CHAPTER SEVEN

Respite Care Partnerships Addressing Young Children Living at Home and Followed by Child Welfare

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Community partner comments **by Isabelle Perreault**

INTRODUCTION

In Québec, out-of-home child placement is a primary concern for the *Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux*. Keeping children in their family surroundings is one of the key priorities of the *Youth Protection Act*. In keeping with this family-centred approach to child safety, the *Centre jeunesse de Montréal – Institut universitaire* (CJM-IU) funds several programs that provide community-based child protection. This chapter looks into one of these community resources, *La Maison Répit-Providence* (RP). This organization's mandate is to ensure that children are protected in situations of family crisis. Its aim is to prevent neglect and abuse while maintaining children in their family surroundings.

After more than five years of collaboration between the CJM-IU and RP, it was apparent that both organizations would benefit from an analysis of the client base and the services provided, in order to assess RP's ability to provide appropriate placements and meet the needs of children and families. It was within this context that the authors of this chapter developed and conducted an evaluation research project of RP respite care service with the CJM-IU.

The research protocol stated that research would be jointly conducted by the CJM-IU, RP and the University of Montreal (UM). The three organizations would supervise the project, meeting on a regular basis

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to plan research activities, make progress reports, and explore ways of thinking. The CJM-IU and RP would jointly bring in a research associate to work on file identification and data collection in collaboration with the community organization and CJM-IU workers. The information analysis strategy would be an ongoing, back-and-forth process between researchers and practitioners to foster collaborative efforts around common issues. Finally, planned outreach activities would be carried out within the partner organizations. This chapter will discuss the nature of this research project partnership, with a focus on the processes and factors involved in updating and completing the protocol components.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

La Maison-Répit Providence

La Maison Répit-Providence is a non-profit organization that has served an economically disadvantaged Montreal neighbourhood since 1995. Children up to age 6, and their siblings (up to age 12), who are referred by the CJM-IU, the local community health centre and local community organizations, are offered up to 30 hours of short term respite care and shelter. *Répit-Providence* was created as part of the *Créer des Liens* Framework operation led by a coalition of community organizations and health and social services institutions to support challenged children and youth within a family-centred approach.

Répit-Providence provides social supports and professional help for families in crisis in order to protect the children in these families from exposure to family violence, neglect and abuse. Its goals are to provide children at risk of maltreatment with a place for respite, security, and recovery during periods of family upheaval.

The program allows for a maximum of eight children per respite period. Child respite planning is done by the child's social worker, the RP liaison agent, and the child's parents, based on the child's needs and the needs of his/her family.

The social workers in the RP respite program pay particular attention to children's needs for a nurturing and stimulating environment. The rooms in the house where children stay are designed to be safe places for children of various age groups. They are set up to allow for stimulating activities as well as to provide intimate places for children to take refuge when going through difficult situations. After each respite stay, an observation report describing both the parents' and the child's behaviour is drawn up and given to the stakeholder upon request.

Partnership Between Institutional and Community Organizations

Since 1997, the CJM-IU and RP have been collaborating to support challenged families in order to avoid out-of-home placements for children. This partnership began with two elements that mutually benefited the partners. First, through its financial support of RP, the CJM-IU ensured that it would have four respite places available at all times for its clients (Laframboise 1998). The partnership also allowed RP to maintain and even increase the number of respite care periods it was able to offer, thereby increasing the support given to all families in the neighbourhood. Over the years, both organizations have gone beyond this initial service agreement and developed intervention practices for children's stay planning, identifying their needs and monitoring the course of their respite stays.

Research Methods

This research project was based on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative element looked at the profiles of the clients that CJM-IU referred to the respite care service and investigated the effects of the provision of respite services on maintaining children in their family surroundings. The qualitative part looked into the various stakeholders (parents, CJ workers, and RP staff) in the respite care service with respect to the strengths and weaknesses of the service, as well as potential improvements. The results of this qualitative part of the research complement those of the quantitative part, and together they allowed for the development and implementation of key measures in an action plan designed to improve RP services.

