CITY WIDE IMPLICATIONS

To: Mayor and Members
   Board of Health

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Re: Parenting Groups – Family Health Division Report (PH06017) (City Wide)

Council Direction: N/A

Information:

Background

The early years between birth and age three, are pivotal in determining whether a child will develop to his or her full potential (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Reports from several community initiatives including the Roundtable on Poverty indicate that approximately 24% of Hamilton’s children 0-14 years of age live in poverty. Many of these children live in less than optimal conditions and therefore face threats to development that can limit their life choices and future prosperity. Young children with high rates of aggressive behavioral problems have been shown to be at great risk for developing substance abuse problems, becoming involved with deviant peer groups, dropping out of school, and engaging in delinquency and violence. Research demonstrates that one of the most powerful protective factors for children faced with adversity is connections to competent and caring adults. A secure parent-child relationship and patterns of stable, warm, responsive care-giving have been shown to be linked to the development of competence.

Parents play an important role during these early years, in advancing the growth and development of their children. While the role of parents as caregivers and providers has rarely been in doubt, recent studies have emphasized the important role they play in providing nurturance, stimulation, and education. Historically new parents learned and acquired skills from their family members. More recently, as extended family units have deteriorated, there has been recognition that much of this important learning is done in isolation, through trial and error. Those parents experiencing difficulty often struggle
alone but sometimes either seek or are strongly encouraged to accept assistance from professionals in the community. Often these professionals are Public Health Services staff.

**Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines**

In Ontario, public health units are mandated to provide group-based parenting interventions to provide information and develop skills. The focus for these parenting interventions includes a variety of important public health practices such as the promotion of immunization, injury prevention and safety, healthy nutrition and breastfeeding, preventive dental health practices, physical activity and effective parenting strategies. Public Health Services staff plays a key role in helping parents adjust to the stresses of parenting. Families are frequently referred to Public Health programs (by physicians, hospitals, community agencies or self referral) with the request for Public Health Nurse (PHN) intervention to teach or improve parenting. The purpose is often the protection of young children and the enhancement of infant or child development through improved parent/child interaction. Recognizing the importance of positive parenting in healthy child development, the Family Health Division of Public Health Services provide a continuum of parenting groups to meet the diverse needs of young families up to six years of age as described below.

**Parent Link**

These drop-in parenting groups provide parents with young children, from newborn to 12 months, the opportunity to socialize, learn from peers and professionals, and develop confidence in their ability as parents. Each session focuses on a health topic such as infant development, early literacy, immunization, safety, childhood illnesses, nutrition, budgeting etc. Families from all economic groups can attend one of six Parent Link sites in the City (East Mountain Community of Christ Church, Flamborough Family YMCA, Dundas Knox Presbyterian Church, Public Health Services Mountain office, Wesley Early Years Centre, Dominic Agostino Riverdale Recreation Centre). These groups are facilitated by a Public Health Nurse. The most recent addition is a Parent Link site at St. Martin’s Manor for Teens. In addition, a drop-in parenting group at the Dominic Agostino Riverdale Recreation Centre, for families with children up to age six, targeting the multi-cultural community, began in June 2005. This group, delivered in partnership with the Community Services Department and the Community Action Program for Children, runs four mornings weekly and has seen a steady increase in attendance.

**Ontario Early Years Centres**

Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs) are the setting for weekly consultation sessions provided to parents by their neighbourhood PHN. Currently PHNs in the Family Health Services Division are reorganizing some of their work to be more responsive to unique neighbourhood needs and characteristics. This will include working more closely with
community partners, such as OEYCs, in neighbourhood HUBs.\(^1\) Services at OEYCs provided by PHNs and Dieticians include: pre and postnatal information; breastfeeding support; growth & development education; nutrition support; home safety, injury prevention including correct use of car seats; and information regarding local community services. Additional services provided by OEYC staff include: interactive play activities for children with their parent/caregiver and other children; early literacy programs to strengthen children’s reading readiness, listening and language skills; parent resources and education materials; and toy lending libraries. Services are provided through individual counselling, small group sessions, and large group presentations. PHNs provide service in 15 OEYCs and programming is enhanced by a multidisciplinary resource team (including Public Health Services dieticians) who rotate service delivery to all sites. Family Home Visitors\(^2\) facilitate Rhyme Time parent-child groups, aimed at multicultural newcomers, at OEYCs to encourage the development of family literacy skills. Over 450 sessions were provided to parents at OEYCs in 2005.

