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Partnering with parents to help disadvantaged kids

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Responding to a news story about an elderly woman arrested for trafficking cocaine, comedian Jay Leno joked, "Where were her parents?" Joking aside, parents are key players in their children's development. Yet policies designed to help children often fail to engage the whole family in meaningful ways. What if public policy and community initiatives helped children by partnering with their parents?

Leno's joke plays off the over characterization of inattentive parenting as *the* source of kids' problems. Unfortunately, when families face strife or instability, children do experience negative repercussions. As a result, some professionals who work with children refrain from engaging families. As one Canadian community health worker told a reporter, "I used to think families were the problem, something to protect youth from. I rarely saw families as part of the solution."[1]

The Cinderella of early childhood policy

Public programs tend to favour responses that try to make up for perceived shortcomings within the family.[2] For example, data suggests that lower socioeconomic families spend less time with their children, provide fewer stimulating activities and have fewer conversations with them. This is concerning because these types of parenting investments have been correlated with better child outcomes.[3]

A popular response is to provide more early childhood education opportunities for disadvantaged children. There may be some merit to these initiatives but as family policy thinkers at the Brookings Institution write, **"Public education, no matter how lavishly funded, can never substitute for good parents."**[4]

Policy makers are far more likely to consider programs that don't depend on significant parental involvement. The Brookings authors bemoan the lack of policy considerations for parents, calling parental engagement initiatives the "Cinderella" of early childhood policy.[5]

Why partner with parents?

Family is a child's first community. It is the core environment where they develop, socialize and learn. Parents know their kids and offer a long-term nurturing presence in the lives of children. No family is perfect, but most families possess natural strengths vital to child development. Policies and programs should leverage these strengths to help children.

One level of engagement focuses on the development of parenting skills. Significant evaluation has been conducted on programs that provide nurse home visits to low income mothers during pregnancy through to the first two years after birth. **The evidence suggests the benefits of these programs extend into adolescence, with lower levels of delinquent and risk behaviours.**[6] Other successful programs such as the Triple P Parenting program, supported in Ontario, proactively empower parents in creating thriving home environments.[7]

Certainly there is some resistance from both sides of the aisle to involving the state in the parenting enterprise. On one hand there is reluctance to plunge the state deeper into the private realm of parenting. On the other hand, the use of state authority to address parenting practices could be interpreted as judgment on parents or particular families.[8] Decades of evidence, however, suggests that programs improving parental skills and home environments do result in better outcomes for children.

Involving parents in the solution is a good first step. But what if child service providers went so far as to treat parents as true partners?

Family-Centred Practice

Engaging parents as senior partners in service delivery is the fundamental principle behind the family-centred practice model advocated by Barry Trute, professor emeritus of social work at the universities of Calgary and Manitoba, and Diane Hiebert-Murphy, professor of social work at the University of Manitoba.

Elevating parents as senior partners in the creation of service plans is provocative. The approach shifts the conversation from problem-fixing toward an active collaboration between professionals and parents.[9] Sure, some situations are more difficult, but the model recognizes the strengths that families already possess.

Trute writes, "Family-centred practice is delivered with the understanding that it is folly to ignore or underestimate the value of the expertise that a parent brings to the ongoing process of child assessment and service planning."[10]

This approach has had years of theoretical development, but at the core it recognizes that family is the constant in a child's life. Families possess expertise and knowledge that can inform how service professionals help their children. **Trute is emphatic that a child cannot be helped without also helping their family.** This approach recognizes that families can identify their own needs and that addressing these needs should be a priority when developing service plans.[11] The family-centred practice model strengthens parents in their role as primary caregivers.

In Canada, the model has received support in Manitoba and Alberta, particularly within the special needs community and children services. In fact, Alberta remains the only province to have legislated the approach when it enacted the *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act* just over a decade ago.[12]

There is no perfect family, but families do possess knowledge and strengths that can be leveraged to better serve children. Too often the first instinct is to ignore family strengths or to view families with suspicion. Some parents need a little help developing the parenting craft. In most circumstances, partnering with parents to provide services is the best way to help children.

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[1] Van Rassel, J. (2013, Oct. 18). Family key to help troubled youth. *Calgary Herald*, A12.
[2] For further discussion see Pekel, K., Roehlkepartain, E. C., Syvertsen, A. K., and Scales, P. C. (2015). Don't forget the families: The missing piece in America's effort to help all children succeed. Minneapolis: Search Institute.
[3] Reeves, R.V. and Howard, K. (2013, Sept. 8). The parenting gap. The Center for Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, pp. 2-3. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2013/09/09-parenting-gap-social-mobility-wellbeing-reeves/09-parenting-gap-social-mobility-wellbeing-reeves.pdf
[4] Reeves, R.V., Sawhill, I., and Howard, K. (2013, Fall) The parenting gap. *Democracy* issue 30. p. 42. Retrieved from http://www.democracyjournal.org/pdf/30/the_parenting_gap.pdf
[5] Ibid.
[6] Doob, A.N., & Cesaroni, C. (2004) Responding to Youth Crime in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
[7] For example, see http://www.triplepontario.ca/en/Default.aspx
[8] Reeves, Sawhill and Howard, *Parenting gap*, p. 42.
[9] Trute, B. and Hiebert-Murphy, D. (2013). Practice parameters and definition of terms. In Trute, B. and Hiebert-Murphy (eds.) *Partnering with Parents. Family-Centered Practice in Children's Services*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 7.
[10] Trute, B. (2013). Basic family-centred practice concepts and principles. In Trute, B. and Hiebert- Murphy (eds.) *Partnering with Parents. Family-Centered Practice in Children's Services*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 20.
[11] See Trute, B. (2013). Basic family-centred practice concepts and principles. In Trute, B. and Hiebert- Murphy (eds.) *Partnering with Parents. Family-Centered Practice in Children's Services*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
[12] Trute, B. and Hiebert-Murphy, D. (2013). Practice parameters and definition of terms. In Trute, B. and Hiebert-Murphy (eds.) *Partnering with Parents. Family-Centered Practice in Children's Services*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 6.