

Centre Francophone de Toronto
Challenges of adapting a program for our French community
The example of the “Make the connection” Program

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Centre Francophone de Toronto: Who are we?

The Centre Francophone de Toronto (CFT) is the first Francophone Community Health Centre in Ontario, and it is one of five French Community Health Centers in the province. Since 2003, we also offer the services of the French legal aid clinic of Ontario.

The CFT has three different service locations throughout Toronto and serves over 5000 French speaking clients.

Our multidisciplinary team consists of approximately 80 employees who service the Francophone community.

The centre offers primary health services (clinical services i.e. doctors, nurses, dieticians, mental health counselors), health promotion and prevention services, and a variety of community based programs and services (i.e. outreach program for the homeless, prenatal and postnatal programs, clothing bank, housing and employment information, early years team of specialist, and much more).

The CFT promotes a holistic approach to well being and therefore takes into consideration a multitude of health determinants relative to experiencing a well balanced lifestyle, such as psychological factors, social status, income, support, employment, housing, environment, education, various health habits, accessibility of services, etc.

Therefore, our approach is as multidisciplinary as it is multi serviced in response to our unique and diverse clientele.

The Francophone population in Toronto is very diverse in terms of culture, experiences, education, development and individual needs.

With regards to our clients, the majority are new immigrants from countries such as Cameroon, Congo, Haiti, Morocco, Algeria and France.

They face numerous challenges and they will often come at our centre for a particular service, usually health related, but screening will underline multiple needs for a variety of services and they will be referred to more than one professional and will attend a certain number of our community programs, which is in accordance with our global health approach as a community health centre.

Our Early year services

The CFT is the first Francophone Early Years Centre in Ontario. In recent years, the centre has been dedicated to offering a variety of services for the Early Years that include an Infant Developmental Program, an Infant Mental Health Program, a Special Needs Resource Program in Child Care, and a variety of Early Years Programs such as:

- Parent and tot drop-in program
- Parenting classes
- “Here to Help”, for children who have witnessed domestic violence
- Social skills group for young children
- “Make the Connection”, for children 0 to 1 and their parents

The need for a parent-infant attachment program

While working with the Early Years population, we noticed that it appeared more difficult to engage new parents and have them participate in our group activities with their baby compared to parents of toddlers for example. Because of the variety of other program and services that we offer at the CFT, we new that there was a considerable number of our clients who were new parents. Some came to our clinic to get their child vaccinated or for health related questions. Other mothers participated in the Best Start Program or had attended pre-natal classes at the centre.

But somewhere between the birth of their infant and the first year of age, we lost contact with these clients. For various reasons, they were not participating in the activities offered to them and we were looking for ways to reach these families. This was particularly the case with pregnant mothers who attended the Best Start Program. Because of their low income and the fact that they are often isolated, these moms are considered at risk and consequently, the relationship with their infant maybe impacted.

For these reasons, we though that it would be important to offer a program specifically for this clientele, that would focus on early attachment and that would target new parents and there infant (0 to 1).

Around the same time, we came across a program called “Make the Connection: Birth to One”, that focused on developing the parent-infant relationship in various ways. Two colleagues and I, working with Early Years Programs at our centre decided to attend the three days training for this program and received a certification as program facilitator for MTC 0-1. By attending this training session, we had hoped to collect ideas and best practices related to attachment and parent-infant relationship and strategies that we could apply to our clientele. By the end of the training however, we felt that the program met the needs of the families that we worked with and we were interested in offering MTC at our centre. We were faced with an important challenge however. All the material, including booklets, posters, CD’s of songs and rhymes were produced in English. These materials were also an essential component of the program.

What is the “MTC” program? (Information source: MTC Leader’s Guide)

In MTC 0-1, parents learn the kinds of skills necessary to establish loving relationships, foster two-way communication, and help their baby learn, in order to prevent social, emotional, language or learning delays down the road. While the central messages are relevant to all families, the aim is to reach infants at risk. MTC 0-1 is adaptable to a wide range of socio-cultural communities because of its hands-on-activities with babies present, accommodation of individual learning needs and opportunities for group support.

The guiding principles for the program are: focused on attachment, readily accessible to at-risk families, easy for community staff to deliver, intensive enough to bring about long-term change and which included built-in evaluation.

Program Format

MTC 0-1 is a 9 week group program which 8 to 10 parents and their babies attend together. In designing a program format that combined hands-on practice with reflection, parent support and videotaping, we brought together features of other respected programs- for example, Mother Goose (Lotteridge, 1987), Nobody’s Perfect (Health Canada, 1987), You Make the Difference (Manolson, et al., 1995), Seeing is Believing (Erickson,1999) and Developmental Training and Support Program (Bernstein, 1998).

