

Parent Links: A network of resource centres serving parents, caregivers and children in Alberta

How the Parent Link Program Works

Alberta's Parent Link centres meet the criteria for family resource programs as defined by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs:

Family resource programs, firmly rooted in their communities... provide a spectrum of early support and prevention services for families with children...[They] also serve as non-threatening access points to more specialized services in the community.

—*Parenting and Family Supports: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric Together* [online], July 2001 [cited July 4, 2004]
(Ottawa: Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs).
<www.frp.ca/PDFDocuments/positionpaper2001.PDF>.

Objectives and Expected Results

The purpose of the Parent Link program is

- **to support Alberta's parents** in their role as their children's first and most influential teachers
- **to link Alberta's parenting programs and services through a province-wide network** that
 - promotes excellence
 - facilitates the sharing of resources, knowledge and best practices
 - fosters the creation of partnerships
 - encourages cooperation on projects of value to the network as a whole, as well as to individual members

Expected results include

- an increase in the number of children and families who do not require family enhancement services from child protection agencies

- an increase in the number of children whose special needs are identified and who are referred to appropriate services
- an increase in the number of Aboriginal children and parents who participate in quality early learning activities
- an increase in the overall number of children and parents who participate in Parent Link programs
- an increase in the number of parents who report improved parenting skills and knowledge of child development

Mandate

Parent Link centres provide high-quality, comprehensive, accessible, community-based programs that comply with province-wide standards of excellence and respond to the changing needs of parents and families. In fulfilling this mandate, the centres

- promote family wellness
- promote positive parent–child relationships
- improve parenting knowledge and skills
- foster optimal child development
- ensure that children get a healthy start in life

Core Services

Parent Link centres provide a comprehensive range of services that includes **all** the following core services:

- parent education
- early childhood development and care
- family support
- information and referrals

These services are both parent-oriented and child-oriented. They are offered as stand-alone services or in partnership with other community agencies. For example, a Parent Link centre might offer an early literacy development program in conjunction with a local school or library, or refer a family to a community’s home visitation program, or work with a public health centre to offer classes on child safety or nutrition.

Note

To be considered a Parent Link centre and to be eligible for Parent Link program funding, an organization must provide all four of the above-listed core services—either independently or through partnerships with other community agencies. The specific programs that a Parent Link centre offers within each core service area are driven by community needs and delivered in a manner that respects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community.

Parent Links centres must operate in accordance with the program’s guiding principles and comply with provincial evaluation requirements and other program guidelines and best practices.

Parent Education

Parent education programs help “to build parents’ skills and confidence in providing a nurturing environment for their children.”* They address the needs of all types of parents, regardless of family structure, composition or socio-economic background. For example, a comprehensive parent education program would address the parenting concerns of fathers as well as mothers, first-time parents as well as grandparents, caregivers and foster parents as well as birth parents, and so forth.

* Family Support America, *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Family Support America, 2001), p. 4.

Examples of parent education programs include

- formal and informal workshops and seminars on issues related to parenting and early childhood development
- drop-in seminars and programs for parents and caregivers
- family literacy and numeracy programs for parents and caregivers

Early Childhood Development and Care

“Parent–child relationships are enhanced when families have positive experiences working or playing together.”* Providing children with a range of interactive, play-based problem-solving experiences can help develop their readiness to learn and ensure they start school equipped for success.

Examples of early childhood development and care programs include

- play-based learning activities in which parents and children interact
- the *Roots of Empathy* program, which develops children’s empathy as a means of building caring, peaceful and civil societies
- play group programs in which children can explore art, physical recreation and other activities
- early literacy programs in which parents and their toddlers learn to enjoy rhymes, finger plays, songs and simple movement games
- preschool programs that promote literacy and numeracy skills and develop the competencies children need to do well at school

Family Support

Family support services are intended to be preventive measures designed “to help parents identify and develop their strengths...and be active, involved, concerned directors of their families’ lives and their children’s development.”† Family

* Family Support America, *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Family Support America, 2001), p. 4.

