There are 268 Family Resource Programs (FRPs) in BC. Located in communities throughout the province, FRPs bring together parents/caregivers and their young children in community based family places where parents socialize while interacting in their children’s play. The programs reflect the diversity of the community, and services are designed to strengthen parenting skills, provide stimulating play environments for children and promote family and community engagement. Seventy-five percent of Family Resource Programs are located in communities of high vulnerability. On average, families attend a Family Resource Program six times a month for eighteen months. During these hundred and eight visits, practitioners have the opportunity to engage with and provide individualized support to families whose issues range from breastfeeding to abuse. Practitioners working in FRPs and other parent / child interactive programs have a unique opportunity to mitigate family vulnerabilities and affect change. Unfortunately many practitioners feel challenged and are not supported with relevant training or resources.

In 2011, the BC Association of Family Resource Programs decided to survey the field and identify the top four training needs practitioners required. Feedback indicated that most were confident with supporting families through minor transitory issues and were very comfortable linking families to community resources. They also felt knowledgeable about child development which they confidently share with parents through various programs and resources. On the other hand, over seventy per cent questioned their capacity to serve those families experiencing vulnerabilities. Practitioners questioned their ability to either identify risk factors and/or to link parents with relevant supports and services. An alarming situation when it is realized that over six thousand families with young children attend Family Resource Programs in British Columbia each day. And although there is no hard evidence, one can assume the situation may be similar in other parent child engagement programs such as StrongStart Early Learning Centres. Community programs that provide an environment which welcomes families, building respectful relationships should universally enable parents to address their issues and lay the groundwork for solutions.

Working in a Family Resource Program is complicated. Families are comfortable and trusting. They do not believe they are being observed or targeted, and practitioners respect their trust. Supporting the vulnerable must be done carefully and with buy-in. The bond between the practitioner and the parent is the first step to identifying issues. What is vulnerability or a risk factor? Does being a single parent automatically put a parent in the risk category requiring extra attention? One would hope not. On the other hand, practitioners do have a responsibility to ensure that the children in their programs are safe from abuse and neglect. “Vulnerable”: can be defined as a condition that needs more attention than what is normally delivered – this can be any issue from discipline and
child development to neglect. It is important to recognize that all families incur some form of vulnerability and require support at some point. Identifying the appropriate response and action is an essential skill for practitioners. Vulnerabilities can be short term such as job loss or permanent and potentially life altering such as parental mental illness.

Establishing and sustaining relationships with parents, informally assessing family needs and promoting opportunities for family development through deeper parent engagement and connection to programs and community are the goals of the Family Support worker. Practitioners may be confronted with complex ethical and legal practice issues that demand careful consideration before actions are taken and strategies implemented to assist families in need of support. In practice, many situations in family support work defy easy solutions. A plan of support developed in concert with the parent should build on existing family strengths and include the provision of concrete resources, connections to informal or social supports, allocation of professional assistance, and referral to or recommendation of a variety of program components to address the parent’s needs. On the other hand, it must be recognized that family support workers are neither social workers nor psychologists. Skillful work requires skill training.

FRP-BC has committed to developing a workshop series to address practitioner training needs. Using the field survey to identify key training needs, FRP-BC has selected four themes.

1. Working with Vulnerable Families
2. Communicating Effectively
3. Engaging Parents as Mentors
4. Planning and Evaluation

Focusing on the Working with Vulnerable Families and Communicating Effectively themes, curriculum has been developed for two workshops to address the following Learning Outcomes:

1. Describe a working definition and overview of the term “vulnerable families”
2. Understand that all families have some form of vulnerability and require support; and gain awareness in identifying appropriate response and action
3. Understand empathy is essential to a helping and supportive relationship; as well as communicating genuineness and congruence
4. Communicate with sensitivity and an understanding of cultural differences and family diversity is necessary
5. Understand the role the FRP practitioner plays in supporting parents while ensuring their children are safe, including practitioner’s role in advocacy and/or reporting to the appropriate authorities
6. Demonstrate ability to work in partnership with the family and specialists such a social worker or mental health professional to contribute to family strengthening goals
7. Identify a community resource list of programs and services available to assist vulnerable children and families and demonstrate skills required to access them and refer effectively.

But training in isolation is inefficient and costly. Children and/or their parents and families are supported and engaged within a range of universal as well as targeted programs which are often delivered with partnerships. The BC Association of Family Resource Programs intend to link FRP practitioners to training developed by others and to invite practitioners from related sectors to participate in the FRP developed workshops. Services strive towards collaborative service delivery, and cross sectorial training and professional development build a core set of skills.

- Joint staff training and professional development creates a better understanding and focus on common skills and knowledge (FRP Canada, 2011);
- Improved clarity regarding professional roles and scope of practice, and effective communication, information sharing and case management/planning practices.
- Maximizes resources

All who engage with a child and parent/family can have an influence on the outcomes. With this in mind, there is a heightened importance of professionalization/training of those who work with all families but particularly the vulnerable.

The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) reports that, “Children’s well-being cannot be separated from their families. While a close relationship with a warm and nurturing teacher can have very beneficial results, it is the family (for better or worse) which will continue to have the greatest influence upon the child for his or her whole life.”