

# Peer Mentoring Guide

for family support volunteers



# PEER MENTORING GUIDE FOR FAMILY SUPPORT VOLUNTEERS

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## ABOUT FRP CANADA AND THE FAMILY SUPPORT SECTOR

The **Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)** is a bilingual, not-for-profit national association of family resource agencies from all provinces and territories.

Family support programs are community-based organizations working with children, families and caregivers to promote healthy child and family development. They are known by many names, such as

- Family place
- Neighbourhood house
- Maison de la famille
- Parent-child centre or
- Family resource program/centre.

All are guided by the *Guiding Principles of Family Support*. ([Appendix 1](#))

The work that family support programs do is based on their size, purpose and resources. In general, the services are flexible, open to a wide range of Canadians, and offered in an informal and caring way. Some services are provided in partnership with other groups. Services may include:

- child development
- community outreach
- drop-in programs
- educational upgrading
- family literacy
- parent and caregiver support
- peer contact and mutual support
- promotion of health and safety
- toy lending
- community development
- counselling and mediation
- early learning and care
- employment assistance
- food and nutrition support
- parent education
- play and recreation
- referrals to other resources



**See**

[Appendix 1: Guiding Principles of Family Support](#)



## INTRODUCTION

### What is volunteering?

Volunteers offer their time, energy and skills to do something without being forced to do it. They do not expect any monetary reward for giving their time and skills.

The late Dr. Ivan Scheier said that volunteering means, “doing more than you have to – because you want to – in a cause you consider good.” Dr. Scheier was known for his work with volunteer programs in Canada and the United States.

### What is mentoring?

Mentoring means that an experienced person (the mentor) helps another person (the mentee) to achieve goals and develop skills. Working as a team, they use conversation and other learning activities to create a deeper link over time. Both the mentors and mentees benefit from the mentoring relationship.

There are mainly two ways that mentoring happens:

- In a **formal mentoring** relationship, the partners ask for or offer the mentoring, decide on goals and use a plan to define their joint work.
- An **informal mentoring** relationship usually happens with less planning. The mentee may ask for or receive help from someone more experienced without asking the other person to be a formal mentor. Informal mentoring may happen between a supervisor and worker, or between **peers** (people who may be friends, co-workers or volunteers in the same place). Informal mentorships thrive in the family support sector.

In today’s fluid workplace, many people may support your professional growth. The idea of a ‘network of mentors’ is an alternative to having one main mentor. The *Guide to Informal Mentoring* produced by the Department of Human Resources at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology provides tips on how to create such a network of mentors. You can view it at [diversity.mit.edu/initiatives/mentoring](https://diversity.mit.edu/initiatives/mentoring).

### Peer Mentors in the family support sector

In the family support sector, Peer Mentors are usually parents who volunteer at family resource programs and share their knowledge and experience with others. They help other parents to connect with community resources and build support networks. They may also help the program to find new families to participate at the centre.

Peer Mentors in the family support sector sometimes have other titles, such as Volunteer Mentor, Parent Mentor or Parent Ambassador.

#### Famous Mentoring Pairs

Sigmund Freud **MENTORED** Carl Jung

Socrates **MENTORED** Plato

John Christian Bach **MENTORED**  
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

School principal Alice L. White  
**MENTORED** civil rights activist Rosa Parks

Author Maya Angelou **MENTORED**  
Oprah Winfrey

In the *Star Wars* movies, Ben Kenobi  
**MENTORED** Luke Skywalker

## BEING A PEER MENTOR: BENEFITS, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### Benefits to you

Your volunteer experience as a Peer Mentor could help you to:

- Strengthen your résumé by gaining
  - › skills you can use in a different setting
  - › Canadian experience and references (if you are new to Canada)
  - › on-the-job training and professional development
  - › leadership and communication skills
- Build your professional network and get access to career opportunities
- Meet the requirements of colleges or universities.

As a Peer Mentor, you may also:

- Learn about working in a community-based environment
- Learn more about services and programs in your community
- Connect with people open to hearing your questions and ideas
- Gain satisfaction by helping other families to connect with community resources and build their informal support networks.

At a more personal level, being a Peer Mentor may help you to:

- Enhance your self-confidence and growth
- Meet new people, make new friends and share your own culture and experiences
- Integrate into your community
- Share your talents and knowledge.

"The work that I did as a volunteer proved to be needed by the community. It became a paid job part-time job (which was a big accomplishment for me). When a new project came up, I was offered an opportunity to lead a new program directed more to those who are experiencing the same things that I went through in my first year in Canada. It allowed me to help those who I know need my support and to become the leader that I was before coming to Canada."

– Family support practitioner, Kitchener, ON

"I used to be isolated. Look at me now! I am here representing my organization at a national meeting."

