



The Phoenix Centre
for Children & Families



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VITAL COMMUNITIES, VITAL SUPPORT

How well do Canada's communities support parents of young children?

PHASE 2 REPORT: What Parents Tell Us

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The *Vital Communities, Vital Support* study set out to explore how well Canada's communities support parents of young children, and to examine how that support relates to parents' knowledge about child development, confidence in parenting and their parenting behaviour. In this Phase 2 of the study, through a landmark national survey, Invest in Kids investigated parents' need for and possible benefit from two types of support for their parenting role – 1) the social support of family, friends and community, and the cultural and national attitudes, beliefs and values; and 2) the tangible supports of community resources and programs. The survey included 2554 married or living together parents - 1661 mothers and 893 fathers - regionally representative of Canada. These partnered parents are the focus of this report.

HOW ARE PARENTS DOING?

Overall, this survey shows there is not enough positive parenting and too much negative parenting by Canadian parents. Fifteen percent of mothers and nearly 30 percent of fathers report insufficient levels of positive parenting, and 25 percent of mothers and 30 percent of fathers indicate excessive levels of negative parenting. This occurs across demographic groups. It is not confined to parents with low income or education.

Parents' knowledge about child development is substantially lacking. Only half of mothers and one third of fathers demonstrate high knowledge about how children grow and develop. **Parents' lack of confidence in their parenting is even greater than their lack of knowledge about child development.** Only one third of mothers and one quarter of fathers have high confidence in their parenting.

Why does this matter? Because both high knowledge about child development and high confidence in parenting are associated with more positive, less negative parenting for both mothers and fathers.

HOW SUPPORTED DO PARENTS FEEL?

SOCIAL SUPPORT from Family, Friends and Society

Too many parents feel left to handle new parenthood on their own. Only about half of parents feel they received enough emotional and practical support when they first became parents. Furthermore, the majority of parents do not view the larger social context of Canada as supporting their role, or of valuing young children.

Only about half or fewer of the parents surveyed feel they are currently receiving strong support for their parenting role from any of their close relationships.

- **Support from their spouse/partner:** only 45 percent of mothers and fathers feel highly supported in their parenting role by their spouse/partner – the person they would typically turn to for support in their parenting role – and 6 percent of fathers and 7 percent of mothers feel very unsupported in how they parent by their spouse/partner. Although about three quarters of parents are highly satisfied with their overall relationship with their spouse/partner, for many this does not translate into feeling highly supported in their parenting role. Although relationship satisfaction and support for parenting are clearly two related dimensions of parents' relationship with each other, for a number of parents they operate somewhat separately.

Fathers and mothers have notably opposing views about who takes what responsibility of parenting. Many more fathers than mothers think they share the responsibility of parenting equally, and many more mothers than fathers think they take the large share of the parenting responsibility. This is important because, regardless of which view may be more accurate in real life, when either mothers or fathers think they share the parenting equally, they tend to feel more supported in the parenting role by their spouse/partner, and when they think they take the larger share of responsibility for parenting they are the least likely to feel supported for it.

- **Support from their own parents:** only 55 percent of mothers and 46 percent of fathers feel highly supported in their parenting role by their own parents, and 13 percent of mothers and fathers feel very unsupported by their own parents.
- **Support from their extended family and friends:** only 50 percent of mothers and 35 percent of fathers feel highly supported in their parenting role by their extended family and friends, and 1 mother in 10 and 1 father in 6 feels very unsupported by their extended family and friends.
- **Support from their neighbourhood community:** only about 25 percent of mothers and fathers reported strong support in their parenting role from their neighbourhood community, and 16 percent of mothers and 13 percent of fathers feel very unsupported by their neighbourhood community.

Does social support matter? The results from this survey indicate that social supports are key influencers of parenting behaviour, and enablers of parents' knowledge about child development and confidence in parenting. The influence of social supports on knowledge and confidence is important because in general, more knowledgeable and confident parents are more positive, less negative in their parenting.

