

COMPASS Program

(Community, Parent and School Support)

Social Return On Investment (SROI) Case Study

FAST FACTS

- In 2011, the COMPASS program provided 202 unique children and their parents with counselling support, parenting education, and access to community resources.
- An additional 113 children (and their parents) received Positive Choices group programming and wait list services.
- 115 children presented with a confirmed mental health diagnosis and/or mental health concerns
- 667 referrals were made to community agencies
- Average length of involvement with the program was 9-12 months
- 95% of parents reported an increased understanding of their child's developmental needs and behaviour
- 94% of parents reported an increase in their use of positive parenting strategies
- 88% of parents reported communication in the family has improved
- 85% of parents reported their relationship with their child has improved

One-Year SROI: \$1 : \$5.37

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"It is night and day difference from where we were to where we are now. I am so grateful for the advice and support and will always look back on this past year as a change for the better." COMPASS Parent

Program Background

The consensus in child development research is that the nature of the home environment is a key factor that affects the functioning and growth of children¹.

When a family is strong, stable and nurturing, a child will achieve his/her full potential. Negative circumstances, such as family conflict and other stressors affecting the home environment, have been linked to undesirable outcomes including delinquent behaviour and school failure².

The family environment becomes especially important for children with behavioural, emotional and/or social challenges. Parents may require more specific strategies to deal with the challenges that the children are facing. As well, stressors in the home environment can prevent children from accessing the support and consistent parenting they require to successfully mature through their developmental challenges.

Consistent with this research, the COMPASS Program strives to support needed environmental change in households by equipping parents with the knowledge and skills to effectively support children who present with emotional, social, and/or behavioural challenges.

THEORY OF CHANGE

If parents of children identified with behavioural, emotional, or social problems are provided with in-home parenting and community supports they will experience improved family functioning and the children will demonstrate an increased emotional and social wellbeing resulting in positive and healthy experiences in school, home and the community.

Social Value Created

The COMPASS Program creates social value through interventions that help parents identify the underlying causes of their child's emotional, social or behavioural challenges.

COMPASS families are living with ongoing daily stresses that may be a result of their children's challenges or may be a result of other factors within the home environment that are contributing to their children's disruptive behaviour.

COMPASS Family Support Workers teach parents more effective parenting techniques and then support them in applying them effectively and consistently over time.

Without COMPASS, these families may become increasingly dysfunctional. As frustration and exhaustion mount, parents are at-risk of adopting punitive strategies

such as hitting, yelling, isolation and neglect in response to their child’s behaviour.

Over time, many families struggling with a child’s behaviour will find themselves isolated from neighbours, friends, other family members and their school community. A parent may have to miss work as their child is missing school, suspended from school, or may no longer be welcome at the daycare or after school program. These realities increase family stress and reinforce the ongoing cycle of negative response to a child’s behaviour.

The COMPASS Program enables families at-risk of ongoing and increased conflict as a result of a child’s behaviour, to find a positive future as a family. Through COMPASS, parents come to understand how their home environment and parenting style might trigger and/or reinforce a child’s negative behaviour. They then learn approaches that reduce the likelihood of an unexpected, undesirable response, with the hope that their child also learns to modify his or her own behaviour.

Ultimately, the COMPASS Program creates social value through working with parents and helping them to understand their role in changing their child’s behaviour. Over time, both parent and child adopt and implement changes that improve the family environment.

How COMPASS works:

- Children, aged 0–12, that have been identified with behavioural, emotional or social challenges are referred to the program by other professionals within the community.
- Participation is voluntary.
- Regular in-home visits and participation for 6–12 months depending on family’s need.

Program Detail

COMPASS Family Support Workers use a holistic approach to improve family functioning. They assist families to recognize and use their strengths, and to build upon their own capacities to address issues that impede positive and healthy dynamics.

Family Support Workers help families to identify the

stressors that are impacting the home environment. Some of the strategies used include:

- Strength-based goal setting with families
- Parenting education and support
- Family solution-focused strategies
- Social skills and problem-solving development
- Liaison with schools and other community professionals
- Referrals to community services that assist in meeting the needs of the family

Through prevention and early intervention, the COMPASS Program increases child/family resiliency, improves the parent-child relationship and overall mental health of the family as the child’s disruptive or dysfunctional behaviours decrease.

