



Parent-to-Parent Support

FCS Sheet #7

This FCS Sheet is #7 of an 18 part series on family-centred service.

If you are interested in this FCS Sheet, you may also want to read:

- FCS Sheet #6: Identifying and building on parent and family strengths and resources
- FCS Sheet #14: Advocacy: How to get the best for your child

Key definitions and a list of the topics in this series can be found at the end of this FCS Sheet.

“We can’t begin to tell you about all the questions we had after the diagnosis. So much of it we had to find out ourselves. We were both afraid of the future and didn’t know how we would cope. Then we met another family who shared their experiences with us and we realized we could do it and we weren’t alone.”

Relevance

Through everyday experiences, parents develop knowledge and expertise in many different areas (MacAulay, 1999). By sharing this knowledge and expertise, parents can support other families who are facing similar issues. This process is often referred to as “parent-to-parent support”. It is relevant to family-centred service because it emphasizes that families are the experts on their child and their family’s situation.

Parents of children with special needs have reported that parent-to-parent support provides opportunities for emotional support and for development of knowledge and skills related to parenting a child with special needs (Ainbinder et al., 1998; Law et al., 2001; MacAulay, 1999; Singer et al., 1999). Parents have also indicated that such support provides a “sense of belonging” (Law et al., 2001, p. 30) and reduces isolation (Ainbinder et al., 1998).

Facts & Concepts

What is parent-to-parent support?

The most important part of the definition of parent-to-parent support is the parents. Parent-to-parent support exists in any situation in which parents are able to share information and provide emotional support. Common types of parent-to-parent support include (for more details, see MacAulay, 1998):

- Informal relationship between two or more parents
- Specific programs that match two parents based on specific criteria
- Parent registries that include the names of parents who have volunteered to be resource parents or contacts
- Parent groups that are either parent-led or service provider-led

The above examples show that parent-to-parent support can be “one-to-one” or that it can be in groups. Many different types of support and activities can occur in parent-to-parent support situations. For example, some parent groups have formalized objectives that they address during meetings, while others provide an informal opportunity for parents to get together.

What does parent-to-parent support provide?

The following brings together personal experiences of parents on our research team and reports from the literature on parent support (such as Ainbinder et al., 1998; Beach Centre on Families and Disabilities; DiVenere, 1995; Dunst, 1990; Law et al., 2001).

Opportunities...

- Opportunities for parents to meet other parents who have similar needs and concerns, and who have children with similar disabilities.
- Opportunities for siblings of children with disabilities to meet one another.

- Opportunities for parents to learn and share together at convenient times including evenings and weekends. This availability beyond the hours of 9 to 5 is a unique component of parent-to-parent support.
- Opportunities for social occasions for the whole family (for example picnics, Christmas parties, etc. held in locations that are accessible for all family members).

Empowerment...

Meeting other parents in similar situations helps parents gain confidence in themselves and in their parenting skills. Other parents appreciate how difficult it can be to meet the needs of a child with a disability, as well as the needs of their other children.

Fellowship...

- Talking to other parents is a good coping strategy. Feelings of being the only one lessen when there are opportunities to share experiences and socialize.
- Meeting with other families of children with disabilities helps families to feel more typical. They are not the only ones who have felt a certain way or who have had certain life experiences. Sharing these common experiences can make the challenges seem more manageable.
- Maintaining a network of family and friends promotes family strength. Parents can focus on what is good about their children and what their children have accomplished.

Information Sharing...

Gaining information and resources from other parents who have been in similar situations can make a new or difficult task easier to manage.

Strategies for Facilitating Parent-to-Parent Support

Strategies For Parents

- Find a family support group in your community: ask other parents, your doctor, service providers who work with your child or go to Family Resource Centres, your library or the Internet.
- Ask a service provider to connect you to another parent who has had similar experiences to yours.
- Ask provincial support groups if they provide a service to link you with another family in your community.
- Consider asking for help to develop a support group where you live.

Strategies For Service Providers

- Recognize that parent support groups are a good source of information for families and that they offer families a safe place to learn how to access community supports.
- Learn about parent support programs in your community. Offer this information to parents in a format that is accessible including a contact person and telephone number.

