



*Family Resource Centres:
Community Settings that Support Social Inclusion*

October 2011

Focus Groups Report



Produced for the project *Family Resource Centres: Community Settings that Support Social Inclusion*
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Introduction

FRP Canada's project *Family Resource Centres: Community Settings that Support Social Inclusion* started on August 01, 2010. This 24-month project is funded by the Multiculturalism Program at Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

The goal of this project is to attract and engage isolated new Canadian families¹ to community-based family resource programs in order to:

- build transferrable skills
- enhance knowledge about Canadian practices and values
- increase intercultural understanding
- provide opportunities to contribute through volunteerism and
- nurture broader social networks

Twenty agencies were recruited from FRP Canada's membership as host sites to deliver key project activities. FRP Canada facilitates and supports the interaction of all the host sites to share their learnings and to support one another. The host sites engage new Canadian families that may be living in isolation within their communities and provide an opportunity for these families to participate in specific activities which may strengthen the foundation for their social integration and inclusion into the community. Host site activities include:

- involving new Canadian families in regular programming at community-based family resource programs
- providing the necessary supportive environment conducive to building interpersonal relationships among participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Canadian-born participants
- providing learning and volunteer opportunities, including mentorship of other new Canadian families

One of the initial activities of the project was for each host site to conduct a community needs assessment focus group. The main discussion points were:

- how best to reach new Canadian families living in isolation
- how to welcome new Canadian families into the local community
- what the programming needs are for new Canadian families
- what types of supports are needed for new Canadian families to participate in community life

¹ New Canadian families may be defined as immigrants who have lived in Canada for three years or more.

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FRP Canada provided the host sites with a guide and tools on how to conduct focus groups. Host sites adapted the focus group/ needs assessment activity to their own unique situations. Here are some of the ways in which they conducted focus groups:

- focus group with new Canadian families
- focus group with practitioners
- joint focus group with both new Canadian families and practitioners
- multiple focus groups: two for practitioners and one for new Canadian families
- series of one-on-one interviews with some isolated new Canadian families, and presentations to practitioners working with community partner organizations
- series of focus group activities over multiple sessions of existing programs such as an ESL class

The twenty host sites conducted a total of 27 focus groups from Houston, BC to St. John's, NL with 155 new Canadian families and 161 practitioners. The following report captures the themes, needs and program ideas and the ideas for community partnerships that emerged from the discussions. It also includes the strategies used to recruit new Canadian families for focus groups, feedback about identifying isolated new Canadian families, and an example of an activity which illustrates the implementation of the focus group learnings.

Strategies to Recruit New Canadian Families for Focus Groups

The host sites identified barriers to participation in the focus group and ideated upon and discussed creative solutions. Here are some of the effective strategies they used.

Organize the focus group as an informal event. Some new Canadian families may find the idea of a focus group intimidating and not know quite what is expected of them. Host sites recommended that calling it something other than a 'focus group' makes it appear more welcoming, inclusive and non-threatening. Since this was a community engagement activity as much as it was a needs assessment, host sites found it helpful to use names such as a 'Get to Know You Party' or a 'Meet and Greet'. One site invited the participant families over for supper and a chat.

Use the power of word-of-mouth and personal contact. Referrals from current participants of other programs within the organization provided the most effective publicity for the focus groups. They also provided an avenue to reach out to all literacy levels. Host site Community Engagement Coordinators (CECs) recruited new Canadian families for focus groups as part of their community engagement process. One host site created a Facebook page for their project and used it to create buzz about the focus group. Host site staff called to invite and/or remind the participant families about the event.

Promote the focus group in existing programs or conduct it during existing programs. Homework clubs and ESL classes were popular places to promote the focus groups. One host site conducted a series of focus group activities over multiple sessions of an ESL class. One site used FRP Canada's focus group

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questionnaires to initiate discussions during a parenting program series. Another site gave forms and questionnaires to the participants to fill ahead of time, to keep the focus group duration short.

Leverage community partnerships and networks. Community partners helped many host sites with recruitment. Some community partners advertised the focus group event through their websites or by posting flyers at their sites. An interagency committee and staff at a housing company helped one site with participant recruitment. Another site advertised via a community email list which is regularly used to disseminate information about services, workshops and community events. One host site partnered with a Multicultural Association that was conducting a survey of all the new Canadian families in their area. A practitioner who works closely with new Canadian families helped another host site. The practitioner provided the site with information about the families such as nationality, English level and childcare and transportation needs. The host site was then able to focus on individual situations from the very first contact they made with the families.

