fosters learning and continual improvement in the ways communities and agencies work with families.
- It contributes to the body of knowledge about what works in early intervention programs.
- It ensures accountability for funding.

Best Practices

Parent Link centres work with parents and with the Ministry to develop an appropriate quality assurance system for the Parent Link program. The system includes at least two components:

- record-keeping and reporting
- program monitoring, including performance measurement and program evaluation

Parent Link service providers **monitor and report**

- service use data, in accordance with recognized best practices
- performance results, as outlined in their contracts with the Ministry
- participant satisfaction (informally as well as through formal participant satisfaction surveys)

Parent Link Centres **protect the confidentiality** of participants in accordance with all contractual and legislative requirements.

Program Monitoring

Responsibility for program monitoring is shared by Alberta Children's Services, service providers and the community planning tables established with regard to Parent Link centres. Monitoring activities include

- ensuring that local practices are consistent with provincial policies and recognized best practices
- identifying and addressing issues and concerns with regard to provincial policies and best practices
- collecting the information needed to make ongoing program adjustments
- reviewing regional and provincial performance indicators

There are two components to program monitoring: performance measurement and program evaluation.

Performance measurement is an ongoing process tied to overall contract management. It compares the funds invested in a program (inputs) to short-term program results (outputs). This information helps Alberta Children's Services and contracted service providers assess the impact of the program and identify areas for improvement.

Program evaluation is a systematic process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting information about the implementation, effectiveness and efficiency of a program. Evaluation is closely linked to performance measurement, although it is typically conducted periodically rather than as an ongoing function of an organization. Data collected through performance measurement provides the basis for evaluations to assess the impact and success of a program.

Program evaluation is conducted at the program level, regionally and provincially:

- At the program level, service providers allocate resources to evaluate Parent Link centres and services.
- At the provincial level, program evaluation is carried out in partnership with Parent Link centres and other Ministry partners.

Best Practices

Parent input is an important component of the evaluation process.

Parent Link centres designate a portion of their program budget for monitoring and evaluation.

Centre staff work with the Ministry and with their community-based planning table to develop appropriate local, regional and provincial performance indicators for the Parent Link program.

Indicators may include

- an increase in the number of children and families who do not require family enhancement services from child protection agencies
- an increase in the number of children whose special needs are identified and who are referred to appropriate services
- an increase in the number of Aboriginal children and parents who participate in quality early learning activities
- an increase in the overall number of children and parents who participate in Parent Link programs
- an increase in the number of parents who report improved parenting skills and knowledge of child development