- Provide parents with articles that quote other families who have been involved with parent support programs.
- Facilitate the forming of a parent support group if there isn't one in your community.

Summary

Parent-to-parent support provides opportunities for parents of children with special needs to share with and gain from each other's experiences. The "first hand" nature of these experiences appears to be the reason that parent-to-parent support is so successful. This type of support plays an important role in family-centred service.

Dunst, C.J. (1990). Family support principles: Checklists for program builders and practitioners. *Family Systems Intervention Monograph 2*, No. 5. Morganton, NC: Family, Infant and Preschool Program, Western Carolina Center.

Law, M., King, S., Stewart, D., King, G., Terry, L., & Chiu, J. (in press). The effects of parent support groups for parents of children with disabilities. *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*.

MacAulay, J. (1998). Differences in common: Self-help for parents of children with special needs. *Self-help for parents of children with special needs: A tool kit for parents and professionals*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs. Downloaded on November 7th, 2002 from the Child & Family Canada website – <http://www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/cafrp/00001112.htm>

Resources

Ainbinder, J.G., Blanchard, L.W., Singer, G.H., Sullivan, M.E., Powers, L.K., Marquis, J.G., Santelli, B., & the Consortium to Evaluate Parent to Parent. (1998). A qualitative study of parent to parent support for parents of children with special needs. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 23, 99-109

Beach Center for Families and Disabilities, University of Kansas – <https://beachcenter.lsi.ku.edu/>

DiVenere, N. (1995). *Supporting Parent Training Manual*. Parent to Parent of Vermont.

Singer, H.S., Marquis, J., Powers, L., Blanchard, L., DiVenere, N., Ainbinder, B.G., & Sharp, M., (1999). A multi-site evaluation of parent-to-parent programs for parents of children with disabilities. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 22, 217-229.

Key Definitions

Family-Centred Service – Family-centred service is made up of a set of values, attitudes and approaches to services for children with special needs and their families.

Family-centred service recognizes that **each family is unique**; that the family is the **constant in the child’s life**; and that they are the **experts on the child’s abilities and needs**.

The family works with service providers to make informed decisions about the services and supports the child and family receive.

In family-centred service, the strengths and needs of all family members are considered.

Service Provider – The term service provider refers to those individuals who work directly with the child and family. These individuals **may** include educational assistants, respite workers, teachers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech-language pathologists, service coordinators, recreation therapists, etc.

Organization – The term organization refers to the places or groups from which the child and family receive services. Organizations **may** include community programs, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, schools, etc.

Intervention – Interventions refer to the services and supports provided by the person who works with the child and family. Interventions **may** include direct therapy, meetings to problem solve issues that are important to you, phone calls to advocate for your child, actions to link you with other parents, etc.

Want to know more about family-centred service?

Visit the CanChild website:
www.canchild.ca

or call us at 905-525-9140 ext. 27850

FCS Sheet Topics

The following is a list of the FCS Sheets. If you are interested in receiving any of these topics, please contact CanChild or visit our website.

General Topics Related to Family-Centred Service

- FCS Sheet #1 – What is family-centred service?
- FCS Sheet #2 – Myths about family-centred service
- FCS Sheet #3 – How does family-centred service make a difference?
- FCS Sheet #4 – Becoming more family-centred
- FCS Sheet #5 – 10 things you can do to be family-centred

Specific Topics Related to Family-Centred Service

- FCS Sheet #6 – Identifying & building on parent and family strengths & resources
- FCS Sheet #7 – Parent-to-parent support
- FCS Sheet #8 – Effective communication in family-centred service
- FCS Sheet #9 – Using respectful behaviours and language
- FCS Sheet #10 – Working together: From providing information to working in partnership
- FCS Sheet #11 – Negotiating: Dealing effectively with differences
- FCS Sheet #12 – Making decisions together: How to decide what is best
- FCS Sheet #13 – Setting goals together
- FCS Sheet #14 – Advocacy: How to get the best for your child
- FCS Sheet #15 – Getting the most from appointments and meetings
- FCS Sheet #16 – Fostering family-centred service in the school
- FCS Sheet #17 – Family-centred strategies for waitlists
- FCS Sheet #18 – Are we really family-centred? Checklists for families, service providers and organizations