

*"Healthy
happy
parents,
Healthy,
happy kids."*

In the summer of 2002, eighty people were interviewed, individually or in groups, to find out their answers to these questions. The people were selected to be a cross-section of those working with or raising children in Saskatoon. They came from community groups, the Aboriginal community, the university, provincial and municipal governments, and the school systems. This information is documented in two reports - Community Voices I & II, completed by Renee Torgerson, Ph.D. and Rita McLeod, Ph.D. respectively.

Here, we focus on one of the main influences on children's well-being, parenting. This information sheet summarizes the main points made by the people we interviewed on this topic, illustrated by their words, in italics. It is one in a series covering the most important issues for children and youth that our project identified.

To help kids, start with parents

How parents, or other caregivers, raise their children is a key factor in how they grow up. Many of the people interviewed recognized that to help children and youth, we need to help their parents.

If we help parents, if we help our families stay strong, then we are helping our youth. It goes hand in hand. You can do all you want for the youth and try to help them, but at the end of the day, if they aren't going home to a safe place to live, what help are you really giving them, if you aren't helping their parents as well?

Skills and support for parenting

What barriers do parents face to doing a good job of raising their children? The main problem mentioned in our interviews is a lack of knowledge and skills. This is a particular problem for Aboriginal families whose lives were disrupted by residential schooling, so that they were unable to pass healthy parenting skills on to the next generation.

Parenting Information Sheet

What factors affect the health and well-being of children and youth in Saskatoon? How well are we as a community meeting the needs of children and youth?



"My parent group saved my life."



Both of my parents were raised in residential school and they didn't learn how families work or how parenting works. So they had trouble raising me and my siblings. I want to do a good job of raising my children but I didn't learn how to parent because my parents didn't know how to parent.

Parents not only need to know how to treat their children, they need the support that would enable them to put these skills into practice.

I worked with young First Nations mothers who have four or five kids, no real family support. They're raising a bunch of little kids, 24-7, by themselves, with no funds-that leads to fatigue. People say they are abusive-it's not true. They are just so tired, they can't cope any more.

One person spoke about programs offered for Aboriginal mothers and their preschoolers, where the mothers are able to do something by themselves, like take a dance class, while their children do cultural activities with other adults.

The programs are trying to provide some social comfort and do a little band-aiding by giving Mom a couple of hours to be by herself and to do something on her own, so that she becomes a whole person, too. Because if Mom isn't a whole happy person, what can she transfer to her kids?

While many participants spoke of the problems faced by Aboriginal parents and those living in the core neighbourhoods, it was also recognized that all parents could use education and support.

To make the assumption that because you have money or you're older or whatever, you are a better parent-I don't think that's always the case. I think that you have good and bad parents in all levels of economic status and ages. I have seen some really wonderful young moms.

Learning how to parent

So parents need education and support, and it needs to begin early, even before people have children.

It would be great to have more opportunities to teach children to be a responsible caring parent. Can you teach that before you become a parent? I always think that if I had known this before . . . If parent education could be starting sooner, before you are a parent, that would be helpful.

Another important opportunity for support and education is right after birth. Participants were concerned with the lack of support and follow-up provided to new mothers who are often discharged early from hospital. Teen parents especially need support, but it seems they don't always get it. As one young mother put it:

Nobody tells you anything 'till it's too late. Nobody tells you that you can get help until you don't need it anymore. Nobody helps you until you have done it on your own.

People who had taken part in parenting classes spoke highly of them.

I swear that my parenting group saved my life when I first started going to it. It opened up ideas for me when I was a parent and I went faithfully for two years every Tuesday morning. It was the highlight of my week.

But not everyone who could benefit from parenting education gets it. Sometimes it's because parents don't see the value, or because it's hard for them to get to the classes. Often it may simply be because they don't know what's available.

I am amazed by how many people don't even know that these classes exist. We have to find some other ways of reaching people and letting them know.

Also, it's important that education and support be available to parents in all areas of the city and of all income levels, not just those seen as "high risk."