Circulate flyers. Host sites designed and posted flyers at their own sites and those of community partners such as libraries, other community centres, immigrant-serving agencies, places of worship, etc. They handed out flyers to participants of existing programs. Some host sites translated their flyers into the languages of the new Canadian families they were trying to reach.

Provide incentives. Most sites recommended that providing a meal and childcare helped them draw in participants. One site handed out gift certificates to participants to acknowledge their time and contribution to the focus group.

Last but not least, as one host site summed it up, “**Use a variety of strategies, not just one**”.

Themes, Needs and Program Plans

Even though the needs of participating new Canadian families that emerged through the focus groups discussions varied from site to site, there were some common themes. Inspired by the themes identified, host sites ideated options for solutions to deal with the challenges and barriers revealed by these themes. They planned a whole range of programs, activities and community engagement workshops and information sharing sessions. Following are some ideas that emerged during the needs assessment.

Basic Needs

Housing, childcare and transportation emerged as the major concerns of the new Canadian families that participated in the focus groups. Many families felt that the only housing they could afford was often sub-standard and tagged with increasing cost, and that some landlords did not want immigrant renters. Families were interested in more information about the rights of renters. New Canadian families with young children found that there were not enough childcare spaces. They were interested in more information about childcare, the procedures involved and subsidies available, and requested help with

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filling out the necessary forms. With regards to transportation, being able to afford bus, taxi and or vehicle was a major concern, as was obtaining a driver's licence and understanding the public transport systems. Language barriers also make some new Canadian families hesitant while using public transport. New Canadian families suggested that programs could be made more accessible if they were provided with a ride or bus tickets.

Options for solutions:

- Offer childcare with programs
- Parents volunteering childcare support for each other so they can attend classes/meetings
- Support network for immigrants for everyday life skills
- Volunteers to provide rides, arrangements between families

Topics for workshops and discussions:

- Information about transportation facilities available - cost of different options, bus route map and information, phone numbers of taxi companies, how to get a driver's licence
- How to access services, or low-cost or gently used items

Language and Literacy Needs

New Canadian families involved in the focus groups voiced a strong need for ESL/EAL programs with more spaces and flexible hours, availability beyond the cut-off time for settlement services and more resources for lower benchmark levels. They reported facing language barriers while dealing with government organizations and resources, and expressed a need for help filling out government forms and with navigating government departments and systems.

New Canadian families in the groups were also interested in receiving more information about the structure of Canadian school systems, education standards and requirements, homework programs and language preparation for 3-5 year olds for school readiness. They were seeking someone to act as a liaison between parents and schools, to help with problem-solving/advocacy, especially for sensitive issues.

New Canadian families expressed a strong need for translation/interpretation services, especially sector specific translation. For example, a family with a young child might need help communicating during school/ kindergarten registration, or a worker at a plant might need someone to explain how to use a particular piece of equipment. Some new Canadian families (recently reunited families and/or those that have been through traumatic experiences) expressed a need for counselling services for immigrants in their own language. Fear of police and the language barriers regarding rules and regulations were other concerns.

Options for solutions:

- Encourage new Canadian families fluent in English or French to volunteer for translation services to help other new Canadian families
- Encourage new Canadian families fluent in English or French to volunteer as translators with community partners such as the Food Bank

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- Match new Canadian families with other families of same language/ culture
- Offer free official translators/ interpreters
- Offer new Canadian families assistance with navigating government departments
- Produce a community integration package with user-friendly multilingual guide and map with local information
- Refer new Canadian families to homework programs
- Refer new Canadian families to newcomer serving agencies and colleges for ESL classes
- Seek counsellors speaking languages of immigrants (e.g. Spanish speaking counsellors at Latina Women's Association)

Ideas for programs and events:

- Conversation club to practise English, discuss topics informally and engage in activities
- Language group for 3-5 year olds
- Support groups for immigrants in own language
- *Nobody's Perfect* Program in languages spoken by new Canadian families

Parenting Support

New Canadian families participating in the focus groups were interested in understanding the differences in parenting styles of various cultures, the family systems in Canada and issues around child discipline, corporal punishment, verbal and mental abuse, parent rights and the age at which children can be left alone. They were eager to discuss how they could integrate the parenting style of their own culture with Canadian parenting styles. This was even more strongly felt by parents with teenage children. Some new Canadian families were looking for parenting programs for children with special needs and some for parenting programs for refugee claimants.