– Peer Mentor, Victoria, BC

## Your rights and responsibilities

As a Peer Mentor, you become a volunteer who is bound by the organization's volunteer policies. This means you must know your rights and be clear about your responsibilities.

### Your volunteer rights

As a volunteer, you have the right to be:

- Treated with dignity, respect and trust
- Treated as a co-worker, not just as a free helper
- Assigned tasks that reflect what you prefer, what suits your personality, and that take into account your time, education, life experience and skills
- Recognized and appreciated for the things you do to help the program.

You also have the right to receive:

- Training and supervision that is well planned
- Guidance and direction from someone who is patient, well-informed, and willing to spend the time needed
- Information about the organization – its goals, policies, programs and people
- Information about the program you are part of and how it fits into the community.

On a more personal level, as a volunteer you have the right to:

- Gain a range of experience by taking on assignments with more responsibility
- Give feedback to the program, and be heard and respected for voicing your honest opinions
- Withdraw from your volunteer role for personal reasons.

## Your responsibilities and duties

When you become a Peer Mentor, the family resource centre will likely give you a job description. It will outline responsibilities such as:

- Following the centre's rules and regulations, and the law
- Keeping information that comes to you private
- Acting in a professional way
- Arriving on time
- Completing the orientation and training the centre may offer you
- Setting personal goals for being a peer mentor and talking to your coach about these goals.

Your Peer Mentor job description may also spell out duties such as:

- Welcoming families and telling them about the centre's programs and services
- Chatting with families at the centre and encouraging them to be part of regular activities
- Sharing information with families about community services and resources
- Reaching out to families that may be isolated within the nearby community
- Giving staff updates about the questions, concerns and needs you hear from families
- Helping with program activities as needed (by making phone calls, setting up workshop rooms, making snacks, designing posters, helping with event planning, etc.)

The material in this section was adapted with permission from volunteer training materials developed by S.U.C.C.E.S.S., BC and the *Volunteer and Student Manual of LAMP, ON*

## THE ESSENCE OF FAMILY RESOURCE PROGRAMS

### Principles that guide our work

All family resource programs share common principles that guide the way services are developed and delivered. Family support workers from across Canada developed the principles through national discussions.

The list below outlines the 12 *Guiding Principles of Family Support* that guide our work. It also provides examples of how family support workers – the staff that Peer Mentors work with – use the principles. Although we chose each example to describe a single principle in action, you will see that some examples reflect a number of the principles.

1. **Family support programs are open to all families recognizing that all families deserve support.**

Family resource programs welcome all families and accept diversity in all its forms – age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and family type. For example, at a craft activity, you might see children from many backgrounds. Among them could be a child with same-sex parents making two cards for Mother's Day.

2. **Family support programs complement existing services, build networks and linkages, and advocate for policies, services and systems that support families' abilities to raise healthy children.**

A neighbourhood with many new immigrants has weekly English conversation classes. The classes give new Canadian<sup>1</sup> parents a chance to practise their English-speaking skills as part of a group. At the same time, the parents learn about programs and services in their community. For parents who want it, childcare for infants and toddlers is available while the parent sits with the learning group. For pre-school children, a school readiness program is available.

3. **Family support programs work in partnership with families and communities to meet expressed needs.**

Family resource programs often bring community partners and families together to share ideas and to plan what they want in their community. The people at one such meeting decided that they wanted to focus on family activities. They wanted to start a *Mom-and-Tots* group that would be planned and led by parents. Six volunteers started the program by finding a space, setting the program's goals and leading community activities.

4. **Family support programs focus on the promotion of wellness and use a prevention approach in their work.**

*Pregnancy ESL*<sup>2</sup> workshops teach English words and expressions about pregnancy, labour and childbirth, as well as words that parents might hear during visits to doctors or clinics after the baby is born. This program is offered just before weekly pre-natal workshops led by a public health nurse for groups of expectant and new parents. At both these workshops, participants can speak freely, express their concerns and ask questions. The workshops are held in neighbourhoods that have many pregnant women at risk of having low birth-weight babies. During the workshops, participants also learn about other

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<sup>1</sup> A "new Canadian" is an immigrant who has lived in Canada for three or more years.

<sup>2</sup> ESL = English as a Second Language



programs at the family resource centre that offer support after the baby is born.

5. **Family support programs work to increase opportunities and to strengthen individuals, families and communities.**

A new Canadian Peer Mentor planned picnics for the community and a field trip to the zoo for families using the centre. Another Peer Mentor set up and managed a Facebook page for the centre, and designed posters for programs. Many other new Canadians came forward to plan activities, which drew in Canadian-born adults and children, too. The sense of sharing led to stronger relationships among new Canadian and Canadian-born people in the community.



