



Stress, Coping and the Impact on Parenting in the Downtown Residential Communities of Winnipeg

Interview, Focus Group and Online Survey Results

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**A Report prepared for the
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Executive Summary

Introduction

Communities 4 Family Downtown Parent-Child Coalition (“Communities 4 Families”) conducted community based interviews, focus group sessions and an online survey to examine the sources of stress experienced by parents residing in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg, including ways parents cope and how these stressors and ways of coping impacted on parenting. This report seeks to fill a gap in the research on understanding the stressors experienced by parents and families living in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg. The information collected will help inform the work of Communities 4 Families.

Methods

Information from parents residing in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg was gathered one of three ways:

1. Through 10 *Personal Interviews* with parents living in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg (Interviews were conducted throughout the months of July 2007 through February 2008);
2. Through 7 *Roundtable Discussions* with parents in various downtown residential community locations (held during September 2007 through February 2008); and
3. Through a 15 minute *Anonymous Online Survey* targeting downtown residential community parents (conducted through Survey Monkey from July to October 2007).

This report focuses on the aggregate (collective) findings from the personal interviews, the focus group discussions and the online survey conducted during the time period from July 2007 through to February 2008. Recruitment of parents from the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg was done in partnership with community partners involved through Communities 4 Families and the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada. Recruitment was done primarily through word of mouth and through email.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The demographic characteristics of interview, focus group, and online participants are set out in two separate chapters.

Chapter two focuses on the characteristics of the participants involved in the personal interviews and the seven focus group sessions. Collectively there were a total of 65 participants involved in both interviews and focus group sessions.

Chapter three focuses on the characteristics of online survey participants. The online survey was open for public input between the months of July and October 2007. A total of 73 responses were received with 31 individuals completing the entire survey. This represents a 41.1% response rate. We originally targeted for 20 individuals to complete the survey. It is clear that we received much more participation in the online survey than originally anticipated. This is a positive response and one that clearly indicates that families residing in the downtown communities of Winnipeg have access to both a computer and the Internet. No immigrants participated in completing the online survey.

Key Findings

Chapter four of this report focuses primarily on the key findings from the collective responses provided by participants to the questions asked during the interviews, focus group sessions and the online survey.

The responses provide insight into how parents define and understand how stress impacts upon their parenting. There is general consensus amongst the participants' responses that stress involves feeling tired, overwhelmed, frustrated and often includes difficulties managing various responsibilities and tasks related to family, relationships and work. Many participants stated that it was difficult to define and put into words exactly what stress means for them.

The participants identified a number of stressors that impact upon them. These stressors were categorized into two sets of factors that were either environmental or personal. The environmental factors are things that parents felt powerless to control. These included issues dealing with gangs and crime, addictions, and neighbourhood vandalism and crimes that ultimately impact on the safety concerns of the participants and their children. The personal factors were categorized by parents' ability to deal with their family schedules and personal time management. Other personal factors included parent's personal issues around finances, housing, lack of child care, need transportation and parking, health, dealing with teachers, schools and the child and family services system. Other stressors were also identified, including stressors unique to new parents and immigrants (newcomers).

Participants consistently mentioned crime as being one of the biggest stressors facing families living in the downtown communities of Winnipeg. Gangs in particular were identified as being a major source of concern to parents. Participants feel that gangs are responsible for many of the criminal activities that occur within their communities. Some participants said they feared these gangs and the criminal activities within their communities. This fear along with threats from gangs has led some parents to relocate their families to other communities.

Parents indicated that they worried about the influence gangs may have on their children and youth.

The presence of addiction to drugs and alcohol within downtown communities was highlighted by many participants as being another problem associated with gangs and criminal activity. Gangs are seen as openly participating in activities such as property vandalism, drinking, and fighting. In addition, participants note that gang members appear to openly sell and smoke illicit drugs (i.e. pot, crack, meth, cocaine) with impunity.

Participants report vandalism, crime and thefts in their neighbourhoods. Some participants reported feeling generally safe within their neighbourhood. The poverty reflected in the community was also identified as a stressor by some participants.

Because of the crime, gangs, drugs and vandalism in the community, many parents who participated in the interviews, focus group sessions and online survey reported being constantly worried about their own personal safety and that of their children.

Eight personal factors were identified from the interview, focus group and online participants' responses as contributing to stressful experiences. These personal factors deal with family scheduling and personal time management including parent's personal issues around finances, housing, the lack of child care, transportation (lack of funds and/or places to park), health, dealing with teachers, schools, and the fear of child and family services.

Participants who had recently become new parents raised specific concerns around stressors they were dealing with that they had not previously had to deal with when they did not have children. These new parents were primarily new mothers. They spoke of having to deal with reduced incomes once they became parents for the first time. New parents also spoke of the quality of their relationships with their partners as being compromised with a new child. Many of these new mothers indicated feeling they had to sacrifice their relationships with the new family addition and that this is a source of stress for them. The loss of individuality, independence and self-identity was reported as a stressor as well as learning that with a new child, to accept that the schedule is not their own. For some parents this unstructured environment is stressful and many feared losing control. Many new mothers spoke of having difficulty in trying to understand, find and access resources within their communities that would help them deal with being a new parent. Information about community resources, they note, is not readily available.