Options for solutions:

- Home visits

Ideas for programs and events:

- Conversation circles - especially for males and young children/youth
- Fathering programs
- *Nobody's Perfect* Program (includes topics such as: nutrition, positive discipline, community programs and resources)
- *Nobody's Perfect* Program in languages spoken by new Canadian families
- Parenting programs
- Preteen group
- Support group for adults and/or parents of children with special needs
- Young Parent Group

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Topics for workshops and discussions:

- Behaviour Guidance
- Cultural sensitivity and inclusive language
- Parenting in Canadian society, using a mix of Canadian parenting styles and those from their country of origin
- Positive Parenting
- Report cards
- The importance of parent-teacher meetings
- What kids learn about sexuality in Canada

Community Connections

Many new Canadian families represented in the focus groups missed the social supports and friendships from their countries of origin, and were looking to form new ones in Canada. They were interested in peer support and information sharing, fun and social activities, and information about community events. New Canadian families expressed difficulties in accessing services that were located far apart from each other and wished for a one stop shop of services in a centrally located building (community centre/ school). New Canadian families voiced a strong need availability of immigrant services beyond the cut-off time for settlement services – for supports to be less time-limited.

Options for solutions:

- Information sheets about government offices and resources
- Creation of a list of services relevant to immigrants
- Match new Canadian families with other families of same language/ culture
- Partnerships between community organizations for special events/ community activities
- Peer mentors and volunteers to make information kits for families
- Posters and informational material about programs and services, and their benefit, in other languages
- Use the word "immigrant" in posters instead of "new Canadian or "newcomer"

Ideas for programs and events:

- Bus tour of Services/ Parks/ Programs
- Community gathering with partners with display and staff to talk to new Canadian families
- Cultural cooking activities
- Cultural events to share traditions between new Canadian families and mainstream
- Field trips where parents can bring along children
- Guided tour/ Open House day at centre, with meal at end
- Open House days to be held on a regular basis
- Information about recreational activities available
- Meet and greet evenings
- Sewing group with relaxed conversation
- Weekly knitting and crochet class led by peer mentor

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Counselling/ Family Services

Some new Canadian families at the focus group sessions, especially recently reunited families, were interested in counselling services for immigrants in their own languages. Some new Canadian women revealed traumatic birthing experiences, and feelings of being marginalized and excluded even by their own family members. The issue of an increase in risk of domestic violence among the immigrant population also came up. A practitioner brought up the need for mental health support to face their constant struggle and feelings of failure that many immigrants face.

Options for solutions:

- Where appropriate, refer new Canadian families to Aboriginal Healing Centres for spirituality-based counselling, sharing circles, wellness workshops, anger management and other aboriginal ceremonial gatherings
- Seek counsellors speaking languages of immigrants (e.g. Spanish speaking counsellors at Latina Women's Association)

Employment services

New Canadian families involved in the focus groups expressed a strong need for employment counselling and services for immigrants beyond the settlement phase of the initial three years. They wanted help with understanding the Canadian workplace culture and were frustrated with the fact that their foreign credentials and experience were not being recognized in Canada. Some participants were looking for information about starting home-based businesses.

Options for solutions:

- Refer new Canadian families to local employment services
- Offer employment-related workshops in women's groups, in collaboration with employment centres

Topics for workshops and discussions:

- Home day care licensing requirements
- Computer classes

Health, Nutrition and Recreation

Many new Canadian families participating in the focus groups found health information challenging to find due to language barriers or lack of computer access. Some were interested in access to developmental screening, prenatal and breastfeeding support and help for parents with HIV or those having children with HIV. Other topics about which they were seeking more information were immunizations, mental health and self care (spa, exercise, stress management).