† Ibid., p. 4.

support services may include a range of social, educational and recreational programs and activities, including

- collective kitchens
- toy– or equipment–lending libraries
- home visiting services (in partnership with Alberta’s home visitation programs)
- family counselling services (provided on-site or through referrals to other community agencies)
- formal as well as unstructured opportunities for parents to meet other parents and share their experiences, build new friendships and create informal networks of support

Information and Referrals

Parent Link centres provide an information portal that connects parents with programs, tools and resources that can help them raise strong, healthy, well-adjusted children. Specific services may include

- resource libraries (stand-alone or in partnership with community libraries) that include books and videos about parenting and child development, as well as books that parents can read with their children
- registries of child care providers
- resource lists that provide details about the range of family services available in the community
- referrals to community programs and services
 - For example, Parent Link staff may refer families to home visiting programs that can help them define and achieve their parenting goals.
- on-site developmental screening for children, or referrals to community agencies that provide this service

Guiding Principles

The following principles provide a foundation for Alberta's Parent Link centres. These principles reflect generally accepted principles of family support, including those endorsed by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) and Family Support America.

Children come first—in all Parent Link program services and activities. The best interests of each child drive all program-related decisions.

Parents are the primary caregivers of their children. Programs offered through Parent Link centres recognize that supporting parents is key to fostering optimal child development.

Parenting is a lifelong learning experience. All families have resources and strengths that they bring to this experience.

Parents and communities are active partners in the planning, design and delivery of Parent Link programs and services. Parents are involved as volunteers, advisors, facilitators, planners and evaluators as well as recipients of Parent Link services.

Parent Link centres are open to all parents, no matter where they live and regardless of their social, cultural or economic background. They offer affordable services and support at times that are convenient for parents.

Parent Link centres recognize that parents need different types of support at different stages in their children's lives.

Parent Link centres value diversity and promote inclusion. They recognize and respect the fact that families differ in their structure and composition. They recognize that different families have different needs, and that special services may be required for children with special needs.

Parent Link centres are community-based partnerships. They build networks and partnerships with governments and community agencies in order to provide a comprehensive range of services that meet the needs of children and families.

Parent Link centres are flexible. They respond to the changing needs and circumstances of parents and communities, while still complying with provincial standards and guidelines. As a result, different programs and services may be offered in different communities or to different parents.

Parent Link centres recognize that communities play an important role in supporting parents and providing children with the positive, supportive environment they need to fulfill their potential. They foster a sense of belonging and help families connect with their communities.

Parent Link centres deliver high-quality programs that reflect current, evidence-based research findings and best practices.

Parent Link centres use a proactive, preventive approach. Rather than focusing on problem-specific crisis intervention, they help parents build skills and abilities that empower them to solve problems, achieve goals and take control of their lives.

Parent Link centres are accountable. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation ensure public accountability and foster continuous improvement.

Who Uses Parent Links?

Parent Link centres serve all parents and caregivers who need support, information, training, counselling or programs to improve their parenting skills and provide Alberta's children with a good start in life.

Since the early years of a child's life are the foundation for later development, most program participants are families with children under six. In response to local community needs and available resources, Parent Link centres also provide programs for teens and for parents of older children.

Most programs and services provided by Parent Link centres are available at no cost to participants. In some situations, nominal fees may apply. In these cases, the fees are waived or subsidies provided for parents and families who can't afford to pay.

Parent Link centres recognize that all parents bring strengths, talents and resources that can enrich the centres' programs for all participants. Parent Links build on the resources of parents in all aspects of their programming

Planning and Development

Good planning and community input are critical if Parent Link centres are to succeed in meeting the needs of Alberta's children, parents and communities. Good planning is a flexible process: it includes ongoing analysis and evaluation to facilitate problem solving and unexpected but necessary changes of course.

The Planning Process At a Glance

- Alberta's Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) convene a community-based planning table to implement Parent Link centres in their region.
- The planning table in each region develops proposals and plans to establish Parent Link centres that meet community needs. Each regional plan identifies the organizations that will serve as Parent Link centres and receive Parent Link program funding.
- Community-based regional plans are submitted to the Minister's Advisory Committee for review. The committee makes recommendations for the Minister's approval.
- Funding is allocated for approved plans.

Community Planning Tables

As a first step in establishing Parent Link centres, regional Child and Family Services Authorities (CFSAs) convene a planning partnership that represents their community. The core of the partnership must include

- at least one representative from the Child and Family Services Authority
- Family and Community Support Services partners
- representation from the Regional Health Authority
- representation from regional school jurisdictions

- parent input
 - Parent input into the planning process can come in many forms, including some or all of the following:
 - data from existing parenting reports or studies
 - focus groups
 - parent participation at the planning table

The planning table may also invite other members, including

- representatives from both large and small organizations that provide services to families with young children
- representatives from existing organizations that serve parent and families in the region
- representatives from the Aboriginal community
- representatives from the region’s library sector
- representatives from the United Way or appropriate service clubs and community-based foundations

Planning Partnerships

Communities are encouraged to use the existing planning tables in their regions as the basis of the planning partnership. Additional members can be added to these tables as required.