6. **Family support programs operate from an ecological perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of families' lives.**

A Peer Mentor worked with a family support worker to promote the centre's program and services with families taking ESL classes. The Peer Mentor and the staff person asked the families what programs they would like to be part of and what was stopping them from going to such programs. With regard to the parent-and-tot drop-in program, the answer was clear: many parents were taking ESL classes on the mornings when the program happened. In response, the centre started afternoon drop-ins for these parents. The centre also hired a bus to bring ESL parents and their children to visit and have a tour of the building. The parents enjoyed being part of activities that welcomed children, rather than having separate programs for parents and children.

7. **Family support programs value and encourage mutual assistance and peer support.**

When the site for a family resource program was closed for the summer, the support group met instead at the public library. They talked about many topics, from women's issues to local and world events. When one member of the group visited Mexico, she remained part of the talks thanks to Skype (computer video and audio that works like a telephone link). The group celebrated birthdays, anniversaries and other special days together. Group members volunteered to bring food and took turns phoning others each month to remind them of the meetings.

8. **Family support programs affirm parenting to be a life-long learning process.**

Drop-in-and-chat conversation groups are a popular activity at family resource programs. They help parents connect with each other in an informal way. People learn from each other, share experiences and support each other. Many topics are covered, such as family life, raising children while taking care of elders, etc. Guest speakers give information on a wide range of topics. Some family resource centres also have libraries from where parents can borrow books on parenting topics.

9. **Family support programs value the voluntary nature of participation in their services.**

Drop-in programs are at the core of the family support sector. Children and their parents or caregivers gather to play, meet new people, make friends, gain new skills, share ideas, learn about sharing and co-operation, and be part of activities such as music, circle-time and messy play. Each centre's drop-in program is different. The goal is to meet the needs of its members and their community. Often, families do not need to register to attend drop-in programs, nor do they have to attend each time it occurs.

10. **Family support programs promote relationships based on equality and respect for diversity.**

In one of Canada's largest cities, the six-week *Nobody's Perfect*<sup>3</sup> program was held for new Canadian fathers and mothers. Talk centered on how to discipline children in Canada. Parents said they felt a need to adapt and adjust their parenting skills for Canadian life. They also talked about common concerns among parents of young children, such as sleeping and eating. People shared rhymes and songs in many languages. The feeling was relaxed, and parents who spoke very little English felt supported by the group. The centre also offered facilitation training to Peer Mentors, that has allowed them to team with experienced *Nobody's Perfect* facilitators to bring this program to more new Canadian families.

11. **Family support programs advocate non-violence to ensure safety and security for all family members.**

Positive parenting workshops attract many parents. Often, a Peer Mentor helps parents share their parenting challenges and find ways to discipline their children without hitting or other punishments. During such an event, parents can share their concerns while feeling supported and cared for. They learn from the Peer Mentor and from each other.

12. **Family support programs continually seek to improve their practice by reflecting on what they do and how they do it.**

A family resource centre invited workers from community-serving agencies to a focus group to discuss the needs of new Canadians in their community. Based on what the focus group revealed, the family resource centre designed its activities. Community partners attended a follow-up lunch meeting at the centre. Participants were able to update each other about their programs.

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<sup>3</sup> *Nobody's Perfect* is a parenting education program for parents of children from birth to age five.

[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/parent/nobody-personne/index-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/parent/nobody-personne/index-eng.php)

## Respecting values

Values are the beliefs we hold close to our hearts. Our values are formed by our life experiences and the important people in our lives.

We look at everything through our values and they guide all of our actions. We use our values to judge how we see something. For many of us, our values are so much a part of us that we are hardly aware of them. Many of us only notice our own values when we disagree with someone or something. Many disagreements are the result of a difference in values.

Each person's values are unique. Although people who share a culture or a community may have very similar values, no two people have values that are exactly alike. Within any group, a wide range of values will likely exist.

As a person working with families, it is important to think about what your values are. Even so, be aware that your values are just that – YOUR values. They are not the only values. They are not the best values for others. They are simply your values. Be careful that you do not – consciously or unconsciously – promote your own values and criticize the values of others.

As a Peer Mentor, be alert for times when you agree with some parents and not with others in the group, or when group members take sides on a certain issue. Your role is to remain neutral and to help the group to find a common ground that respects everyone's beliefs and values.

The family support sector does not aim to change people's values. It accepts the diverse range of values in any group. The focus is on looking at the effect that values have on choices parents make every day.

"I am happy to be able to help isolated families because I had experienced how hard it can be when one is new in Canada. I love to make new friends in the community with different cultural backgrounds."

