

An Evaluation of the *Nobody's Perfect Parenting Program*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED FOR

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Executive Summary

Background

Nobody's Perfect is a community-based parenting education and support program that was developed in the early 1980's by the Public Health Agency of Canada (then Health and Welfare Canada) and the four Atlantic provincial departments of health. It was developed specifically for parents of children from birth through age five who are young, single, socially, culturally or geographically isolated, and who have limited formal education and low income. In 1987 it was introduced nationally and was eagerly adopted across the country. The program has been offered in every Canadian province and territory and has been one of the most popular parenting programs in the country.

The overall goal of the program is to improve parents' capabilities to maintain and promote the health of their young children. "Within this general goal, the specific objectives of the program are:

1. To increase participants' knowledge and understanding of their children's health, safety and behaviour;
 2. To effect positive change in the behaviour of participants in relation to their children's health, safety and behaviour;
 3. To improve participants' confidence and self-image as parents;
 4. To improve participants' coping skills as parents; and ,
 5. To increase self-help and mutual support among parents"
- (Health Promotion Directorate, Atlantic Region, 1987, pp. 12-13).

Nobody's Perfect is offered by a trained facilitator, or co-facilitators, to small groups of parents in weekly sessions over a six to eight week period. When developed in the early 1980's, *Nobody's Perfect* was before its time in terms of philosophy and approach. It is based on an adult learning model and uses a learner-centered and strengths-based empowerment model. Parents' own experiences are recognized and valued and the program builds on parents' existing knowledge and capacities through group discussion and problem-solving learning activities. Facilitators create opportunities for change through building trusting relationships with parents and creating groups characterized by mutual support. These program features are now well accepted as best practices in parenting education and family support (Campbell & Palm, 2004; Mann, 2008).

Although there have been a number of evaluations of *Nobody's Perfect* that have found evidence of the program's effectiveness, none have employed a control/comparison group (Vollman, 2001). Thus, purpose of this project was to build on and extend previous evaluation studies. It is the first

national evaluation (with participation from Atlantic Canada, the prairies, and BC) and it is also the first evaluation of *Nobody's Perfect* to include a comparison group.

Methodology

A pretest, posttest design with a non-equivalent wait-list comparison group and a 6-month follow-up was employed. Two-hundred and eighteen attendees from 24 *Nobody's Perfect* groups were recruited to participate in the study and an additional 27 individuals were recruited to serve as the wait-list comparison group for a total of 245 participants. Of the 218 *Nobody's Perfect* attendees, 205 individuals completed a pretest, 155 completed a posttest, and 41 completed a 6-month follow-up. Of the wait-list participants, 27 completed the measures at Time 1 but only 19 of these completed the measures again 6 to 9 weeks later. At each testing session, participants completed a package of measures to assess: parenting behaviour, specifically parental nurturing and discipline strategies (Objective 2); parenting confidence (Objective 3); stress, coping, and problem-solving (Objective 4); and knowledge about community resources and how to access them, and social support (Objective 5). Also, focus groups were conducted with *Nobody's Perfect* participants to obtain additional feedback about the program and its materials. Finally, through questionnaires, 36 *Nobody's Perfect* facilitators provided feedback about the program and offered suggestions for strengthening it.

Results

Impact Study

This study demonstrated that the *Nobody's Perfect* program was successful in reaching most of its program objectives. Importantly, the study documented five key changes in parenting behaviours as a result of participating in *Nobody's Perfect* (Objective 2). With respect to discipline practices, parents who participated in *Nobody's Perfect* reported an increased use of positive discipline strategies (such as using a problem situation as a teaching opportunity with a child; calmly explaining to a child why what he/she is doing is wrong; giving a child a choice between acceptable behaviours) and a decrease in negative or punitive practices (such as the use of spanking, getting angry, and yelling when a child has misbehaved or done something the parent did not like). Moreover, these changes were maintained or continued to improve over time. These are particularly important changes as it is well documented in the research literature that more authoritative approaches to parenting that use teaching and reasoning in disciplining children rather than punitive approaches lead to superior child outcomes (Dooley & Stewart, 2007; Fletcher, Walls, Cook, Madison, & Bridges, 2008; Gershoff, 2002; Lansford et al., 2005).

Parents' use of active rather than passive approaches to discipline also improved although these skills needed time to develop and were only evident at the time of the 6-month follow-up. Specifically, although parents' reported use of a passive or permissive approach to parenting (such as letting a child have his/her way or ignoring a child's behaviour) did not change significantly immediately after participating in *Nobody's Perfect*, use of these responses had diminished

significantly by the 6-month follow-up. This reduction in parents' passive responses to their children's unwanted behaviours appears to be replaced with more positive parenting behaviours, such as the positive teaching approaches to discipline described above, and with the use of more active behaviour modification approaches to discipline. For example, although parents' reported use of behaviour modification strategies (such as time out; promising a treat; taking away a privilege) did not change from pre to post program, these active strategies were significantly more likely to be used at the time of the 6-month follow-up than at the pretest.