Sessions are approximately 90 minutes and follow a three –part format: 1) The parent-baby time is a facilitated time when parents interact with their baby in suggested ways then reflect on how the baby responded: Songs and rhymes, Magic Moments (Magic Moments are moments of social interaction, when parents lock into their baby and tune out everything else going on. Tickle games, mutual smiles or funny faces are examples of Magic Moments which foster closeness and unique parent-infant relationship), Toy box, Transition songs; 2) The parent discussion is an experiential learning and discussion time with parents on what the different MTC themes mean to them, their baby and their relationship and offer support to parents in their role; 3) The parents are also videotaped trying out program themes and activities with their baby and will receive group feedback related to their video highlights.

Program Messages

The parenting messages at the core of the program were derived from themes that occur repeatedly in the child development and parenting literature as being essential for healthy socio-emotional growth and brain development. These themes include: responsiveness to baby’s emotional cues, sustaining two-way communication, adjustment to moods and temperament, and encouragement of baby’s sense of agency (Benoit et al., 1998; Brazelton & Cramer, 1990; Clark and Ireland, 1994; Greenspan, 1999; Lerner & Dombro, 2000; Manolson, 1992; Lieberman, 1993; Shore, 2002).

In MTC 0-1 these messages are grouped into themes of Love, Language and Learning and presented to parents over five program sessions.

Adapting the MTC program and applying it to our clientele

Because of our enthusiasm for MTC and the need that existed to offer an attachment based program to francophone parents and infants, we decided that it would be interesting to translate the MTC material in French and attempt to adapt the program for our clientele. After consulting and obtaining permission from the two authors of MTC, Claire Watson (M.S., SLP) and Barbara Mackay Ward (M. Ed.), we got to the task of translating and spent around three months working on the project. We completed what could be called a homemade version of the booklets, albums and posters, but were not able to produce a CD of songs and rhymes due to lack of budget. A French booklet of songs and rhymes was however produced. Through this experience, we learned to be creative in terms of the resource that we used and that were available. We also needed to make sure that while following the philosophy, the goals and messages of the program, we also adapted it in a way that would reflect the reality of our clients and that would help them connect with the guiding principles of the program.

Challenges and success

While we were very excited to participate in this innovative project, we realized that certain challenges would be encountered. The lack of financial resource was an important obstacle. Although we volunteered to translate the materials, the budget for editing and printing was and is still nonexistent. This means that for each session that we offer to groups of parents and infant, we have to produce the material (i.e. printing, cutting, assemble the booklets) according to the number of participant. This can be quite time consuming. Another challenge is the limited number of MTC programs that we can offer during a year. In average we run the program twice a year, mainly because we are currently only two professionals trained to offer the program at our centre and also because it requires a substantial amount of paper work and planning. The need and the interest for this service his growing however and would require us to offer the program four times a year. But the main challenge that we face by adapting the MTC program in French is that it addresses the French community at large but appears to be less in tune with the realities of specific cultural groups within the French community (i.e. Congolese, Haitian, French Canadian, Moroccan, etc.).

In terms of success indicators, we have been offering MTC in French for the last three years and we have completed the program 10 times. We started with groups of three or four parents and the number of attendance as grown to twelve families and more. The success of the program is clear in terms of number, but also with regards to the participants. Our last two groups included fathers which is a great accomplishment for us because we have been attempting to reach them for a long time. The evaluations and feedback that we receive are also positive and parents appreciate the material that we provide for the program. They are generally very excited to learn that such a program is offered to them in French in Toronto and they often ask if there is another program for 1 to 2 years old children. Finally, we feel that we have been able to adapt efficiently the MTC program to the particular needs of our clientele. One example of this is a recent change that we have made in the format of the sessions. Because most of the families that

we encounter are faced with multiple needs, they often require the services of different professionals. In order to help these families make contact with the various professionals at our center (dietician, nurse, infant development counselor, etc.), we invite one of them at each of the MTC sessions. They offer information to our participants and are available for individual questions. Many of the parents subsequently call for appointments or follow-up with these professionals and this indirectly allows us to reach one of the goals of the MTC program, which is early prevention.

What is next?

A small budget was made available for us to have our material revised by professional translators. The next step is to obtain financing to have the materials edited and printed in French. We also hope that other centers will eventually be interested to offer MTC in French and use the material that is available to them.

We are currently working on the translation of the material for the “MTC 1-2” program. We plan to offer the program by the fall 2008. We have received the training and have done one trial group so far.

Questions