

The Evolution of a Title:

The "Canadian Parenting Workshops" have evolved from a program that was originally written for and piloted with Spanish-speaking parents. The first version of the workshops was entitled "Immigrant Families: Helping Children Succeed in School." That draft was piloted, evaluated, and revised and the title was changed to the more inclusive "Newcomer Families: Helping Children Succeed in School." That draft was also piloted and evaluated. The evaluations completed by Beth Hoen were of these earlier versions of the workshops. The present iteration of the workshops retains the strengths and addresses the weaknesses of the earlier versions.

NEWCOMER FAMILIES: Helping Children Succeed in School Final Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

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1. Introduction

The program, *Newcomer Families: Helping Children Succeed in School* (NF)¹ was developed to help newcomer families promote their children’s development and success in school and improve their relationships with Canadian education and social service systems.

The Ryerson School of Early Childhood Education initiated NF as part of a broader research project, *Supporting Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Settings*. A Human Resources Development Canada grant supported the NF program development, evaluation and dissemination during the period September 2001—December 2003.

An external evaluation consultant conducted the evaluation of NF. This executive summary of the evaluation report outlines the evaluation purpose, methodology, key findings and conclusions, and recommendations.

1.1 Program Purpose and Background

NF’s intent is to help newcomer families learn knowledge and skills to promote their children’s development and readiness for school and to interact with Canadian early childhood centres and schools, in a way that empowers participants, builds communication and recognizes cultural and family values and practices.

NF was structured as a 10-week curriculum for mothers in newcomer families with children up to the age of eight. The program had two primary messages: that parents can have an impact on their children’s socio-emotional development and that they can affect their school experience and success—they have something worthwhile to contribute to their children’s education.

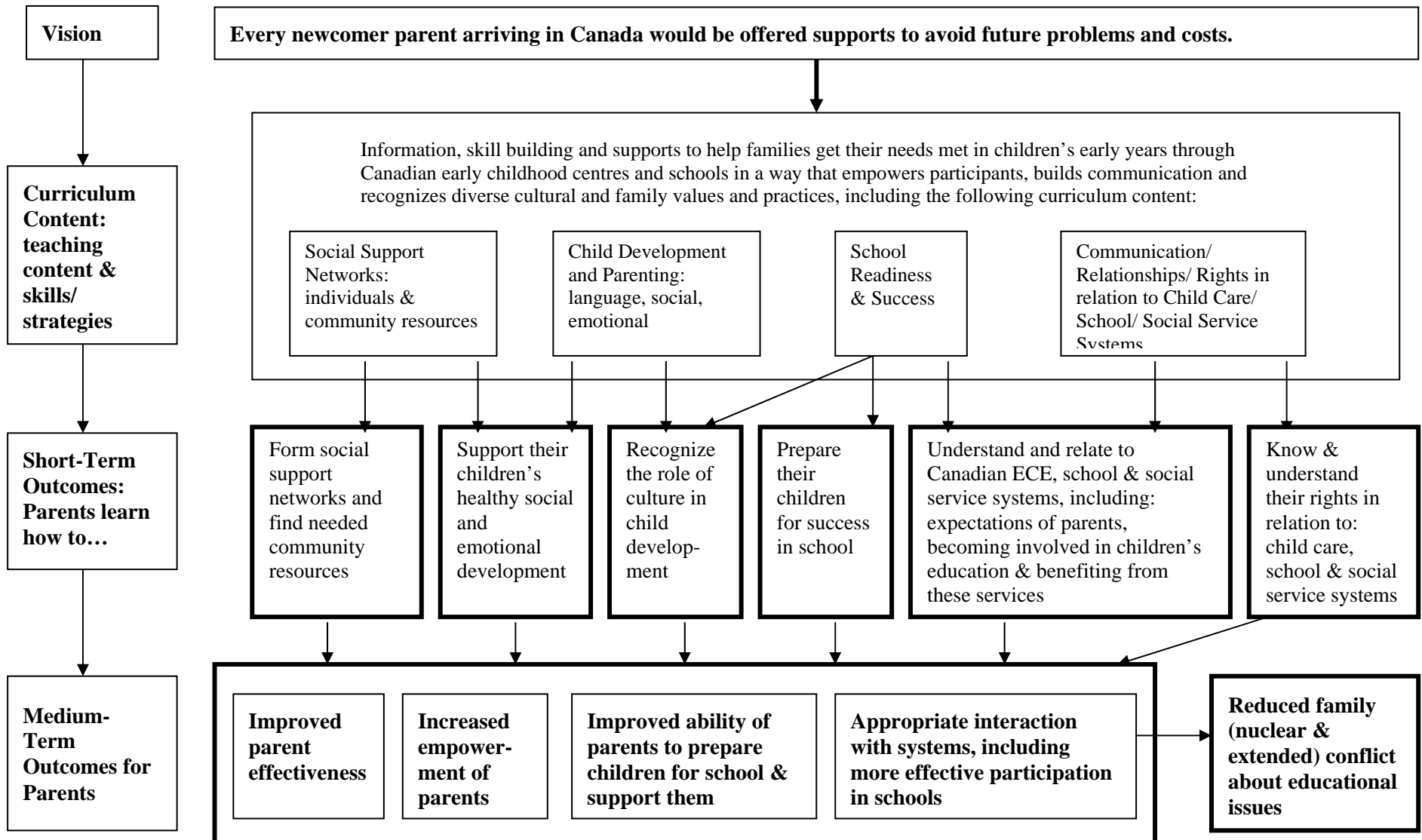
NF was implemented in four community-based settings in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto in the fall 2002 and spring 2003. The fall program delivery was primarily directed at Latin American parents of children ages four to eight and the spring program, parents of children from birth to kindergarten age. The short and intermediate outcomes as well as an overview of the curriculum content are reflected in the logic model, Figure 1.