Mothers are the key to knowledge, confidence and high quality parenting for fathers. When fathers feel highly supported in their parenting role by their wife/partner, the results are impressive: such fathers are 50 percent less likely to engage in excessive negative parenting and twice as likely to have good levels of positive parenting compared to fathers who perceive only moderate/low support from their wife/partners. Mothers are the only significant source of support associated with fathers' knowledge about child development and confidence in parenting. Fathers who feel highly supported by their wife/partner are twice as likely to have high knowledge about child development and 2.35 times more likely to be confident in their parenting than other fathers.

This is not a one-way street. Mothers with husband/partners who highly support the mother's parenting role show a 50 percent decrease in excessive negative parenting, and a notable 70 percent increase in the likelihood of good levels of positive parenting. And, although not reaching the magnitude of their own influence on fathers, mothers with highly supportive husband/partners show a 50 percent greater likelihood of having high knowledge about child development and a 40 percent increase in the likelihood of being highly confident in their parenting.

Parents' own parents also play a critical support role with their adult children. When fathers feel their own parents are highly supportive of their son's parenting role, fathers are 40 percent more likely to have good levels of positive parenting and 70 percent more likely to feel confident in their parenting. Mothers who feel their parents are highly supportive of their daughter's parenting role are 25 percent less likely to engage in excessive negative parenting and 35 percent more likely to have high knowledge about how children grow and develop.

The single most influential source of support for mothers' positive parenting comes from their extended family and friends – not their husband/partners. Mothers who feel highly supported in their parenting role by their friends and family are twice as likely to have good levels of positive parenting. However, mothers' extended family and friends is the only source of support that is not related to mothers' knowledge of child development or to their confidence in parenting. Perceived support from extended family and friends is not significantly related to fathers' knowledge about child development, confidence in parenting or parenting behaviour.

Perceived support from the neighborhood community is an important influence of mothers', but not fathers', knowledge about child development as well as mothers' confidence in parenting. Mothers who view their neighbourhood community as highly supportive of their parenting role are 30 percent more likely to be very knowledgeable about child development and 40 percent more likely to be highly confident in their role, compared to mothers with moderate/low support from their neighbourhood community.

Thus, both the direct influence of social supports on parenting behaviour, as well as the effects of social supports on knowledge and confidence, which in turn significantly influence parenting behaviour, are critical to mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviour.

In this survey, it is social supports, rather than socio-demographic characteristics, that are the most influential with regard to parenting. Demographic characteristics of age, income and education play only a limited role in parenting behaviour, knowledge or confidence.

TANGIBLE SUPPORT: from neighbourhood community resources and programs

Overall an informative pattern emerged from the data ~ generally, the more that resources and programs are universal (versus targeted or remedial), informal, unstructured, flexible and non-judgmental about one's parenting, the more likely parents rated them as “very important” and used them when they were thought to be available.

Playgrounds and libraries are deemed to be very important by nearly all parents, are thought to be widely available and are highly used by parents when they are available. **Arenas, recreation centres, athletic instruction programs and organized sports leagues as well as public places to interact with their own children and other families** are also fairly highly rated and believed to be available. However, only about 40 percent of parents used organized sports and 50 – 60 percent used the other resources in this cluster. **Drop-in centres and instructional creative arts classes** are similarly highly rated. Sixty to 64 percent of parents thought they are very important, 50 - 60 percent thought they were available and 30 - 40 percent used them. **Family resource type centres, parent-child programs and organized playgroups** had strong appeal to 50 - 60 percent of mothers and 40 - 50 percent of fathers. Forty-five to 55 percent of mothers and 35 – 45 percent of fathers thought they were available, and about one third of both mothers and fathers used them if they believed they were available. **Parenting workshops and classes** that are issue-related or focused on improving parenting, were the least likely to be deemed as very important, were thought to be the least available and were the least used of all community resources or programs.

