



*Lessons from the Field:
Successful Collaborative Practice
for the Prevention of Family
Violence*

Summary

The report *Lessons from the Field: Successful Collaborative Practice for the Prevention of Family Violence* offers some lessons learned from seven Canadian family violence groups that have been successful in working together to prevent violence and support survivors. It looks at key values and principles, and the ways that the groups work together to achieve common goals. The report is intended for individuals and organizations working in family violence prevention, and others in the health, social services, justice, education and community services fields.

With funding support from the Family Violence Initiative, Public Health Agency of Canada, Nextpoint¹ collaborators Dianne Kinnon and Wanda Jamieson selected family violence groups from across Canada that are working successfully together to address family violence in their communities. The groups are:

- Spousal Abuse Advisory Committee, Rankin Inlet, Nunavut
- Together for Justice Collaborative, Watson Lake, Yukon
- Calgary Domestic Violence Collective, Calgary, Alberta
- London Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse, London, Ontario
- Ilagiilluta – Let's Be Family Program, Inukjuak, Nunavik, Québec
- Coalition Against Abuse in Relationships, Moncton, New Brunswick
- Purple Ribbon Task Force on Family Violence, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

The groups described how they work together and why they think their collaboration has been successful. The researchers used these case studies to draw conclusions about what is important in family violence collaboration.

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By Dianne Kinnon and Wanda Jamieson, 2016

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Successful collaboration for family violence prevention

We found nine main themes that contribute to success in working together for family violence prevention:

1. believing in the value of collaboration
2. creating a “culture” of collaboration
3. staying goal-oriented
4. being a good collaboration leader and member
5. practicing inclusion and engagement
6. valuing and sharing power
7. working through conflict
8. providing coordination and infrastructure
9. reflecting and learning.

1. Believing in the Value of Collaboration

Members of successful groups really believe that they can get more done by working together. This belief comes from positive experiences of achieving common goals with other people and organizations. Such people see the personal, professional and agency benefits of being a member of a group that collaborates.

2. Creating a “Culture” of Collaboration

In successful groups, leaders and longer-term members create a “culture” or environment where everyone involved is expected to be inclusive and respectful of others, to solve problems, and to get things done. Leaders model the behaviours they think will help the group. They often teach, mentor and support newcomers to the group.

3. Staying Goal-Oriented

Successful groups set a common goal and stay focused on achieving it even when things get difficult, such as when people disagree with each other or don't do what they said they would, or when problems come up in the group's activities. Leaders keep bringing the group back to the shared goal, and members try to uphold the group's common values of supporting survivors of violence and working for social change.

4. Being a Good Collaboration Leader and Member

Family violence prevention groups need effective leaders and committed, engaged members. Effective collaborative leaders build relationships and connections among people in the group. They make sure that the group process encourages everyone to participate and is heard. They also ensure that the group keeps working toward its goals and objectives. Having the same leader for several years also helps, as it creates continuity.

Individual members can either energize the group or create barriers to moving forward. Strong group members are comfortable working with others from diverse backgrounds and experiences; they also make sure their home agency knows about and supports the work of the group.

5. Practicing Inclusion and Engagement

The members of these seven collaborative groups welcome new members and try to make them feel comfortable. They use consensus-style decision-making as often as possible; that is, they make sure everyone expresses their views and the whole group is comfortable with the outcome before a final decision is made. They also reach out to other agencies and community members, communicate openly, and are willing to adapt and change. In successful groups, the members have positive personal and professional relationships.

6. Valuing and Sharing Power

Some of the groups we talked to had thought about the role of power and influence among group members and how these elements affect their ability to work together. They told us that power and influence can be very positive if they are shared in the group and used to create change, such as when the bigger agencies share their knowledge and resources and use their influence for the good of the group.

Competing for scarce resources, such as funding, can create real divisions in collaborative groups. These groups have to work hard to build trusting relationships among member agencies and uphold the values they have in common. Successful newer groups might make an effort to avoid competition and disagreements in order to build longer-term relationships.

7. Working through Conflict

Effective collaborators in family violence prevention accept that differences of opinion and conflict are normal. They know that the bad “history” between agencies and sectors, and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities can affect current relationships. They realize that talking openly about past experiences can help the group move forward. We found that the stronger collaborations don’t avoid conflict; instead, they address it openly.

8. Providing Coordination and Infrastructure

Most collaboration members expect to put time and money, or in-kind donations, into the group’s efforts, but one of the member groups often provides “backbone” or behind-the-scenes coordination such as handling finances, organizing meetings, etc. Having at least some direct funding or staff helps a group get more done without putting a big strain on member agencies. We also found that a lack of resources makes it hard for small groups in rural and remote areas to achieve their goals.

9. Reflecting and Learning

Many collaboratives learn to work together through trial and error. Members often feel they don't have time for more formal learning given that they have such pressing issues to address. Other groups build in learning opportunities and conduct regular reviews of how they are doing. All of the groups agreed that stopping to reflect on their progress is useful. Several of the groups also want to develop better ways to provide information to new members so they understand the purpose of the group and how it works together.

What does this mean for people working in family violence prevention?

Collaboration in the family violence field has both strengths and challenges. Most people involved bring passion and commitment to their work. Advocates and service providers are looking for practical solutions, and they know this requires effort across the health, social services, justice, education and other sectors. This leads to a strong desire to work together toward a common goal. However, firm beliefs and convictions can also result in group conflict. At the same time, a strength of the movement to prevent family violence is its solid history of collaboration. Interagency efforts on the issue began in the 1980s, and those involved today have several decades of expertise and knowledge about collaboration to draw on.

To remain effective, existing groups need to be "worth the time and effort" for individual members and also create something that is of value to their home organizations. Understanding and sharing power is important, as is addressing conflict. Successful groups think and talk about how they are doing, and are ready to learn, adapt, and change. This learning can be experiential – the "learning by doing" kind where group members get more experience with collaboration – or it can be more formal, such as attending workshops or having speakers come to the group. For new partnerships, lessons from the field suggest that members should start by talking to each other about values, principles and goals. New groups need to spend time building relationships among members, solving problems as they come up, and making sure the group's work results in concrete action.