¹ The program was originally titled “Immigrant Families: Helping Children Succeed in School.” In the spring of 2003, the name was changed to “Newcomer Families: Helping Children Succeed in School” to be more inclusive of immigrants, refugees and newcomers whose status is not yet established.

1.2 Evaluation Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine whether it was effective in achieving the expected short-term outcomes, as well as how the curriculum was implemented and how it worked and evolved in response to participants' needs and the circumstances of program delivery.

Figure 1.
Newcomer Families Logic Model



September 2003

2. Method, Sources and Tools for Information Collection

The Newcomer Families curriculum was first drafted in the spring of 2002. Because the evaluation was a process and outcome evaluation of a new program, the information collection was intensive and included a preliminary report to assist in curriculum revisions.

Information sources were the participants and the program facilitators. Methods included a post-program survey in the fall and pre-post program survey with the spring group participants; participant focus groups and individual interviews; session-by-session facilitator reports; mid-curriculum and final surveys; and a group interview with facilitators. The information collected included program delivery and process data; parental attitudes and knowledge about children's development and the Canadian service systems; social support; satisfaction with and perceived benefits of the program; and demographic information about participants.

3. Key Findings and Conclusions

The findings and conclusions are organized under five headings: curriculum, participant characteristics, satisfaction, outcomes and the evaluation. Within each heading the key findings are described, and the primary conclusions are stated in **bold**.

3.1 Curriculum Content and Changes

To be responsive to participants' needs and the facilitators' experiences as they delivered the program, the NF curriculum was a work in progress. Although much of the curriculum was delivered as planned, facilitators in the fall made changes that they thought were necessary to enhance the curriculum's relevance for families with young school-aged children. The primary change was bringing forward information about school readiness, school-parent relationships and school structures. The curriculum designers incorporated these changes and streamlined the curriculum for the spring, in addition to modifying it somewhat for mothers of preschoolers.

The curriculum tested with the spring 2003 group appears to have the elements necessary for successful future implementation by facilitators with some group work experience and familiarity with the needs and concerns of newcomers in Canada. It has clear objectives, a coherent approach, relevant topics and appropriate learning strategies and activities. For broader use, it needs minor tinkering to refine the final content, order of topics, time needed and the balance of time allocated to individual topics.