In contrast to parenting behaviour, knowledge about child development and confidence in parenting, where the socio-demographic variables play only a minor role, family income and the age at which parents first became a parent are particularly influential on parents' participation in neighbourhood community resources and programs. Low income is associated with lower use of resources/programs that are typically fee-based, and parents who are younger when they first become parents are more likely to use athletic-related resources and programs. Overall, the more universal (versus targeted or remedial), informal or unstructured, flexible and non-judgmental about one's parenting, the more likely parents will see a resource as very important and the more both mothers and fathers will use them.

Do resources and programs matter? Yes! Use of resources and programs has a direct bearing on parents:

- Mothers who are high users of programs and resources are 65 percent more likely to exhibit good levels of positive parenting, and fathers who are high users are 75 percent more likely to report good levels of positive parenting.
- Both mothers and fathers with high knowledge about child development and/or high confidence in their parenting use significantly more programs and resources than parents with low knowledge and/or confidence.

The question is: do parents who already have more knowledge, confidence and positive parenting behaviour use more programs, or does the use of more programs increase parents' knowledge, confidence and positive parenting? It is difficult to disentangle these elements with a cross-sectional survey. However, it could be asserted that regardless of which drives what, it is important for parents to use resources and programs because: 1) it is likely that use increases their knowledge and confidence; and 2) even if it does not, resource and program use may reinforce those with high knowledge, confidence and positive parenting to stay that way.

Perhaps the most important story around program use is the link between resource and program use and neighborhood community support. Recall that only about one quarter of mothers and fathers reported feeling highly supported in their parenting role by their neighbourhood community. Yet the mothers and fathers who feel highly supported by their neighbourhood community use significantly more resources and programs than parents who do not feel highly supported. For fathers, perceived high support for their parenting role from their neighbourhood community is the only factor associated with higher program use. Even high support from their wife/partners, who are so influential in many other ways, is not significantly associated with fathers' greater use of programs and resources. Fathers appear to need a high level of support for their parenting role from their neighbourhood community to partake in community resources and programs. **Thus, for both mothers and fathers, neighborhood support matters!**

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: IT DOES TAKE A VILLAGE!

Decades of research show the single most important benefit children can receive in their early years is sensitive, responsive parenting. Yet, parents are struggling – there is not enough positive parenting and too much negative parenting by Canadian parents.

Parents in the Phase 1 focus groups poignantly testified that they feel unsupported, vulnerable and isolated; that society expects them to fend for themselves until their children reach school age. They yearn to be welcomed, valued, recognized and supported in their role as parents, yet there is an enormous gap between what they want from their communities and what they experience, creating that sense of isolation and vulnerability. They feel there is a stigma attached to asking for help around

anything to do with parenting, because parenting is supposed to be simple, natural and intuitive – and they think their families and neighbours, indeed all of society, agrees.

In so many of life's endeavors, constant improvement - good to better to even better - is accepted, even expected. Elite athletes, despite their innate talents and constant practice all employ coaches to help them improve their performance. Taking lessons to improve one's game carries no stigma for any golfer. Why then, for one of life's most important roles, do we burden new parents by having them believe that asking for help carries the stigma of being a bad parent rather than being a parent who wants to be the best they can be?

Every parent – all parents – can benefit from parenting support. Yet the respondents rated parent education programs as the least important and least used of all community resources and programs. We need to make it acceptable for parents to reach out for help, to remove the stigma that too often comes with seeking that help.

The significance of the work of countless dedicated frontline service providers cannot be underestimated. The survey results are clear that parents benefit from their use of community resources and programs. We need to make it a priority for communities to provide resources and programs that build parents' knowledge about child development, confidence in their parenting and high quality parenting behaviour.

Leaving it entirely up to the professionals is just not enough. This survey results shows that it takes a village to raise our children well. We are the parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, friends and neighbours of parents of young children. Now that we know how important we are to the mothers and fathers in our midst, we need to do better. We must do better. We have the power to transform how parents experience a new kind of supportive village, a village to which we all want to belong.

For the future well being of our children, we imagine a world where:

- All parents are knowledgeable, skilled and confident in their parenting role.
- All parents feel recognized, valued and supported by their families and friends, their communities and their country for their parenting role.
- All children have the opportunity to make the most of their potential.

We invite you to join in creating that world.