Quantitative methods

The specific goals of the quantitative part of the research were to: 1) draw up a profile of the children and families referred to RP by the CJM-IU; 2) identify children who had been maintained in their family surroundings and those who were placed in foster care twelve months after a first referral; and 3) compare the placement rate in the respite group with that of a comparison group.

To do this, an analysis of the attendance files and client files kept by both RP and the CJM-IU was carried out. Two groups of children were formed for analytical purposes: one receiving respite care services (RP group), and a comparison group. The RP group sample was composed of 105 children meeting the following criteria:

- child was aged from 0-5 years,
- child was the youngest in the family at the time of the family's first stay at RP,
- child benefited from RP respite care services between January 1998 and June 2003, and
- follow-up took place in a family environment.

A comparison group of 105 children who had not received RP services was randomly formed from the CJM-IU client files. Children in this group had to meet the following criteria:

- child was aged from 0-5 years,
- the first intervention in the protection system was not a placement into foster care, and
- child was not a sibling of another child who had previously benefited from RP respite care services.

A comparable number of children similar to the RP group were considered for each year from 1998 to 2003. The same sets of data were collected for both groups, that is, children's and parents' personal characteristics, family characteristics, the issues at hand, and the placement history. For the RP group, information on respite care services use was collected (e.g. start and end dates of attendance, and number of days in attendance). To simplify the presentation of this part of the research, key data are summarized in Tables 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3.

Table 7.1 Profile of Children Who Received RP Respite Care Service (Objective 1)

Characteristics of the children:

- 51% are less than two years old at the time of first respite
- 50% are girls and 50% are boys
- 98% are francophone
- 22% are only child; 29% have fewer than three siblings
- mothers have custody of the child for 53%
- mothers are 25 to 34 years old for 44%
- neglect is the key child development compromising factor at the time of guidance and intervention at the CJM-IU for 82%

Table 7.2. Children Who Received RP Services and Who Were Maintained in Their Family Environments (Objective 2)

- Children stayed in their family environments for 12 months following their first respite in 74% of cases.
- 9% of children were placed more than one year after their first respite, and 6% were placed before their first respite.
- Therefore, 60% of children in our sample remained in their family environments before, during, and after receiving respite care.

Table 7.3. Comparison of Placement Rates in the RP Group and the Comparison Group (Objective 3)

Unexpectedly, a significant number (26.7%) of children who had respite care services were placed in substitute care in the year after their first respite, compared to those in the comparison group (12.9%) (X^2(df=1)=6.146; p<.05).

Qualitative methods

The goals of the qualitative part of the research were to: 1) assess the program's efficiency in meeting the needs of children and their families; 2) identify the program's strengths and weaknesses and obtain suggestions for improvements; and 3) explore the collaborative link between the various stakeholders.

To do this, semi-structured interviews of about one hour were conducted with 23 participants. Our sampling was made up of 10 parents of children aged 0-5 referred by the CJM-IU who had been to RP in the last year prior to the research, or were there at the time of the research; 10 CJM-IU stakeholders who had referred children to RP since the beginning of the partnership in 1997; and three RP staff members. Given the diversity of the sampling, various recruiting approaches were used to engage participants. Parents were contacted through the RP referring officer. Three experienced CJM-IU workers were recruited by the social worker of the CJM-IU Intervention Support Service who sits on the Research Follow-up Committee.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed with participant consent, followed by a thematic content analysis of all the collected material.

Results

Program's ability to avoid placement

Most respondents said the respite care service alone cannot prevent placement into foster care. In this respect, many suggested that respite should be combined with other family support services. Various stakeholders identified three main situations where respite could help in avoiding child placement: 1) an exhausted parent without respite resources in his/her social support network but with sound parental skills; 2) a child who has been brought back to his/her family environment after placement in a substitute environment; and 3) custody of the child has been withdrawn from a parent and granted to the other parent. Finally, many stated that optimal use of respite care resources, which would consist of regular attendance to the maximum duration of days allowed, could increase the capacity of respite to avoid placement.