New Canadian families were very interested in healthy cooking, especially learning how to cook healthy 'Canadian' foods and presenting them to their children – as attractive options to fast food. They were looking for information about nutrition, access to community gardens and local food banks. New Canadian families were interested in accessing low cost/ free family activities or recreational programs,

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especially during the winter, long weekends and school holidays. Some were looking for help to access or make free or low cost toys and supplies for children, and some asked for a teen/preteen group for support and activities.

Options for solutions:

- Accompany families to Regional Health Centre to access services where possible
- Help to find a doctor/walk-in clinic
- Offer membership cards to a family recreational activity/ family club

Ideas for programs and events:

- Aerobics dance classes for adults simultaneous with gym time for children in the school gym
- Arts and crafts group
- Community sports festival with possible sponsors
- Healthy lifestyles groups
- Physical activities and games – bowling, fishing, swimming, etc.
- Picnic at beach
- Screening program with local health department, including dental/ vision screening
- Speech/ language support, mental health information and immunization clinics
- Spring/ summer meet
- Summer outdoor activities in parks and campgrounds
- Visit to local farmers market
- Walking on community trails

Topics for workshops and discussions:

- Access to healthy food choice information and cooking classes
- Dental/ oral health
- Healthcare in Canada - what you pay for and what you don't
- Healthy snacks/ lunches
- How to start a community garden
- Making and selling crafts
- Speech language delays with children from families who speak more than two languages
- Travel within Canada and sightseeing

Finance/ Legal Issues

New Canadian families present at the focus groups were looking for information about financial issues - banking, establishing credit, down payment for home buyers, retirement planning, income tax and specific topics such as federal and provincial child benefits, registered education savings plans (RESP), government grants and bonds for RESPs, student financial assistance, legal aid, income tax, etc.

Topics for workshops and discussions:

- Budgeting
- Police Services: police role in Canada, citizens' rights, safe driving, etc.

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- Child-related: child benefits (federal & provincial), investing for children's future, saving for children's education, children's education for low income families
- Financial needs and plans
- First Aid/ CPR
- Housing - what to look for when buying a house
- Insurance claims
- Rights/ freedoms in Canada
- Taxes - property taxes, GST/HST/PST
- Women's and children's rights in Canada

Identification of Isolated New Canadian Families

The following are some of the groups that were identified during the focus group process as potentially isolated new Canadian families:

- Women with children, especially those with younger children and/or with children with disabilities
- Seniors, especially those with language issues (difficulty with English/French) or those caring for grandchildren
- new Canadian families with language issues (difficulty with English/French)
- Employees who are told by employers not to access support services or are given misinformation about employment rights and responsibilities
- New Canadian men, especially those whose dreams for the new country have not been met
- new Canadian families with mental health issues
- New Canadian parents with HIV-Aids or those having children with HIV-Aids

The results from the needs assessment suggested that new Canadian families could be reached at locations such as health services, schools, stores, libraries, public transport stations, driver's licence offices, places of worship, restaurants and other everyday services which would be utilized by community members. They could also be reached through the internet, ethnic newspapers and media sources, and businesses owned by new Canadian families. Chambers of Commerce and real estate offices were also mentioned as conduits for reaching new Canadian families.

Community Partnerships

Host sites already leverage community partnerships to offer services to new Canadian families so they can focus on their organization's mandate and field of expertise, and avoid unnecessary duplication of programs. For example, in their focus group reports, host sites showed a strong preference for referring new Canadian families to employment services and immigrant-serving agencies for employment needs and family services for counselling.

The focus groups and meetings provided host sites with welcome networking opportunities. They were able to identify possible new community partners, share information about new services, events and

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other updates, and discuss learnings and possible new avenues of funding. In the words of one host site coordinator, “Some of the gaps identified were not true gaps – practitioners weren’t aware of existing services”.

The following are some of the partnership ideas that emerged during the needs assessment.