– Peer Mentor, ON

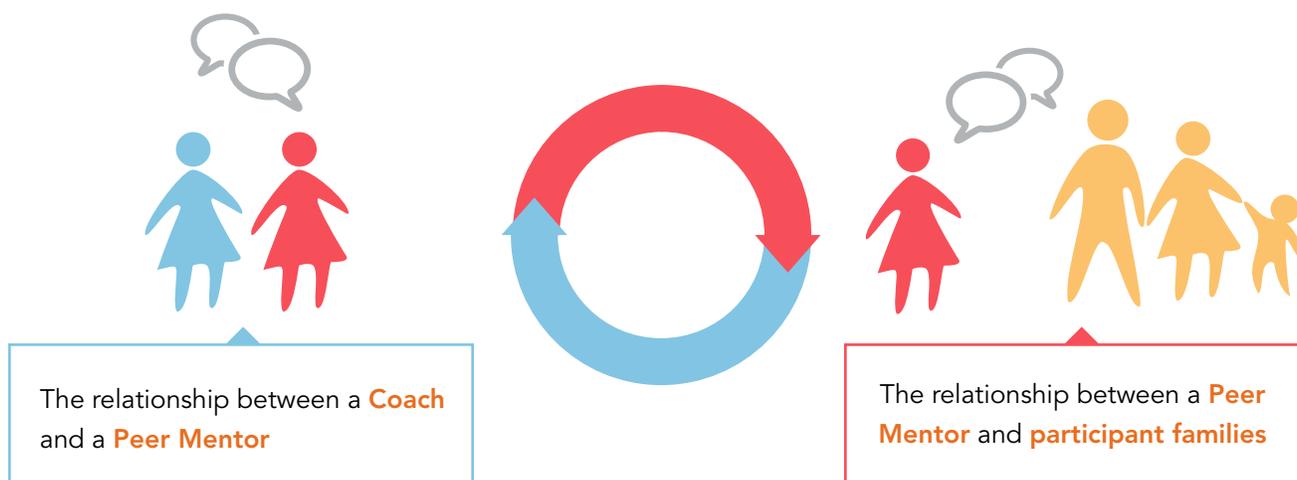
The material in this section was adapted with permission from Public Health Agency of Canada (2000) Working with *Nobody's Perfect: A Facilitator's Guide*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing.

## HOW TO BUILD MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

As a Peer Mentor, you will be part of a group of three:

- The Peer Mentor – you!
- The Coach – the family support worker who is working one-on-one with you.
- The participant families you will interact with.

Peer Mentoring is based on two different relationships that have an impact on each other:



The next sections of the guide include tips on what to do and what not to do in your relationship with your Coach and with participant families. The first rule of any mentoring relationship is to make the other person feel valued and comfortable, and to give them the support they need. In general, this means showing understanding, flexibility and appreciation, while still being professional in your approach. If you are not sure about what to do or how to act, ask your Coach. By asking, you show that you respect the work you are doing together.

## The relationship between a Peer Mentor and Coach

This relationship is usually a formal one. Both people agree to be part of the relationship, promise their time and set goals. Sometimes, both the Coach and Peer Mentor sign a written agreement that describes the relationship.

The Coach's role is to provide you with the chance to develop the skills, practical knowledge and leadership you need to have when working with families. This includes:

- Giving you an orientation about Peer Mentoring, as well as training
- Helping you set personal goals
- Giving you a chance to learn by watching (known as job shadowing)
- Offering you support and feedback.

### Tips for the Peer Mentor

When you are interacting with your Coach, here are some things you may want to take into account:

- Keep the mentoring relationship professional.
- Take time to set personal goals with your Coach (see next section for more details).
- Think of your Coach as a 'learning helper' rather than a person with all the answers. Your Coach could suggest books or other people that will be useful to you. Talk to her/him about what you are learning. Remember that you are responsible for your own growth.
- Be aware of your Coach's time. Return phone calls and emails promptly, and be on time for meetings and activities.
- Communicate clearly and openly. Be honest about the way you interact with each other and about your needs and limits, such as time constraints.
- Solve problems as soon as they arise.
- Seek to discuss and get input from your Coach rather than looking for advice. Ask your Coach for constructive feedback. Ask for it early.
- Be open to your Coach's efforts to help you see things in a different way. Ask your Coach to tell you about the kinds of approaches and resources they used in the past that could apply to the challenges you face. Discuss how to apply the knowledge your Coach shares with you.
- Provide regular feedback to your Coach about your experiences with families.



Your relationship with your Coach will thrive if you:

- Show your Coach that you appreciate who s/he is and what s/he does.
- Make only positive or neutral comments about your Coach to others. If you do not agree with your Coach's behaviour or values, tell her/him this in a respectful way.
- Enjoy the mentoring experience. The energy you invest may have a major impact on your life. Your Coach will also grow from the experience.
- Expect the mentoring relationship to end within the time limit you agreed to.
- Stay in touch with your Coach when the formal relationship ends. Send a note or email, or call from time to time.



The material in this section was adapted with permission from:

- ALLIES (2009) [Mentoring Toolkit](#)
- Center for Health Leadership & Practice (2002) [Mentoring Guide: A Guide for Protégés](#). Oakland, CA: Center for Health Leadership & Practice, Public Health Institute.