The NF curriculum appears to be very appropriate for use in a variety of settings accessible to newcomer families. The final curriculum will need to be adaptable for use with mothers of both young school age children and children not yet in school.

Decisions are needed about whether and how several topics will be included: Improving the Responsiveness of Schools, Helping Children Deal with Difficult Peers, Children with Exceptional Needs and Special Education, Experience with Bias, Children's Homework, Report Cards and Levels of Government and Elections.

Other practical considerations to be addressed are translation into the languages of program delivery and further development or acquisition of culturally appropriate resources using more current technology, such as videos, films and other visual aids.

3.2 Characteristics of Participant Families

A total of 55 mothers registered for Newcomer Families and 48 completed the program and final surveys. Most of the mothers were in their mid-twenties to late thirties, as might be expected for mothers of children from birth to age eight. Family size was generally between one and three children.

All the mothers and almost all the fathers were born in Latin American countries. Most had come to Canada recently—a large majority had been in Canada less than five years and half less than three years.

In addition to being newcomers to Canada with young children, the mothers in NF groups were further isolated from the mainstream by:

- their limited English or French—only one fifth spoke the language of their children’s school
- low income—nine out of ten had incomes below the Canadian Low Income Cut-off, and
- limited support for parenting—in addition to having left behind extended family members, one quarter were single parents, nearly one half reported no help with their children, and one in ten had no help or advice about parenting.

These mothers were the target group for the program—newcomer Latin American mothers with young children who had some or no school experience. In conclusion, the NF program attracted and generally retained mothers who represented the target group for the program.

3.3 Participant Satisfaction

NF participants’ satisfaction was evident in their survey and focus group responses and in their attendance. An average of 85% of registered mothers attended at each session, with over half of participants attending 90% or more of the sessions. Discussion in all groups was very active. In particular, mothers shared their feelings and experiences about immigration and its impact on parenting, children’s development, school readiness and school relationships.

The evaluation results, especially from the qualitative information, suggested that the mothers’ satisfaction with the program was related to learning about topics of importance to them: their children’s development, how to improve children’s school success through activities with their children and their own involvement with the school. The mothers explained that they appreciated the opportunity to speak Spanish in meetings with other women who had similar experiences.

Participants were very pleased with the staff and generally with their discussions with other mothers, as well as the subject matter. Their feedback indicated that the program logistics (time of day, location, etc.) were quite acceptable to them. The primary concern of NF participants was about the limited time. They wanted more—more in-depth coverage of some topics, additional

topics and more discussion time. Another concern expressed by a very few mothers in one group was with the group dynamics and dominance of discussion by a few participants.

Participants' overall satisfaction with NF was very high. They liked the program content, opportunities for discussion and the way NF was delivered.

3.4 Participant Outcomes

Through their written and oral feedback, the mothers in NF groups affirmed the benefits of the program and its impact on their knowledge and behaviour. This section draws conclusions about NF's short-term and intermediate outcomes and the overall value of the program as assessed by participant mothers.

3.4.1 Short-term Outcomes

Mothers increased their use of informal and formal supports.

Most mothers described the mutual support they received from NF groups, that is, their appreciation of sharing experiences and learning from each other. In addition, one group continued after the last session, expanding their membership and making use of the NF curriculum again. While the quantitative survey information did not identify that mothers specifically learned how to form social networks or that many considered NF group members a primary source of support, the mothers appeared to recognize the value of social networks and some individuals increased their social support. Mothers also got information from NF groups about formal supports—community resources for themselves and their children.

Mothers learned about children's healthy development and how to promote it; they started to use what they learned.

Overall, the mothers clearly understood more about how to encourage and support their children's development. They shared examples of how they applied their learning—they talked more with their children and established routines. The pre-post survey results that mothers felt less positive about their parent-child relationships at the end of NF were surprising and contrary to their qualitative comments. Perhaps this contradiction was evidence of their struggle to put into practice what they were learning.

