



National Family Week

Living Its Message All Year!

by JUDY BERANGER

What a life-giving way to start the school year – celebrating all that is good in families, setting goals that ensure we do our best in our own families while modelling the same values in our classrooms. Giving the best that we can in our sphere of influence goes much further than just saying the words – it is purposeful behaviour directed by affirmation, celebration and a desire to make a difference. The goal is to take good care of ourselves, and those in our care, whether at home or at school.

In 1985 the Government of Canada proclaimed National Family Week to be an official week to celebrate families in all their diversity and to recognize the critical role they play in our schools and in society. Family Service Canada (www.familyservicecanada.org) initiated and coordinated the celebration of National Family Week, to be held October 1-7 during the week before Thanksgiving. In 2007 the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) assumed the coordination of this important work.

What is family? Families take many different forms and the definition of family is as unique as the family members themselves. When we celebrate all that is or can be the best of family we see it as our starting point in life, our first educational environment and, hopefully, our source of security and continuity. A family focus group I once facilitated generated these definitions of family:

- *For me, the family is made up of people that you can count on, that you can have faith in.* (13-year-old)
- *The family should be an environment for healthy growth, and learning, the best school of life for its members.* (36-year-old)
- *A family is that group of individuals who, either by choice or by relationships, give mutual support, work towards a common goal, and share with other members of the group.* (28-year-old)

Another definition I once came across on a reader board at a local car wash read, “A family is the place when you have to go there, they have to take you”. All of these definitions tell us something about what is meant by the term “family” in our society. Ultimately, family defines itself with more importance placed

on the functions carried out by the members than the particular form it takes. Using these criteria a “family” could be a single parent with children, two brothers living together, a gay couple with or without children, etc. A “family” does not always have to be a husband and wife with children and a dog.

Each year a different theme is selected for Family Week. Reflecting on past themes can stimulate awareness, ideas and opportunities for caring for our “families” – both at home and at school. Examples have included: *Building the Smallest Democracy at the Heart of Society*; *You’ve Got What it Takes – Building Better Family/Community Environments*; *Rediscovering Family Strengths* (even though there are times when family members wonder if they have any strengths!); *Family and Work: Seeking a Healthy Balance*; *Volunteering is a Family Affair*; *Strengthening Ties Through Family Traditions*; *Families Connecting Through Stories*; *Turning Your Family’s Values into Action*.

The theme for 2012 is *The Grandparent Connection*. At a time when the aging population in Canada is becoming larger and more diverse, it is especially fitting to highlight the range of experiences associated with grandparents and older people. National Family Week celebrates the role of the grandparent – as nurturer, caregiver, role model, historian and so much more. Encouraging contact between different age groups can build trust and strengthen families and communities. It can also reduce the ageist attitudes and behaviours that are rampant in our society. This week and beyond is a real opportunity to connect with kindness, highlighting intergenerational relationships, exploring the positive ways in which all generations can support, care for and enrich each other’s lives.

It is not age that is important but rather, it is how we show respect and care for others, regardless of age.

A four-year-old boy lived next door to an older man who had recently lost his wife. He asked his parents if he could go over and visit their sad friend. On seeing the man cry the little boy went into his neighbour’s yard, climbed on his lap and just sat there. When his Mom asked what he said to the neighbour, the little boy answered: “Nothing, I just helped him cry.”

National Family Week dispels any attempts at ageism, prejudice and racism by encouraging us to teach, share, and enjoy our uniqueness with each other. It is a time to reflect on what we believe is or can be a “healthy family”. Like all families, healthy families have many of the same challenges, problems and parenting issues as the next family – the only difference is – they are willing to learn new strategies of dealing and coping if the ones they have are not working.

Here are some ideas and suggestions for how we could integrate the values of this year’s National Family Week theme into our professional and personal lives.

For Schools

- Considering the theme for this year, promote short stories about grandparents or *Special Memories with My Grandparents*.
- Encourage students to write about their families.
- Consider a family sports event.
- Display children’s art about their families at a local mall or community centre.
- Hold a photo contest.
- Hold a parent/grandparent tea hosted by students.
- Have a family week essay or poetry contest, with winning essays to be published in a local paper.

For Teachers and their Families

- Create a family recipe book including favorite recipes.
- Plan and cook a meal together, with each person responsible for one dish or item.
- Start a family blog to keep friends and relatives up to date on your activities.
- Write a family Christmas letter for the year 2012.
- Initiate the planning stages of a family reunion.
- Create a family CD or playlist of favourite songs.
- Create a family scrapbook with a page for each family member.
- Do a physical activity together. Consider hiking the trails.
- Have a family game night.
- Go for a walk and discover your neighborhood.
- Do an art or craft project together.
- Arrange to do something special for a family you know in difficult circumstances: offer to babysit, take the children to a movie, or prepare a basket of fruit, muffins or other treats.
- Hold a family talent show or movie night.

FRP Canada provides downloadable resources (www.frp.ca/nfw) filled with helpful suggestions for fun activities that schools can integrate into their themes and families can do together. The BC Council for Families has created an excellent how-to guide for organizing events on its website (www.bccf.ca).

We would all agree that connecting to family, friends, pets, nature, and special colleagues is life giving. Spending less time on energy-draining relationships and more on the ones that bring meaning and peace to our lives make all the difference for us personally and those around us. Sometimes, in the absence or loss of our biological family, we may need to create a “family of choice”. This could include people in our lives who are not necessarily related by blood, but who support and care about us, are interested in our goals and achievements, are honest, genuine and assertive – who in short, provide much of the same functionality and meaning as a healthy, biological family.

The themes within National Family Week are ones we can incorporate into our lives with a goal of integrating their messages into actions all year – whether at home or at school. National Family Week focuses but on a week. Let’s live its message all year!

Judy Beranger is a wellness and employee assistance coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Judy at ext. 265.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT



Elect Derek Drover NLTA Vice-President
Trusted Experience... Strong Leadership