Parents also reported significant increases in the frequency of positive parent-child interactions after participating in *Nobody's Perfect*, but improvements in this aspect of parenting had faded by the 6-month follow-up, suggesting that parents may need more support to make these changes permanent. The wait-list comparison group did not report any change in the frequency of positive parent-child interaction; thus, the temporary change in parenting can be attributed to *Nobody's Perfect*.

In addition, the program was effective in increasing parents' abilities to cope with typical parenting stressors (Objective 4), parental problem-solving ability (Objective 4), and parental perceptions of social support (Objective 5). Changes in coping with stress and social support were maintained over the 6-month follow-up period. Problem-solving ability continued to improve over the 6-month follow-up period, suggesting that parents may need time to develop some of the new skills fostered by the program. Importantly, the wait-list comparison group did not experience any of these changes over time, indicating that the changes in *Nobody's Perfect* participants can be attributed to the program. These changes are especially important because parental social support, problem-solving, and ability to cope with stress have all been found to impact quality of parenting (e.g., Cochran & Niego, 1995; Crnic & Low, 2002; Seng & Prinz, 2008).

Finally, participating in *Nobody's Perfect* also may contribute to enhancing parents' confidence in parenting (Objective 3) and to increasing parents' knowledge about community resources (Objective 5). However, since the wait-list comparison group also reported increases on each of these measures over time, it may not be *Nobody's Perfect* per se, but rather having contact with a family resource centre and its various programs and resources that contributes to these changes.

Focus Groups

During the focus group interviews, parents' comments about the *Nobody's Perfect* program were overwhelmingly positive. All of the groups reported that participating in the program had brought about positive changes for them. They reported feeling less alone and more accepting of their own personal parenting styles. They reported gaining knowledge about their children's needs, effective discipline, keeping their children safe, and community resources. Parents reported that facilitators created a safe and supportive environment where they felt validated and empowered

as parents. For the most part, parents liked the *Nobody's Perfect* books and found the books to be helpful. The most common recommendation was that the program be extended to include more sessions and that the books (especially the *Safety* book) needed to be updated.

Facilitator Feedback

On questionnaires asking for feedback on *Nobody's Perfect*, facilitators reported that they had witnessed numerous positive changes in parents' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, confidence, skills, and behaviours that they attributed to the program. When asked for their recommendations for strengthening or improving the program, facilitators identified the need for more funding to allow them to better support the child care and transportation needs of participants, to enable them to offer more sessions for each parent group, to allow them to offer more groups, and to support the purchase of more program resources. Facilitators also desired more training in specific areas (e.g., conflict resolution), refresher courses, a method of contacting and networking with other facilitators, and increased facilitator stipends. Third, facilitators reported that they needed more time with program participants and that the number of sessions should be extended. There were even suggestions for a second level of the program ("*Nobody's Perfect II*") for parents who had completed the first course. Finally, although facilitators thought that program materials were a strength of the program, they reported a need to update materials and to have additional materials such as videos and handouts on special topics (e.g., health-related issues, SIDS, preventing sexual abuse, attachment).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This impact study found that *Nobody's Perfect* contributes to improvement in a number of parental outcomes that are consistently associated with superior child outcomes. The program was not designed for families in crisis, but rather was intended to be preventive—to focus on vulnerable parents before problems arise. Indeed, participation in *Nobody's Perfects* seems to result in key changes in parents that should reduce the risk of their families experiencing crises. Thus, it appears to be a successful program for supporting vulnerable parents with young children.

The demonstrated effectiveness of *Nobody's Perfect*, its adherence to current best practice principles, its preventive nature and focus on parents of young children, and its ability to be adapted for different cultures (and the fact that program materials have been translated into numerous languages), makes it a highly desirable program to offer in Canada. Yet, this research suggests that *Nobody's Perfect* could be further strengthened by ensuring:

- THAT the program is adequately funded and supported;
- THAT program length is a minimum of eight sessions;
- THAT each session is not longer than two hours;
- THAT program materials, and specifically program books, be updated

to reflect current knowledge (e.g., about safety and health issues, and parenting practices, early life experiences, and early brain development);

- THAT additional materials to reflect current parental needs and interests are developed (e.g., videos and handouts on topics like attachment, family violence) and/or additional existing resources be acquired and made available to facilitators;
- THAT facilitators are adequately trained and supported;
- THAT community agencies be encouraged to monitor their own program effectiveness of *Nobody's Perfect*, or other parenting programs with similar goals, through the regular administration of some or all of the measures used in this impact study; and,
- THAT monthly booster sessions and/or a second program be developed to follow and build upon *Nobody's Perfect* in ways that would reinforce the learning, skill development, and mutual support acquired through *Nobody's Perfect*. (It is recommended that a subsequent program have a component that involves parent and child together to provide the opportunity for facilitators to observe parents and children together and to allow for facilitator modeling of interactions with children.)

Finally, the findings of this study are consistent with previous evaluations and provide clear evidence of the effectiveness of *Nobody's Perfect* in meeting program objectives with its intended target audience. Still, further research with control or comparison groups is needed to replicate the findings. In addition, future research should include longer term follow-up, assess children's outcomes, and involve larger sample sizes that would allow investigation of the potential differential effectiveness of the program with specific sub-populations (e.g., dads or specific cultural groups).