Examples of existing planning tables include

- the **ECD planning table**, which was established to plan and coordinate the expansion or enhancement of early childhood services across the province
- **Community Partnership Enhancement Fund tables**, which are a partnership between Family and Community Support Services and CFSA’s

Members of the community planning table must have input and influence over decisions about how planning, implementation, quality assurance and training dollars are allocated within their region. They must also have the authority to make decisions on behalf of their sector or organization.

The planning table as a whole must have the authority to make decisions and allocate resources on behalf of the region. The planning process in each region must be fair, transparent and flexible.

Developing the Plan

Plans and proposals to establish Parent Link centres are developed by the community planning table convened in each region of the province. Community plans can be based on any of the following models:

- expanding an existing program
 - When an organization already provides all four of the required core services, Parent Link program funding could make it possible for the organization to
 - extend its hours of operation and improve accessibility for working parents
 - provide resources for the parents of children with special needs
 - provide services to specific ethnocultural groups
 - provide services to families in the surrounding community
 - expand its program in other ways
- transforming an existing program
 - When an organization provides some of the four required core services, Parent Link program funding can be used to expand current services in accordance with program guidelines.
- creating a new centre
 - Proposals to establish new Parent Link centres must respond to community needs, have the endorsement of the region's community planning table and meet the requirements of the Parent Link program. Except for minor renovations, capital costs are not eligible for program funding in Phase 1.
- creating a new delivery partnership
 - Different organizations in a particular region may specialize in meeting particular community needs. Collectively, these organizations may provide all four of the required core services.

Parent Link Core Services

- parent education
- early childhood development and care
- family support
- information and referrals

Creating a service delivery partnership linked by a centralized administrative structure would allow the organizations to qualify for Parent Link program funding—even though the organizations were not situated in one location and no one organization provided a comprehensive range of services.

Components of the Plan

Plans for Parent Link centres must use the standard template developed by Alberta Children’s Services. In each submitted plan, the community planning table must identify

- the region’s priorities for family support and child development services
- gaps or duplication of family support and child development services in the region
- how Parent Link centres will build on existing programs and services
- what steps are needed for the successful implementation of Parent Link centres in the region

Community plans for Parent Link centres must also provide the following information:*

- where the centres will be located
- the operational model that will be used and contact information, as appropriate
- the population the centres will serve
- the number of participants expected to use each of the centres’ four core services
- how the centres will address gaps or duplication of services

* The following steps are modelled on the planning requirements for Ontario’s Early Years Centres. See *Planning the Ontario Early Years Centres: Guidelines for Communities* (Ministry of Community and Social Services, September 2001), p. 17.

- how the centres will coordinate their services with other those of other family support service providers in the community
- how parents will be involved in centre operations
- how the centres will deliver core services and other programs, how they will meet the needs of particular population segments, how they will market and communicate their services and how they will meet the diverse needs of the community’s various ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups
- how the centres will share ideas, experiences and best practices with other Parent Link service providers within the region and across Alberta
- an annual operating and capital budget (Note: Only minor renovations are eligible as capital costs in Phase 1.)

Program Delivery

Parent Links centres deliver services under contract to the Ministry of Children’s Services.

Funding

Alberta Children’s Services currently spends approximately \$5 million on parent or family resource programs in communities across the province. This funding is allocated through regional Child and Family Service Authorities and Family and Community Support Services partners.

In 2004–2005, under the Parent Link program, Alberta Children’s Services will provide \$6 million—in addition to the \$5 million currently allocated—to establish Parent Link centres in communities across the province. The additional funding will ensure that the centres can

- deliver the four core services in accordance with Parent Link guiding principles and standards
- pay their staff well enough to maintain a stable, qualified workforce

Family Support America suggests that the cost of establishing one or more linked centres can range from US \$100,00 to \$350,000 and the process can take about 12 months.

—Family Support America, *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Family Support America, 2001), p. 18.

- provide outreach services in the community
- develop and maintain high-quality programs

Note

Parent Links program funding is allocated for organizations identified in approved regional plans submitted by community planning tables.