Entities that could be approached for potential community partnerships:

- Local churches for furniture and delivery for low income families
- Housing companies for low cost housing
- Red Cross for emergency funding
- Newcomer serving agencies and colleges for ESL classes
- Small business associations
- Local businesses and service providers

Activities that could be conducted to optimize community partnerships:

- Partnership activities between mainstream organizations and settlement agencies
- List servs/common networks among partners
- Semi-annual meetings to share information about resources and programs and discuss learnings
- A resource to share workshop topics and key contacts
- Community gathering with partners with display and staff to talk to new Canadian families

Implementation of the Learnings

Host sites were quick to act upon the learnings from the needs assessment. Community Engagement Coordinators at the host sites reached out to engage new Canadian families in their community. Simultaneously, they planned and began programs, workshops and discussions in ways that worked for their community. The host sites for this project are either family resource programs or they operate family resource programs. The strength of the family resource program model is its informal, welcoming and inclusive nature. The activities carried out by the host sites were based on these principles. Therefore, one seemingly informal activity could address multiple needs within the community. Additionally, one activity can often spark off other activities. Here is one example, from among many, that illustrates both the informal aspect and the seamless programming.

At the beginning of the project, **Kootenay Family Place** (Castlegar, BC), partnered in *Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy’s* weekly **ESL Family Drop-in**, where immigrant families learn English through songs, poems and crafts. Then they held a **Multicultural Food Celebration** to introduce this project to the community. The event was advertised on their volunteer-run Facebook page and through flyers. The room was decorated with flags from the participants’ countries of origin and with streamers. A cake was cut in honour of a participant’s 40th anniversary as a new Canadian.

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The host site conducted a focus group with new Canadian participants. In response to a need that emerged during this focus group, the weekly **Multicultural Morning – Conversation Club** was started. It provides new Canadian families an opportunity to share experiences as immigrants and their process of adaptation to Canada and to the local community. The community partner, *Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy*, provides an English tutor and a childminder. The topics are participant driven, and have included discussions around articles from the local newspaper, activities in the community, the local map and bus routes, stories and traditions, travel, etc. Activities such as crafts, vision boards and demonstrations of traditional dressing are included, and they provide excellent non-threatening opportunities to engage isolated new Canadian families with little or no English, such as an elderly Chinese couple who found a place here. A knitting activity at the Multicultural Morning helped engage the Chinese grandmother. The grandfather became an enthusiastic volunteer at the **Seed to Plate Community Garden**. The **Seed to Plate Healthy Cooking Program** was also started. Participants cook meals with the produce from the community garden (when available), teach each other various dishes from their own cultures and also try their hand at Canadian dishes. The Sun display below was put up during the winter when participants said that they missed seeing the Sun!



Above: Community Engagement Coordinator
Adriana Huerta Nava with the Sun display

Right: Collages made by participants at the
Multicultural Morning Conversation Club



One of the activities at the Multicultural Morning Conversation Club was the making of a collage by participants (pictures above). It was presented as an exercise in personal freedom. The CEC mentioned that some of the participants did not consider themselves creative and were hesitant to 'think outside the box'. However, participants warmed up and thoroughly enjoyed making collages that expressed their personalities and likes by cutting or ripping out pictures from magazines and to create designs of their choice.

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For **International Women's Day**, the host site printed a brief history of the day and handed it out to participants as the topic was being discussed at the Multicultural Morning. Participants made a poster by writing something about women who were influential in their own lives. They also painted a picture together and created a PowerPoint presentation, which is included in this reporting package. The site also partners with the *Community Action Program for Children's Parent Education Drop-in*, which is a regular drop-in and chat program in an informal setting, with activities for the children, and a parenting-focussed discussion led by a facilitator. Community partners are called in to present to the group, such as a dietician who spoke about balanced meals. This activity provides a much-needed opportunity for families new to the community to meet local families.

All the above activities at Kootenay Family Place demonstrate how new Canadian families in the area have been reached out to and engaged in community life. In all the drop-in programs (ESL Family Drop-in, Parent Education Drop-in and Multicultural Morning – Conversation Club), the groups are becoming self-directed and participants take initiative to suggest and plan activities. In the words of the Community Engagement Coordinator, "They do this not out of a sense of entitlement, but out of a sense of community".

Conclusion

The project host sites conducted focus groups to assess the needs in their communities. They discussed how best to reach new Canadian families living in isolation and how to welcome them into the local community. They identified the main programming needs of these new Canadian families and the types of supports they might need to participate in community life. Host sites generated a wealth of ideas for programs and community partnerships.

FRP Canada wishes to thank all those who worked hard to make the focus groups possible – the staff at the host sites and the participants who contributed their time and thoughts.