Many newcomers to Canada shared that they deal with many stressors on a day to day basis. They are dealing with the stress of learning a new language so they can communicate about their own needs and the needs of their children. They

indicate that they are stressed with the housing conditions as these homes are often times unsuitable and inadequate for their family needs. And because they are on social assistance, newcomers reported their finances are not enough and that many times they are unable to pay the utilities. Newcomers worry about their children being bullied, not just at school but when they are playing in the neighbourhood. They report being stressed about the crime in their communities and fear for their own and their children's personal safety.

We asked parents to comment on how they recognize when they are under stress. There is no uniform response from the participants on when they recognize they are under stress. Many of the participants shared feeling "angry, depressed, tense, agitated, impatient and anxious" when stress sets in.

Participants shared various coping mechanism used for reducing the stress they experience on a day to day basis. For some participants, removing themselves from the moment seems to work. This was characterized as "taking a time" out from the situation for themselves. Other parents reported coping with stress through "*crying, positive self-talk, going to the gym, 'going out for a smoke,' walking, exercising, cooking, taking deep breaths and using relaxation techniques.*" Many of the participants clearly indicated that their sleep patterns were deeply affected by the stress in their lives. When they have difficulty sleeping because they cannot "shut off" their minds, they recognize this as being one of many symptoms related to stress.

Participants indicate that they draw upon internal as well as external resources in helping them cope through stressful situations and events. Parents' defined internal resources as those they are able to draw from within themselves. External resources were characterized as resources that are outside of themselves such as friends, families, and money among other tangible resources and community services.

Participants were able to articulate greatly about how stress impacts on how they parent their children. Parents shared that stress causes them to be less patient with their children. The general observations from most parents are that there tends to be more arguing, less cooperation from children and less patience from parents when stress sets in. Participants reported that their children are for the most part aware when they are dealing with stress. However in other instances parents note that when children don't understand that the parent is under stress, children often believe that they are the cause of parent's stress. The ways that children cope with their parents' stresses are both positive and negative.

Participants shared experiencing many stressful moments with their children throughout various times of the day. By far the most reported stressful moment is in the morning when it is difficult to get children out of bed and out the door in time for school. For some parents, after school was tagged as the most stressful point in their day. For other parents evenings or bedtime was identified as being

the most stressful at the close of their day. Children are often restless and resistant to sleep and the parent is so tired from the stress and activities of the day.

The change in weather from fall to winter was flagged by the majority of parents as being the most stressful time of the year. Other participants indicate that the Christmas holiday season and birthdays were especially stressful times within the year as these events have a detrimental impact on the family's finances. For other participants back to school times within the year (at the end of summer, after Christmas and after spring break) were considered some of the more stressful family events. For other parents, especially those who reported having a low income, summer presents a challenge as there is no school and often times there are no structured activities for children and little money to engage in recreational activities.

Parents note that there are both positive and negative aspects to parental stress. On a positive note, parents say that stress motivates them to make changes to improve their situation. Stress motivates parents to find someone to help them (i.e. like seeking out counselling) or it motivates them to look for resources within their community to help them alleviate the stress in their family life. Stress has been described as having a positive impact on parents in that it helps them grow and learn about themselves and helps parents to "put things into perspective". It teaches and helps parents to look at their situations differently and forces them to find alternative and sometimes creative solutions for dealing with parental stressors. The negative aspects of parental stress deal have been noted to conjure up feelings of depression, sadness, frustration, anxiety, and isolation and makes parents doubt their parental abilities and whether they are doing a good job. The negative side of stress also means that parents sometimes say things to their children that they normally wouldn't say or mean.

Very few of the participants indicated that culture played a part in diffusing everyday stressors faced on a daily basis. Many of the participants clearly indicated that culture is not relevant or that it doesn't play any role in their lives. For the Aboriginal participants in this study many indicated that culture "*helps to reduce the stress*" but no elaboration on exactly how culture helps reduce stress was provided.

Lastly, parents involved in this study identified a number of resources which need to be developed and/or implemented within the downtown communities to better help children, families, communities and newcomers reduce everyday stressors. These recommendations have been divided into sub-categories that focus on parental, family, community and newcomer needs.

Conclusion

This report provides an overview about stress, coping and the impact on parenting in the downtown residential communities of Winnipeg Research

Project. It represents the collective results of interviews, various focus group discussions and an online survey which were conducted from July 2007 to February 2008.

Demographically the participants who participated in this study come from a broad cross-section of parents residing in various communities within the downtown communities of Winnipeg.

These results provide some understanding of the types of stressors that families in these communities are dealing with on a day to day basis. The perspectives shared by the interviewees, focus group and online participants also speak to the resilience and strength of families in terms of how they and their children have coped and dealt with stress. Excellent ideas were shared about resources that help. It is clear from the responses that participants underline the need for more community resources within the downtown communities to help alleviate family and community stressors.