Strengths and weaknesses

The major strengths of respite care services as identified by all stakeholders were: a neutral and non-threatening surrounding for parents and a warm, safe, organized, and structured environment for children. CJM-IU workers also mentioned the positive quality of the interactions between RP staff with parents, and many parents agreed with this, saying that RP is non-judgmental, respectful of differences, and sensitive to their needs.

Several drawbacks were pointed out. For some parents from outside the neighbourhood of the respite centre, the distance to the centre made it difficult for them to travel to, especially if they had several children. Parents and CJM-IU workers mentioned the high turnover rate of the staff taking care of children at the resource location. RP workers stressed the fact that many of the staff lacked proper qualifications for their roles. Finally, CJM-IU workers mentioned the low number of places available to meet the parents' needs, and some said they would like to see a one night extension to respite stays for children.

Collaborative links

CJM-IU and RP workers have virtually no direct contact. The RP liaison agent acts as the channel of communication between the two sets of workers, especially when carrying out observations on a child in respite care.

The organizations involved said they were very pleased with the planning and organization of respite care for children, and with the information-sharing mechanisms between RP and CJM-IU staff.

Links between the quantitative and qualitative results

Overall, stakeholders said they were very pleased with RP respite care services. Quantitative results showed that this resource managed to maintain more than 50% of all the children referred by the youth protection centre in their family environments.

However, analysis between RP groups and comparison groups showed a higher rate of child foster care placement in the RP groups. Caution should be used in considering these results and, although both groups are comparable with respect to controlled variables (age, gender, age of parents, family sibling composition, placement history, etc.), it is impossible to take into account one of the most important variables, which is the imminent risk of placement. Indeed, as shown in the qualitative part of the research, a proportion of children referred by RP were at high risk of placement. In that context, RP cannot on its own meet the numerous needs of these families and make a major difference in maintaining the children in their family environments. Respite care would only help in maintaining children in their family environments in the framework of a set of diversified and complementary services provided by various organizations.

PARTNERSHIP:
VIEW OF THE AUTHORS-RESEARCHERS

In addition to the aforementioned objectives, this research project aimed to foster partnerships between field workers and research stakeholders. Was the desired partnership really established? Was the actual extent of the partnership sufficient to carry out this research project? To address these questions, we will first describe the nature of the partnership we have seen in the course of the research project. Then we will outline the lessons learned from our partnership experience. Identifying these lessons helped us to clearly see the benefits, and above all the challenges, of carrying out a research project involving an institutional resource, a community organization, and the academic world.

Description of the Nature of the Partnership

This section describes the nature of the partnership as developed in this research project at three specific times during the research process: 1) setting the research objectives, 2) conducting research activities, and 3) generating and releasing results.

Setting the research objectives

Fostering a partnership to carry out a research project requires an initial consensus on the research objectives from stakeholders. Here, we describe how this unfolded in our case. The project initiator was a CJM-IU worker mandated to promote linkages between research and practice. This worker had been informed of the *Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare's* interest in funding research on intervention evaluations. He was also aware that, after a few years of collaboration, the CJM-IU wanted to reflect on the use of the *Répit-Providence* respite care services in order to foster maintaining children in their family surroundings, promote child and family need identification, and promote the evaluation of service relevance and quality. With these goals in mind, he brought together a team of CJM-IU workers, RP representatives, and two university researchers with the idea of developing this research project.

Initial meetings took place at the onset of the project with CJM-IU representatives, the RP Director General, BOD members, and one UM researcher. The goal was to reach an agreement on the research objectives and design highlights to be submitted to the granting agency. The first funding request to CECW was rejected, but a second request the following year was accepted. During this waiting year, there were no meetings between the partners. RP went through a critical financial situation and its long-standing director resigned. After a few months, a new director was appointed with the mandate to restore the organization's financial health, to increase RP's professional networks, and to improve its internal operations. When the time came to submit the new research protocol to the granting agency, the new director, who had not been involved in the protocol drafting, expressed her disagreement with the idea of restricting the research to children referred to RP from CJM-IU. Emphasizing the preventive mission of the organization, she preferred to have all her client base included in the research, namely children referred from CLSC and community resources. But the CJM-IU stood its ground and wanted the research to include only their client base. Concerned with methodology, the research team felt that extending the research sample would consume too much time and too many resources.