**Starbucks Workshops**

The HBHC program partners with Starbuck’s Ancaster Meadowlands location and Hamilton Public Library together with Chedoke Child and Family to provide monthly drop-in workshops with presentations on parenting topics, such as nutrition, reading to your child, toilet readiness, development through play and more. These educational sessions provide another opportunity for parents to increase their knowledge about child growth, development and care. Ten sessions were offered and attended by over 400 parents in 2005.

**Parenting Groups for Fathers**

A pilot project of two weekly fathers groups began operating in April of 2005. These groups were initiated recognizing the important role that fathers play in their child’s development. The two fathers groups are facilitated by a male PHN in partnership with community agency staff. The long term goal of this new program is to reduce child abuse and enhance child development by supporting positive parenting strategies and to empower fathers to take a more active role in parenting. Adolescent fathers benefit from the sessions held weekly at Gracehaven. A group for fathers from the multicultural community runs Saturday morning at the West Hamilton OEYC on Queen Street North. During the 25 weeks of 2005 that the programs were offered, there were a total of 260 participants. A formal evaluation of these groups indicates that fathers want to learn about their children's growth and development and limit setting. The way in which fathers would like to learn about these issues varies. They also want to learn using a variety of options including books/video materials, expert led classes and/or groups with other dads. Fathers attending the fathering groups found the programs to be valuable because they: received important and helpful information; were provided with useful

\(^1\) Integration Resources Hub is a group of community programs working together to provide a coordinated service response to preschool children with special needs, their families and the day nurseries who enroll them.

\(^2\) FHVs are women from the community who received training to become skilled peer mentors. They work one-to-one with families in their homes, focusing on growth and development, model effective parenting, reinforce health teaching provided by the PHN, and link parents to community resources.
resources; and received support from the facilitators and each other. In addition to the development of the Fathering groups, and resources to support them, Family Health staff chair a Fathering Coalition that meets regularly to network about fathering resources and improve collaboration and information flow.

The Incredible Years

The Incredible Years (IY) parenting program is a new, exciting evidence based parenting program first piloted in Hamilton in the fall of 2005. The program is designed to promote emotional and social competence and prevent/reduce aggressive, defiant, oppositional, and impulsive behaviours in young children 3 to 6 years old. The program emphasizes parenting skills known to promote children's social competence and reduce behaviour problems such as: how to play with children, helping children learn, effective praise and use of incentives, effective limit-setting and strategies to handle misbehaviour. Evaluation of other IY programs has shown success with parents from various ethnic groups and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in parts of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. This 12 session program is provided in partnership with local Ontario Early Years Centres and Chedoke Child & Family at area Ontario Early Years Centres. Child care is provided by Early Years Centre staff. Thirty-two individuals from the partnering agencies have received specific training to run the IY parenting program. A PHN co-facilitates the group with a staff member from either an OEYC or Chedoke. Four series with a total of 50 registrants have been provided with 3 more planned for the fall of 2006. Chedoke is assuming the lead in conducting a formal evaluation of our local IY program. A multi-agency Community Advisory Committee provides strategic directions for collaborative planning, implementation and evaluation of parenting programs in Hamilton. The vision is that all families in Hamilton will have access to age appropriate parenting programs.

Beyond the Basics

Our newest parenting intervention program, has been introduced as a pilot to the Hamilton community in April of 2006 is Beyond the Basics (BTB). This 10 session program, developed in Toronto, implements play based learning for adults using games and interactive activities. It is designed to provide participants with fun ways of learning how to be a more effective parent. This parenting group for families who have children ages birth to six, was specifically designed for parents who have mental health concerns, or whose children have been (or are at risk of being) apprehended by child welfare agencies. BTB was developed to create a relaxed, accepting environment where participants share information, strategies and challenges and at the same time learn new approaches to parenting. This approach recognizes that people are not born with parenting skills - they need to learn how to be effective parents. Long-term objectives of this program are to: maintain knowledge learned by parents; increase parents’ positive parenting skills; reduce child maltreatment; and increase parents’ use of community and social supports. Fourteen participants are registered in the pilot group running in East Hamilton. Each session is facilitated by 2 PHN. Assistance with transportation, child care, and a nutritious snack are provided to reduce barriers to

3 This includes 8 PHNs from the Healthy Lifestyles and Youth Division who will be able to run groups for school-aged children.
participation. Plans are underway to deliver future groups in partnership with the local Children’s Aid Societies.

Summary

The Family Health Division offers a variety of evidenced based parenting programs for families with children 0-6 years of age. These parenting groups complement our home visiting interventions funded through the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Program. The intent is to focus on the parents, enhancing their capacity to nurture their infants and children within a safe and secure environment. Many of the parenting groups are offered in partnership with other community agencies ensuring they will meet the needs of Hamilton’s diverse community, minimize duplication and ensure efficient use of resources.

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