

---

## Work and Family: Conflicting Values

CPRN has organized three networks of researchers and policy makers. They focus on work, family, and health. The linkages among the three are constantly on our minds:

- To be effective at work, we need peace of mind – the sense that all is under control at home.
- To be able to provide the best for our families, we need income and the self-esteem that comes from work
- To be healthy, we need a sense of self-mastery – that we can shape the world around us – at work and at home.

Yet, in the 1990s, the world has shifted in directions that can place a heavy burden on families:

- Work is less secure; there is a polarization of job quality and of earnings.
- Families are stressed out, time crunched, more isolated and fragmented than they used to be.
- Social programs, across the spectrum, are being changed, and in many cases curtailed.
- More children than ever are living in poverty, and there is evidence of dysfunction among children who may not be poor but who lack attention, care and nurturing that they need.

One of CPRN's major projects is called: *What is the Best Policy Mix for Children?* Suzanne Peters is the director of the project, and she has just authored a first report with Pauline O'Connor, to be released in the next few months. The final synthesis of the project, including work on international and interprovincial issues, will be completed next year.

Today, I want to discuss some of Suzanne's preliminary findings, findings that indicate we are still a long way from coming to terms with the modern stresses on the family. The cultural beliefs and norms of the early post-war period still have an enormous impact on the way we think, and there is a wide gap between the way we think and the way we actually behave.

In 1995, Suzanne's report on *Exploring Canadian Values* suggested that Canadians set a high priority on investing in children. Partly that is a sense of investing in "our future". Partly it is a sense of prevention – that investing in healthy child development will lead to healthier adults. At that time, however, people could not articulate what the appropriate investments were. They were blocked by the sense that children are a private concern of the family.

Since 1995, thinking has evolved somewhat. In the 1997 round tables and discussion groups conducted for the Best Mix project, Suzanne's analysis reveals that people are beginning to reassess the roles of families, communities, and governments. They are seeking a basis on which they can work together to achieve better outcomes for children. There is a lot of common ground among the groups she has met so far, but we are still far from a general consensus.

In general, she found people struggling with the confusion and contradictions she identified earlier. They want to avoid creating dependency. They are highly sceptical about the capacity of government to deliver help. And they are worried that the fiscal constraints will prevent anything from happening.

Canadians are living with deep value conflicts. Here are three examples:

a) Broad support for women to work, but a concern that families with pre-school children need systemic support to ensure that quality care is available. This concern still revolves about what women should do to accommodate work during the early child-rearing years. In fact, about 65 percent of women with pre-school children are working, and two-thirds of them work full-time.

b) General sense that children are primarily a family responsibility, but broad recognition that it is next to impossible for families to manage in today's economy without public supports.

c) Double bind placed on lone parents on welfare - they are both expected to raise children and to work. While many want income and child care supports for families attached to the labour market that would allow them to stay-at-home, they are nevertheless worried that supports for parents will somehow "create dependency."

The "Best Policy Mix" conversations involved two different kinds of parent groups, all with at least one child at home over six. Groups were also held with the general public and youth.

- Some were randomly selected. They came to the issue with less knowledge, and they found it somewhat easier to reach consensus – albeit sometimes at a more superficial level. Nevertheless, clear themes emerged.
- Others were nominated by community groups working with families and children. They brought more knowledge to the discussion. So the conversation went deeper. They were more innovative. They had more trouble coming to consensus at this deeper level. But they also identified consistent themes.

Participants were asked to select the best policy mix or combination that would achieve higher outcomes for children, using a protocol that included an array of choices. Here is an example of what they discussed.

### ***Best Mix Vision Focus Groups***

#### **Main Categories:**

Economic Supplements

Balancing Family and Work

The Legal System and Families

Child Care/Early Education

Parenting Supports

Children's Development

Community Spaces and Supports

### **Choices Within Balancing Family and Work**

1. Maternity leave, as is
2. Parental leave, up to one year, in addition to maternity leave
3. Economic support for the parent on leave for up to one year.
4. Day care centres in workplaces, with arrangements for breast feeding.
5. Employers pay modest top ups to workers with children in day care.
6. Flexible hours and weeks
7. Access to two years of part-time work with no loss of benefits, seniority etc.
8. Job sharing, with no loss of seniority etc.
9. Prohibition on mandatory overtime
10. Paid leave to care for family members (several days per year).

Here are the main findings, to date.

1. Basic infrastructure supports of education and health are essential.
2. Incomes supports essential for those in poverty, but much ambivalence about how they should be delivered. Uncertainty about the impacts of enriched levels of support.
3. Strong interest in preventive services, universally available. Main focus was on innovative outreach and integration of services. Many groups talked about integrated service delivery (like the CLSC's in Quebec) which would provide a community anchor. Preference for parents to go to a communal space rather than home visiting services.
4. On the interface between families and the labour market, people want to go beyond flex-time and part-time options. In general seem to prefer collectivist options, but there is tension to find a level of support which is both fiscally viable and personally responsible. Families should pay, up to a point.

E.g. One community group in Ottawa wanted families to receive supports for labour market participation, but disagreed over whether to use child care, parental leave or economic supplements.

5. General acceptance that women will work, and that they need supports which permit smooth transitions back and forth between home and work, as the pressures at home shift.

### **Reflections on the Results:**

- Given the conflicts over the findings about labour market participation, we should not be surprised that public policy has been so disjointed on these issues. There does not appear to be a consensus on the need for child care, for example.
- Suzanne's findings suggest the need to invest more time and energy in clarifying values, resolving conflicts, and identifying common ground.
- Participants shared a growing recognition that families need help and that responsibility is shared across families, communities, and governments.
- In that context, these results suggest general support among Canadians for:
  - prevention, for all children, not just those at risk,
  - income supports for those in poverty,
  - universal services, including community anchors to create access,
  - public spending on broad social infrastructure,
  - and new options to support the interface with the labour market,
- Pauline O'Connor's reading of the research literature indicates that we have very little evidence about what works for Canadian families in the current context. This means that we need to conduct pilots (and evaluate the results) on different mixes of program supports for families.

(November 1997)