Funding was therefore granted based on the original design. It should be mentioned that, despite her clear disagreement with the research sample, the RP director facilitated the smooth conduct of all research activities carried out at RP.

Conducting research activities

This section looks into two major aspects of conducting research activities, namely, planning and data collection.

At the onset of the research, a few meetings with various stakeholders took place to organize and plan data collection activities. Data collection tools developed by the research team were submitted to other stakeholders for validation. They provided feedback, especially on the qualitative interview framework, as well as on the identification of information to be collected on the RP group families and the comparison group families.

Both partners encouraged meetings with stakeholders (parents, workers, and RP staff) in carrying out the actual qualitative research activities. The CJM-IU identified workers who had referred families to RP in the last few years so that the research team could select their sample. For its part, RP greatly promoted parent participation in the research. In fact, the community organization asked parents to participate, provided the research staff with a room within RP premises for interviews, and took care of the children during the interviews. Eventually, some RP workers became involved individually and participated in a research interview.

With respect to the quantitative part of the research, both partners provided the research team with their records for data collection. For the CJM-IU, this involved creating a link between the research team and those in charge of records. The community organization, on the other hand, had to share its information on the attendance of CJM-IU referred families. In other words, a RP staff member worked closely with the project research agent in collecting data. It should be mentioned that the structure implemented by the organization a few years ago to accurately document the frequency and duration of respite stays for each child was instrumental in facilitating the research process.

Generating and releasing results

This section looks at the nature of the partnership at the time of generating and releasing results. Although the initial research design had built in time for travel back and forth between the research team and field workers for material analysis and results generation, very little

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activity of that kind actually took place. In addition, there were major delays between data collection and analysis. On the research team's side, the principal investigator went on professional leave for 12 months with no mechanism in place to carry on with research activities in the interim. This resulted in the breaking up of the research team. CJM-IU workers involved in the project were assigned to other tasks and were no longer available for research activities. As for RP, the director also had to stop her professional activities for some time. Afterwards, the principal investigator and the research professional both resumed analysis but did not engage CJM-IU or RP stakeholders.

Given these difficulties, how did the partnership work when it came to releasing the research results? There was a presentation in a symposium with Quebec health and social services stakeholders. This presentation was made in partnership between the research team and a RP worker. There was also a scientific presentation during a special day organized by the CJM-IU. This presentation was for the research team members only. In addition, researchers in the project took part in a sharing activity organized by RP. Moreover, two scientific papers showing the results of the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research project are currently being written.

Lessons Learned from our Partnership Experience

As is evident from the above, the partnership arrangement made planning and collecting data easier in this project. It allowed researchers to go out to the field and gain real-world experience. It was also instrumental in engaging practitioners in the communication of results, which had the potential to positively promote their work.

At the same time, we feel our experience in this research project highlights the gap often seen between the expectations and the realization of partnerships between research and practice stakeholders. This gap may have many consequences. In this project, it could explain some of the challenges we were faced with, such as rallying stakeholders around common decisions; negotiating in cases of disagreement; maintaining stakeholder commitment at different stages of the project; and sharing the leadership of researchers. In light of these findings, an analysis of the nature of the project partnership was made in order to determine "lessons learned." We humbly submit these lessons below with the hope that they will facilitate discussion on the key conditions required for optimal success in future undertakings.