It also includes material from the *Mentee's Guide* produced by FRP Canada (2005) for the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement.

## Tips on setting personal goals

Early on, you will meet with your Coach to talk about the goals you wish to set for yourself. Setting goals is very important to the success of mentoring partners. Goals give the partnership a clear purpose and help you organize and express your expectations. Having well-defined goals will help plan the work you will do together. It will create a focus for the relationship. Once you reach your goals, it means you have done what you planned to do.

When you start as a Peer Mentor, think about what you need. Would you like to:

- Learn a certain skill?
- Gain exposure to a process, project or job role?
- Have someone to talk to about your questions and ideas?
- Gain experience working with families, for future jobs or to complete your education?

Once you know what you want for yourself, you can work with your Coach to:

- Develop a plan to achieve those goals
- Discuss the kinds of training and support you will need, and
- Set regular times to talk about the progress you are making.

It is important to be aware that you may not be able to meet all your goals with one single volunteer role. As a Peer Mentor with one organization, you will only be able to meet those goals that are practical for that organization. For example, if you want to learn how to design a poster, but that is not what the organization expects from you, you may not have a chance to learn this task with them at this time.



**See**

[Appendix 2: Sample Form for Setting Personal Goals](#)

The material in the section was adapted with permission from Department of Human Resources, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, U.S.A. *The Guide to Informal Mentoring* [diversity.mit.edu/initiatives/mentoring](https://diversity.mit.edu/initiatives/mentoring)

## Solving problems that may arise in your relationship with the Coach

Here are some examples of challenges other Peer Mentors and their Coaches have faced and solved.

- **Time and energy.** The most common challenge is finding enough time to do all you want to do.
  - › *What could you do?* Think small rather than big, especially in the beginning. Talk to your Coach to be certain you are both comfortable with the time you are spending and the learning that is taking place.
- **Building trust.** With only a few hours of contact each month, it may not be easy to build the kind of trust you both would like.
  - › *What could you do?* Listen carefully, and remember what your Coach has said in the past (you might want to keep a journal). Keep your commitments, or set a new time or a different commitment if the current commitment does not suit you. Avoid saying negative things about others. Above all, keep the confidential information your Coach shares with you private, unless it is something that is against the law or against the centre's rules.
- **Expecting your coach to be the expert.**
  - › *What could you do?* Be aware that your Coach does not have all the answers. A Coach is a 'learning helper.' Ask them to connect you to others who may know more about certain topics, as needed.
- **Be sensitive to how you are different.** It maybe easy to think that both you and your Coach think and react in the same way.
  - › *What could you do?* As you understand how you are similar, seek to also find the differences between you and your Coach. For example, how does their position differ from the role you play? What problems do you face that they do not? If you are not of the same age group, gender, race, culture or professional background, what is different in how you have lived? Be a learner and invite discussion about these topics.
- **Mentoring other Peer Mentors.** As you gain experience as a Peer Mentor, you may be asked to help out with a new Peer Mentor. This may increase your workload and make you feel upset, especially if you both receive the same credit for your work.
  - › *What could you do?* Think back to when you were a new Peer Mentor and had the same doubts and concerns that this new Peer Mentor now has. Someone guided you then. Now, it is your turn to guide a new person. You can gain satisfaction by helping someone to grow and develop. This will also help you to build your own mentoring and leadership skills.

## The relationship between a Peer Mentor and participant families

You are the Mentor to the participant families you connect with, and they are your Mentees. The mentoring relationship between you and these families is an informal one. Its main feature is that you have connections and resources that you are willing to share that could help the families. This informal mentoring will focus on:

- Building a caring and supportive relationship with families
- Encouraging families to engage in community programs and services
- Giving families a chance to share their skills and experiences.

Once you have connected with a participant family, the next step in the mentoring process is to build the relationship. This means:

- Taking time to know each other and to start building trust
  - › Share common experiences.
  - › Share common interests or hobbies.
  - › Find out about the family's needs and its interest in community programs and services.
  - › Discuss what is stopping the family from being part of community activities.
- Exchanging information
  - › Share information about community services and programs, such as the family resource centre.
  - › Help with some of the barriers to participation, if you can. For example, if they live a long way from the centre, the centre might be able to give them bus tickets.

### Tips for the Peer Mentor

- Understand that you are not acting as a **counsellor** for families but as an **ambassador** for community resources and services.
- Understand that it takes time to develop bonds and trust.
- Be aware of and honest about your own limits, such as the amount of time and kind of support you can give them.
- Respect the participants' time as much as you respect your own time.
- Communicate clearly and openly.
- Always ask if it is okay to make a suggestion, before you make a suggestion.
- Be supportive of the family's situation and choices.
- If you are having difficulty communicating with a participant family, ask your Coach for help.
- Explore and learn about how you are similar to and different from the families you work with.