Parent support is sometimes very targeted. Parents who are in those targeted areas will get supports, but parents that fall above that line will sometimes will not be able to get supports, even if they still do need it. I think that has to be right across the board that we help parents out.

The role of other adults in children's lives

Other things, in addition to lack of parenting skills, may make it hard for parents to give their children the support and attention they need.

Families are so busy that they sometimes forget how really important is to sit down at supper table as a group. One child has a game here and the other one is going off there for something else, or parents might be involved in other things. Families sometimes don't have the resources to sit down and be at the supper table together, either, because there might be a lack of food, frustration, confusion, children just not coming home, all of those sorts of things. Mom, if she's a single mom, might be busy with her job.

Other adults can help provide children with encouragement and guidance, acting as role models or mentors. This is especially important for children and youth who have a difficult family life.

Every child needs a cheerleader in some shape or form-someone who is a consistent support to a family and whose support doesn't stop at five and doesn't stop when they leave an agency's doors, but a continuity of services and support.

So along with providing parents with education and support, we need to identify and encourage other adults who play a key role in children's lives.

With a little bit of training, those mentors could be just the guiding lights in these kids' lives-to direct the kids into finding a strength whenever a kid is in trouble.

Challenges around childcare

Another type of support needed by parents who are going to school or working outside the home is childcare. Project participants named several problems with the way things are in Saskatchewan.

First, the number of licensed daycare spaces is not enough to meet the needs of parents in the province.

Our research shows that in Saskatchewan, about 70 percent of children are in daycare some of the time. So when you look at that number and the number of licensed day care spots that are available, about five to seven percent of the daycare spots are licensed. The rest of the daycare spots do not have to meet standards.

As a result of the small number of spaces, parents who wish to have their children in licensed centres often face long waiting lists.

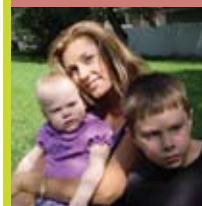
The good daycare centres have waiting lists [so long that] you have to put your name in when you are pregnant.

Even if they can find good quality childcare, the high cost creates problems for many parents, making it hard for them to get training or jobs.

Right now, the parents pay the majority amount for the operating costs of the childcare centre. So it's quite hefty.

Daycare is a big issue, especially for single parents who can't afford it. How can you get a job when you have two or three children? How can you become a police officer if you have to train for 17 weeks, when you are a single mother with a child? You are eliminated from other opportunities because of poverty and the cost of daycare.

"Day care is a big issue."



And yet at the same time, childcare workers are paid very low wages.

We have a really big problem that childcare providers' work is not acknowledged or recognized for what it is. So there are people hoping that they can find daycare for a dollar an hour. For some reason childcare is supposed to happen out of the goodness of your heart. There just isn't recognition of the fact that the caregiver is doing very demanding work that requires dedication and knowledge and skills that are worth dollars.

There was a big study called "You Bet I Care," a national study on daycare, they were giving some examples that parking lot attendants make more than childcare workers. We value our cars more than we value our children!

What underlies all these problems is a lack of government (and public) support for childcare.

The subsidy system and the fees for daycare are very contentious. Daycare can be very expensive. It's not as expensive as in some other parts of the country, but it's a big chunk of your income to shell out. If you are eligible for a government subsidy based on your income-those haven't been increased for about 12 years, so they are quite pathetic.

I think there needs to be some kind of public commitment to early childhood. There needs to be money available-there is a role for the state to play. There need to be standards in place.

The childcare system not only needs better funding, but also better coordination.

There is no coordinated system for early childhood care and services. They come up haphazardly all over the place in a completely disconnected way. We leave it up to parents to find their own way through this maze of services.

So what can we do to help parents?

The issues raised by the participants in our project suggest some questions that need to be addressed by families, community groups, service providers, program planners, policy-makers and society as a whole, such as:

- What kinds of support and education for parenting are currently available, and how can these be publicized better?
- Are there parents whose needs are not being met by current support and education and if so, what can be done to make sure they get the help they need?
- How can we encourage and support adults to act as mentors or role models to children and youth?
- How can public support for affordable, accessible childcare be increased so that a workable, coordinated system is put in place?

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