Lesson 1: The importance of drafting a partnership agreement that goes beyond the research design

A research design document was necessary for the funding application in this granting program. This document detailed the various aspects of the evaluative part of the research, that is, population, data collection methodology, and analysis strategy. Since this was to be done in partnership with various organizations, the study design also stated that research activities were to be carried out in collaboration with both practice surroundings. Looking back, we realize that a much more explicit memorandum of understanding would have been essential to experience a true partnership with the stakeholders. As is usually the case in action research projects, the role and responsibilities of each stakeholder in each research activity should have been clearly stated in this memorandum. Such a MOU should also clearly state the expectations of each partner (including the granting agency) at the onset of the research process.

The MOU should also clearly state the procedures in case of disagreement in the conduct of the research. In this project, we had "pre-project" meetings to develop the objectives and some methodological aspects such as the target population. However, no procedure had been planned in case of a disagreement in the process. This resulted in the researchers having all the decision-making power. Such an imbalance of power could result in major disengagement of stakeholders who are supposedly involved in a research partnership.

There are several *benefits* in having a MOU where the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder are clearly described, as well as the prescribed procedures in case of disagreement. Drafting such a MOU requires several meetings right from the beginning of the project. A stage of "getting acquainted" is crucial as it helps in establishing a relationship between partners and in gaining a better understanding of each other's realities. This is also the time to clearly state in writing the expectations of each agency involved. A MOU of this type has a binding effect that goes beyond individuals, which could prove quite useful in case of personnel changes in the research or practice teams.

This type of agreement also raises several issues. To be really useful, such an agreement should bring stakeholders to clearly state not only their needs but also their capability to get involved in the project. Since this has to be done at the onset when people do not really know one another, an environment of trust should be established in a very short period of time. Finally, this stage is time-consuming. Many stakeholders, especially from the research world, may see this as a major waste of time.

They must be sold on the idea that the time spent will prove highly beneficial as it will result in a much smoother research process.

Lesson 2: Plan clear mechanisms for partnership facilitation

Partnerships between the worlds of research and practice can take various forms, and the partnership continuum offers many opportunities. There are many differences between traditional research, in which researchers may see the organizations involved as just research subjects, and participative action research, in which researchers and practitioners share the same roles and functions. In action research, a partnership definitely adds value, provided it is adequately done. Once again, carrying out this project showed us that this required time and effort. As with any research activity, a partnership does not occur by itself. There should be a clear mechanism stated in a written agreement (see previous lesson) to facilitate the partnership. In practical terms, this means having a variety of ways of exchanging information, suited to the needs of each stakeholder. An efficient partnership will undertake research using the practical activities that fit realistically into the tasks of each stakeholder.

Time for discussion is often scheduled at each step of the research project. This is an interesting but insufficient strategy. A research project carried out in partnership should have other mechanisms to keep the partnership alive. We believe a logbook open to everyone is an interesting tool. This logbook could include entries outlining not only how research activities are carried out, but also the personal experiences of those involved, including questions, successes, lessons learned, and so on. Such a forum would help each partner in gaining a better knowledge of the others' realities and implementing true knowledge transfer among stakeholders. If dissatisfaction occurs, it would also help with taking corrective actions.

An advantage of having practitioners facilitate partnership is that it brings partners to "really" see themselves as research stakeholders and not as mere research users. Planning and carrying out partnership-related research activities, as well as directly research-related activities, allows for genuine expertise transfer between the research and practice worlds.

One of the major issues we were faced with in this project was partnership facilitation at every step of the research. If this had not been clearly planned for specific activities, we might have given up at some point, such as when it came to analysing the results. We now realize that each step of the research project requires different partnership mechanisms. For example, the analysis step requires time and hindsight. Researchers often leave the field of practice at this point. However, in

a participatory research approach, mechanisms should be found to maintain the partnership to some extent for the entire duration of the project, even for the practitioners who may wish to distance themselves at some point if they do not feel equipped for the task at hand.