Above all, celebrate success and focus on the common good!

The material in this section was adapted with permission from ALLIES (2009) [Mentoring Toolkit](#). It also includes material from FRP Canada (2005) *Mentor's Guide* produced for the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement.

## Setting boundaries

It helps to set boundaries at the very start of the mentoring relationship. Boundaries provide structure to the relationship. They help the Peer Mentor, the Coach and the participant families to know the limits of the relationship.

Poor boundaries in a mentoring relationship can cause:

- Anxiety and discomfort among all the people involved
- You (as a Peer Mentor) to feel overwhelmed, or feel that someone is taking advantage of you
- The Coach to feel overwhelmed, or feel that someone is taking advantage of her/him
- Participant families to feel disappointed because they did not know what to expect or were not clear about what was being offered to them
- Participant families to feel pressured to attend programs by a Peer Mentor who pushes too hard
- Some participant families to feel that they are treated differently from others.

When people do not take the time to set boundaries, there is a good chance that they will not follow the policies and principles of the organization.

Peer Mentors are **ambassadors** whose goal is to connect participant families with community resources and services. You are not a counsellor or personal worker for families. As a Peer Mentor, you can set clear boundaries during your goal-setting and other meetings with your Coach. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself:

- What policies of the organization may affect my role as a Peer Mentor? (For example, policies may not allow volunteers to represent the organization outside the centre. This will affect how you do outreach.)
- What are my goals as a Peer Mentor?
- How much time am I willing to commit to being a Peer Mentor?
- What kind of help am I willing and able to offer the participant families?
- What will my relationship be with the participant families?
- How do I manage personal friendships with participant families? (For example, some of the participant families may already be your friends, or some may show interest in becoming your friends.)



**If you find yourself saying, "I will do it just this one time..."**

Think before you use these words. If you are tempted to do something "just this once," it is likely that it is something that crosses your boundaries. Many mentors regret saying these words because they soon learn that it is harder to say "no" once you have said "yes" in the past. You may get caught in a trap and end up with new problems.



## HOW TO CONNECT WITH PARTICIPANT FAMILIES

From the first moment you connect with potential participants, you are setting the tone for their experience with the program or centre. As a Peer Mentor, your warm, friendly and non-judgemental approach will make them feel that they would be welcome at the centre. This is the same feeling they will get when they arrive at the sessions later on.

### Doing outreach in the community (connecting with participant families)

Where can you reach families?

- Community events
- Community food markets
- Community partners
- Cultural associations
- Doctors' offices and drop-in clinics
- Knocking on doors (where appropriate)
- Employers of target groups of participants
- Ethnic stores, shopping centres and restaurants
- Food court in mall
- Inter-agency meetings
- Laundromats
- Libraries
- Lobbies of apartment buildings
- Local stores and businesses
- Other programs at the centre
- Parks
- Posters at community centres and associations
- Referrals from community partner organizations
- Schools
- Town Hall meetings
- Used clothing stores
- Word of mouth

- Bus tickets or a ride from other participants
- Childcare
- Food and refreshments
- Food vouchers
- Flyers or brochures in multiple languages
- Opportunities for the whole family
- Programs offered in the evenings or weekends

What helps to make the families feel welcome?

## Tips for recruiting parents

- Be positive and enthusiastic about the activity or group. Explain why you think the family would enjoy it.
- Be clear that you are not asking the family to be part of the activity or group because you think they need to. You are simply offering something very practical and useful that you think they would enjoy.
  - › Respond to the parents' fear or doubts.
  - › If the concern is about going alone, ask if they have a friend who might like to be part of the activity or group.
  - › If you are dealing with a couple, invite both partners to participate.
  - › Talk about the benefits of being part of a group and sharing experiences and ideas with other parents. Make it clear that people only speak if they want to and that the group members will decide how they will work together.
  - › Ask if you may follow up with them by telephone.
- Offer information about what the activity or group will do and give details, such as the time, place, dates and number of sessions. A brochure or fact sheet can be helpful, especially if it is in a language that the family speaks. On the other hand, if you can explain things with enthusiasm, this might be more effective.
- Talk about barriers such as transportation, childcare, etc. Let them know that there are solutions, such as bringing children to programs, free childcare, preschool programs, bus tickets, etc.
- Leave your name and contact number at the centre.



## How to respond if parents are negative

Some parents will react in a positive way to the activity or group you describe to them. They will be eager to attend the next session. Others may have negative feelings or comments. When this happens, ask yourself, “Does this come from what I said or from an experience they had in the past or from somewhere else?”

### Some negative feelings or comments from parents...

### Some things you could say...

They feel suspicious, singled out or threatened.

The activity or group is open to all families.