Most mothers reported they had learned new ways to help their children learn acceptable behaviour. Some revealed they were uncomfortable with the physical punishment that had been part of their childhood experience. In two of the four groups parents reported learning how to help their children deal with difficult peers, although some requested more information.

The curriculum raised the question of gender differences and attempted to explore mothers' attitudes about parenting boys and girls. While the findings about parents' treatment of boys and girls were inconclusive, there was qualitative evidence that mothers were more thoughtful about gender differences at the end of NF than at the beginning.

The majority of mothers recognize the role of culture in their childrearing and reported learning and using "Canadian ways" to promote their children's development and school readiness.

At the end of NF, well over half of the mothers agreed that culture plays a role in child development and child rearing, although nearly one third did not. It appears that NF at least raised the question for discussion and heightened awareness of culture, and most mothers reported that they learned Canadian approaches to help their children learn.

Mothers learned how to prepare their children to be successful in school.

Consistent with their learning and applying child development knowledge, the mothers in NF clearly learned and put into practice activities to help their children be ready for school and/or be more successful at school. As noted above in relation to child development learning, they more often talked, read, told stories and sang with their children in Spanish, English or French. At the end of NF, they also believed that speaking Spanish to their children at home helps them learn language and be more ready for school, a change for many of the mothers.

Mothers learned about the structures and services of Canadian systems related to children and families, in particular how to relate to schools.

As a result of their experience in NF, mothers know more about what is expected of themselves and their children in the Canadian education system and how to communicate with teachers and principals. In the groups they often expressed pride in telling stories about using what they had learned in their contacts with teachers and principals. By the end of NF, more mothers also agreed that it is important to share information about their culture with their child's teachers; they told stories about teachers' positive responses.

In the groups with older children, mothers found the information about children's homework helpful, but continued to be confused about the language used in report cards. As a result of NF, the mothers better understood how to navigate the structure of schools and access services, including how to access special education and interpreters. They are also more aware of how child care and other community resources are structured and how they can access and communicate with them.

Mothers learned about their own and their children's rights and how use them.

Participants' increased understanding of Canadian systems includes an appreciation of their own rights to communication and to be treated fairly, and their children's rights to be free from physical violence and neglect. They better understood the multiple roles of child welfare agencies in protecting children and supporting families. Their stories about talking with teachers provided evidence that they felt more comfortable exercising their rights to communication with school personnel. Mothers also reported more confidence about how they would handle potential contacts with authority figures including school personnel, police and child welfare workers.

Most expected short-term outcomes were achieved in the implementation of the program.

Overall, mothers in NF groups:

- increased their communication with others about their parenting practices and how their adaptation to Canada affected their parenting, and recognized the need for social support
- learned about children's social, emotional and language development and how to support it, including specific discipline methods. They also became more thoughtful in considering how their culture affected their parenting practices. They put into practice what they had learned or

intensified their efforts to promote their children's development and readiness for school. Most described increased understanding and patience with their children

- learned about the Canadian systems and laws related to children—schools, child care, social services and other community services, children's rights and child protection, and
- developed skills to interact and communicate effectively with Canadian systems.

The following aspects of the NF curriculum need further attention because their achievement of the short-term outcomes is less clear: the role of culture and gender in child development and child rearing; parent-child interaction; helping children deal with difficult peers in supporting their development; and the formation of social networks within NF.

3.4.2 Intermediate Outcomes

Overall, the program appears to have been most successful in increasing participants' knowledge about parenting roles in child development and in school success, including promoting children's readiness for school and enhancing parents' involvement in their children's education. These findings suggest that the program has the capacity to achieve the longer-term outcomes:

- improved parent effectiveness
- improved parental ability to prepare and support children to be successful in school, and
- appropriate interaction with Canadian education, child care and social service systems.

Mothers gained confidence from using the information and skills learned in NF; some reported feeling more empowered to advocate for their children with schools and other resources. The evaluation also found evidence that some mothers conveyed their learning to other family members to develop a more cohesive family approach to their children's education.