Conclusion

As we have learned through this research project, partnerships between researchers and field workers have many advantages to offer. However, this way of doing research is no panacea. We believe a thorough evaluation of this type of research should be done before deciding to get involved in a partnership venture. The extent of the partnership should be determined right from the start. In relation to action research, Dolbec (1998) outlined several partnership scenarios between research and practice:

- a researcher who carries out the entire research in association with practice stakeholders,

- a researcher who works in collaboration with field workers throughout the research project, and

- field workers who become researchers and get involved with the researcher in every steps of the research process.

We believe this continuum may also be useful in discussing which level of partnership to implement in other types or research. In our opinion, the level of partnership required should be assessed based on various elements, such as the research objectives, the needs of each stakeholder, the nature of relationships among stakeholders, and their desire to get involved in such an approach, as well as their actual ability to do so. An open discussion with all the stakeholders involved in the project should lead to an informed choice and the drafting of a true partnership agreement.

A partnership approach should not be taken just because it is trendy to do so, or because this is what the granting agency wants. Both research and practice stakeholders should agree to invest all the time and energy required in the partnership research approach. Otherwise the whole process will only "look" like a partnership and will do little to improve the sometimes bumpy relations between the research and practice worlds.

We hope our insights will inform the discussions of those wishing to undertake a partnership research project in the field of child protection.

We strongly believe that this type of research can help deepen our understanding of such issues, provided it is properly done. Practitioners and researchers are stakeholders with much to share and they need the tools to do it efficiently. Research partnerships are an alternate way of doing research, which should be encouraged and supported by practical measures such as project funding, adjustments to work conditions to facilitate field workers participation, and improved knowledge of this type of research in the academic world. In the absence of such measures, there will always be a gap between what was desired and what was actually achieved in many projects.

PARTNERSHIP:
A MANAGER'S POINT OF VIEW

Isabelle Perreault

This research project was part of an assessment and analysis of services provided to our *Centres jeunesse de Montréal-Institut universitaire* (CJM-IU) client base. *Répit-Providence* has worked with the committee that was created to keep track of the research process. Our participation in this research has been beneficial in many ways, both qualitatively and quantitatively. However, we were surprised with the final results stated in Table 7.3: *Comparison of placement rates between the respite group and the comparison group*. Nevertheless, reflecting on these results led us to review our motivations and actions in relation to the various partnerships that we maintain. This does not invalidate the relevance of our mission; instead it clarifies our action and allows us to identify self-development models from our respective practices.

Moreover, our participation in this research allowed for some reciprocal benefits. Researchers integrated both "professional knowledge" and "field knowledge" into their work. In turn, this helped the researchers to provide a variety of helpful insights into the actions and practices of both organizations involved in the research.

Répit-Providence certainly wanted a much broader sampling of children and families than only those referred by the CJM-IU. From our experience in the field, we knew that several CJM-IU referred children had been placed in foster care despite the fact that they may have had respite care at RP. We also believe that drafting a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) that describes the roles and responsibilities of organizations and conflict resolution procedures is quite appropriate.

Pre-project meetings would also result in better knowledge of practice settings and client bases. To us, this is crucial as it would facilitate the implementation of a "partnership facilitation" agreement where stakeholders would be involved throughout the research and analysis process. We feel this would bring a new meaning to collaborative research because cross-influence opportunities between stakeholders and researchers are beneficial in every possible way for the organizations involved.

In addition, for action research to benefit stakeholders, organizations must invest time and energy in sharing and discussing the various steps of the project. Numerous difficulties over the nearly five years in which this research process took place had the effect of reducing engagement by those involved.

Répit-Providence engaged in a strategic planning discussion approach, based on the study results, which ended in 2007. This led us to the conculsion that action research input is very interesting for organizations like ours, and we were able to make the best of it. We also learned that research outcomes are unpredictable and, for this reason, all stakeholders involved should be ready for any result, even if they do not support the initial intent of the study.

Overall, *Répit-Providence* has benefitted from this research partnership experience, and we hope researchers and funding organizations will remain open to such initiatives. Both field and research knowledge should join forces for a better assessment of their respective practices, so that social development may build on shared experiences and benefit from them.

PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY

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