They are afraid that others will see them as “bad” parents if they attend the program.

The activity or group gives parents a lot of practical information.

They feel they are coping well and are not interested.

The activity or group gives parents a chance to share their experiences and help one another.

They are not interested because the program does not provide any money or job prospects.

Being part of the activity or group offers parents a chance to get out of the home, meet other people and have some fun.

As an immigrant family, they do not know about family support programs.

Families in Canada use family support programs for many reasons, such as meeting with other parents for support, making friends, reducing isolation, children’s play, etc.

The material in this section was adapted with permission from Public Health Agency of Canada (2000) *Working with Nobody’s Perfect: A Facilitator’s Guide*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing.

## WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

This section offers some practical advice from experienced family support workers on ways to connect and work with families whose background and needs may not be familiar to you. If you are a new Canadian, this section may include details you already know. The goal is to help Peer Mentors avoid misunderstandings. Early on, you and the families you connect with can enjoy each other's company and learn from each other. Here are some things to be aware of when you are working with parents from diverse cultures.

### **Parenting is a culturally sensitive issue.**

Parents and the family have the same role in every culture – to pass on to children the values, beliefs and customs of the culture. Parents from each culture have their own way to approach parenting and may have different goals as parents. For example, many cultures teach children to obey adults and respect elders. Others believe that children have the right to express themselves freely, even when this involves challenging the adults around them.

Many parents who have immigrated to Canada have had happy family relationships in their home country. They are excellent parents who love their children and want the best for them. It can be a shock when they realize that some of their parenting practices are very different from what is done in Canada. Immigrant parents may also find it difficult to parent when the family supports and resources that were so much a part of parenting in their homeland may no longer exist. Part of your role as a Peer Mentor is to help parents build on the skills they have and to build their support networks so that they can be effective parents in this new country.

### **Expect to speak about racism.**

It is essential that those working with immigrant parents understand racism and its effects. Be very clear and honest about your own feelings and beliefs about race and culture. Anti-racist principles and practices should be part of the way you interact with others. Parents may face racism in their daily lives and they may want to talk about it when they attend a group or activity at the centre. They may be looking for ways to help their children deal with racism.

Ignoring racist behaviour sends the message that it is okay. This is a complex issue that cannot be ignored. Your Coach can help you look for resources that address racism. They will likely come from local multicultural groups and human rights organizations.

### **Address negative views about sexual orientation.**

The first Guiding Principle of Family Support is that family support programs are open to all families. This includes same sex couples and their children. Immigrant parents often have traditional family values, which may include negative views about same sex couples. Your Coach can help you learn how to address this challenge and maintain a balance between being open to ideas of different participants and creating a safe, positive space for all families.

Family Service Saskatoon has a short guide for newcomers called *Understanding Canadian Family Life*. It is free to download at [www.familyservice.sk.ca/pdfs/CDNLife.pdf](http://www.familyservice.sk.ca/pdfs/CDNLife.pdf).



## Tips for working with immigrant parents

- **Accept traditional parenting skills and values.** Help parents to identify some of the values and beliefs that affect their behaviour and the way they parent. Suggest that parents in a group talk about the parenting values they have in common.
- **Expect, accept and respect differences in the kinds of behaviour that parents believe are correct.** The beliefs about what is polite and what is rude differ across cultures. If you are not sure what behaviour is appropriate, ask. For example, you may see cultural differences in:
  - › whether people look you into your eyes when they speak to you
  - › how closely they wish to sit or stand when they are talking to you
  - › the kinds and amount of touching that people accept, such as shaking hands, kissing, hugging, patting children on the head
  - › how people express emotion
  - › when thanks is needed, or not needed.
- **Respect parents' privacy.** The kinds of topics that people consider to be private vary from culture to culture. Go slowly when you first talk about topics you are not sure about. Ask open-ended questions and allow the parents to decide how much they are comfortable saying. For example, you could begin the question by asking, "What can you tell us about ...?"
- **Listen carefully to make sure you understand what parents mean.** At the same time, make sure that parents do not assume that they know what YOU mean. Just as you are viewing their actions through your cultural beliefs, they are viewing your actions from their cultural standpoint. Even when parents nod (or say "yes") when you speak, this does not always mean that they agree or understand. In some cultures, nodding one's head or saying "yes" are polite ways of letting you know that they are listening.
- **Be prepared for long discussions during the activity.** In some cultures, people think it is rude to be too direct. They may expect a certain amount of chit-chat before the real point of the discussion can begin. As well, each speaker may take awhile to say what they really want to say. This is why parents may answer your questions to them in an indirect way. They may give you less important details before they move to the real response.
- **Be calm and relaxed.** Be warm, flexible and open to new ideas. Make an effort to put participants at ease and reduce their tension. Many cultures are comfortable with silence, so a quiet group does not mean that the parents do not like the program or understand what is happening. However, if you sense that the parents are uncomfortable, follow up on it. In some cultures, people think it is very rude to disagree with others. It may take careful effort to draw out some parents' thoughts and ideas if they fear that their views are not the same as yours.