3.5 Evaluation

The evaluation of NF contributed to the ongoing development of the program by providing a preliminary report following the fall groups and by determining the achievement of most of the expected program outcomes. The evaluation was relatively successful in assessing the program process. The evaluation's effectiveness in examining outcomes would be enhanced through the consistent use of pre-post information collection from participants, a stronger research design. However, participants were very clear in their post-program feedback about what they learned, and the findings for the fall and spring groups were generally consistent with each other.

Further evaluation is needed in relation to specific outcomes as noted at the end of the section on Short-term Outcomes. In addition, some specific curriculum topics could benefit from further examination, in particular, the topics implemented less consistently as noted in the section, Curriculum Content and Changes. Using external facilitators to conduct the participant focus groups could strengthen the quality of the qualitative information. To encourage ongoing evaluation of NF, the information collection needs to be streamlined so it is less onerous.

4. Recommendations

Recommendations focus on NF's target group, the curriculum, program delivery and the evaluation.

4.1 Target Group

1. Continue to offer and adapt the program in response to the needs of newcomer families; consider its application to other at-risk families and those with special needs, for example, families involved with child welfare agencies and parents of children with exceptional learning needs
2. Continue to deliver NF in other language groups and settings across Canada
3. Consider how families who are most at risk due to stressors such as low education, income and a short time in Canada can be supported to become involved and complete NF
4. Develop ways of conveying curriculum content to all family members, including fathers and grandparents.

4.2 Curriculum

5. Review these evaluation results in relation to the curriculum topics, considering the following:
 - the use of the curriculum with families who have children ranging from birth to age eight, and the optimal balance of content about school and school readiness vs. child care and early child development for participants depending upon their children's ages
 - the central core topics, especially Child Development, School Readiness, Relationships with Schools, School Structure, Social Support, Immigration and Adaptation
 - the selection of other topics as optional to be included depending on participants' interests and the ages of their children, including Children's Homework, Report Cards, Helping Children Deal with Difficult Peers, Improving the Responsiveness of Schools, Levels of Government and Elections
 - variations in program time in different settings, including the length and number of sessions
 - guidance that might be offered facilitators as to how to plan sessions to ensure that topics are covered to meet participants' needs and address their interests
6. Prepare and make available for extensive distribution (paper and electronic) an NF program manual including the curriculum, related materials and evaluation protocols and forms
7. Locate or design more technologically sophisticated and culturally appropriate materials to supplement the existing materials, including audio-visual resources.

4.3 Program Delivery

8. Address specific program delivery logistics such as:
 - Ensure translation of the curriculum and resource materials to the language of program delivery before implementation

- Clarify and confirm resources needed for program delivery:
 - i. facilitator skills and time to implement NF, considering the program time and adequate set-up and close down time, as well as tasks such as contacting participants between sessions and arranging for guest speakers
 - ii. child care time and resources, considering the ages of the children, needed staff-child ratios, and transition time for parents to drop-off, settle and pick up their children.

4.4 Evaluation

9. Enhance the evaluation design and quality of information collected by:

- Using a pre-post design with the participant surveys to better capture change in attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and behaviour
- Reviewing parent survey questions in areas where the findings were less clear, in order to better capture outcomes and benefits
- Using external facilitators to conduct focus groups with participants to promote objectivity

10. Determine the minimum requirements for continuing evaluation and monitoring now that NF has been successfully piloted.

Concluding Remarks

The results of this evaluation are evidence that NF was able to convey its two priority messages to the participating mothers: that parents can have a positive impact on their children's socio-emotional development and on their school experience. Parents learned that they can contribute to their children's development and education in important ways and promote their children's success in school.

Judging from the response of the participants and the outcomes found in this evaluation, the program is responding to the needs of this group for information and skills to help them improve their children's chances of success in school. There is more to be learned through continued implementation of NF in a variety of settings, ongoing improvement and adaptation of the curriculum to different participants and settings, and further evaluation of its effectiveness.