"I felt good doing this kind of work, I felt useful, but sometimes I felt disoriented when people expect all the answers from us, so we explained that we're here as facilitator and we don't know all the answers. It was a challenge to try to share ideas with people without English at all."

– Peer Mentor, MB

## Tips for working with parents who are very new to Canada

- **Use translators and cultural interpreters whenever possible.** Newcomer parents are more comfortable speaking in their own language when they are talking about things that create strong feelings, such as their childhood, their families or their life as a parent. Speaking from the heart often requires the mother tongue.
- **Be aware of and acknowledge the enormous stress families are facing.** Everything is new. What they thought was normal may not be normal in Canada. For example, many day-to-day things, like finding a place to live, finding work, setting up childcare, shopping, banking, public transportation, using the health care system, or moving children into a school could be very different from what they knew before. It is all happening in a new language and, for many, in a new and colder climate.
- **Other stresses** newcomer families face may include:
  - › loss of the support from an extended family
  - › lack of knowledge about what is expected and okay to do in Canada
  - › not having their education and work experience recognized
  - › racism or the feeling of being a minority
  - › changes in the roles of the parents, such as a mother finding a job before the father does
  - › changes in parent-child relationships as the children adapt to the new country and are exposed to new people and non-traditional values.

These kinds of stresses reduce self-esteem and can make people feel isolated, confused or frustrated.

- **Refugees can face even greater difficulties in adjusting to Canada than immigrants who are here by choice.** Refugees have been forced – by political events or economic forces – to leave their homeland. They may have faced great risk and hardship before coming to Canada. They may have lived in refugee camps, suffered violence or lost family members. Such families may suffer post-traumatic stress due to these experiences.

“I had a wonderful and rewarding experience working with newcomer families. Being an immigrant myself, it made me feel closer and more understanding of the issues and challenges these families were facing on a daily basis. It was a learning and sharing experience.”

– Peer Mentor, MB

## Tips for working with parents who speak little English

- **Help parents to focus.** Reduce distractions and background noises. Avoid interruptions. Learning to speak in a new language requires a lot of effort. Give the speaker your full attention to help them focus on the topic.
- **Do not rush the speaker.** Pay attention. Offer help only if needed. Allow the speaker to go at the speed they choose.
- **Speak slowly and clearly.** Choose your words carefully. Use clear and basic plain language. Focus on one idea at a time.
- **Repeat what you have said when someone does not understand.** Repeat what you said, using mostly the same words as before. Change only one or two words. Speak clearly and a bit more slowly. Do not speak more loudly. The listener heard you the first time; they just did not understand you.
- **Make sure your listeners understand what you are saying.** Do not assume that because someone nods or says “yes,” they understand. Double-check by asking the person to repeat the message in their own words.

“I discovered myself while I worked with other families. We helped each other.”

– Peer Mentor, QC

“I developed good relationships with people. I got many things like social life, knowledge of the city.”

– Peer Mentor, ON

This guide was produced for you – the Peer Mentor working in the family support sector. Some of you may go on to become family support workers. We hope that this guide was useful in giving you an idea about the family support sector and its values, and about the role of Peer Mentors in this sector.

## Appendix 1

### Guiding Principles of Family Support

1. Family support programs are open to all families, recognizing that all families deserve support.
2. Family support programs complement existing services, build networks and linkages, and advocate for policies, services and systems that support families' abilities to raise healthy children.
3. Family support programs work in partnership with families and communities to meet expressed needs.
4. Family support programs focus on the promotion of wellness and use a prevention approach in their work.
5. Family support programs work to increase opportunities and to strengthen individuals, families and communities.
6. Family support programs operate from an ecological perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of families' lives.
7. Family support programs value and encourage mutual assistance and peer support.
8. Family support programs affirm parenting to be a life-long learning process.
9. Family support programs value the voluntary nature of participation in their services.
10. Family support programs promote relationships based on equality and respect for diversity.
11. Family support programs advocate non-violence to ensure safety and security for all family members.
12. Family support programs continually seek to improve their practice by reflecting on what they do and how they do it.



Appendix 2 - Download this customizable document at <http://bit.ly/SIThVo>

## Sample Form for Setting Personal Goals

(For the first goal-setting meeting between the Peer Mentor and the Coach)



**Name of Peer Mentor:**

**Name of Coach:**

**Today's Date:**

1. What would you like to achieve by becoming a Peer Mentor?

2. What kind of help or support do you need to achieve these goals?

3. How often will we meet to talk about your progress? What are the best times and places to meet?

**First check-in session:** [date, time and location]





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