COMPASS Clientele

The COMPASS program serves families with children aged 0 – 12. Children are referred to the program by professionals from Alberta Health Services programs including Access Mental Health, pediatricians, psychiatrists, physicians, mental health professionals, schools, psychologists, and community agencies.

Families come from a variety of backgrounds ranging from financial stability to poverty, married, single parenting, blended-families, high conflict separation/divorce, and can include domestic violence.

The family environment is a key factor in influencing potential outcomes. On one end of the spectrum are parents with some understanding of the underlying issues related to their child’s difficulties, and the willingness to learn and implement new strategies. On the other end of the spectrum are parents facing so

“You and the Compass Program made a significant difference in our life from over 1.5 yrs ago and it still helps every day. All of his specialized services therapist team and aides know you so well without even meeting you. Whenever we spray color water on snow, it reminds me of you. You have great ideas and strategies.”
— COMPASS Client

many issues themselves that they are more challenged by the prospect of change. If left unchanged, their parenting style and the home environment will continue to negatively influence their child's behaviour.

For the purpose of this case study, the families served by the COMPASS Program were grouped into three profiles, representing the complexity often found in the home. Families in Profile One represent a relatively uncomplicated home environment. Families in Profile Two are experiencing some complexity, while the home environments represented by Profile Three are highly complicated.

Across the group of 185 families served in the 2010-11 program year, 83% of parents who responded reported a clinically significant level of stress in the home at intake. Many families become increasingly isolated from their support systems due to their child's unpredictable or unmanageable behaviour.

Understanding Change

A child's ongoing behavioural challenges can lead to parental exhaustion and poor mental health. Relationships can disintegrate as a result, which in turn impacts a parent's ability to enjoy family outings and family time. In these circumstances, it is not uncommon for the parent to have forgotten any enjoyment they may have once experienced from parenting.

The child who is referred to COMPASS may well be exhibiting increasing regressive behaviour. In this case, the child does not learn to make friends as a result of communicating through outbursts, aggressive and extreme behaviour or withdrawal.

If no interventions take place, the child is increasingly isolated; at home, at school and from positive peer relationships as they grow to school age and toward their teen years. If unchanged, these children are at significant risk of extreme social isolation that can trigger mental health problems, criminal behaviour, severe depression and even suicide. These risks become significant once a child is older than 10 years of age. The COMPASS Program enables parents and children to change the way they communicate. This contributes to a positive family environment and strengthened family bond.

Starting with each parent's knowledge of how parenting style influences a child's reaction, COMPASS works with the whole family to build the foundation for positive relationships and interaction.

Image 1: Family Profile Breakdown

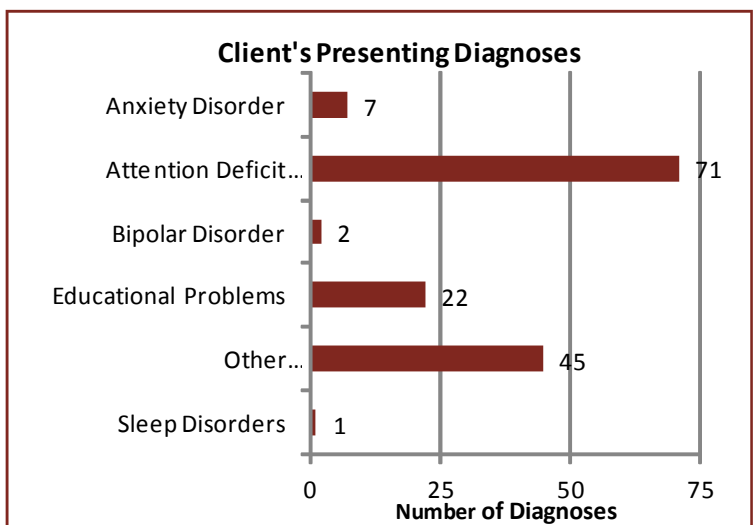
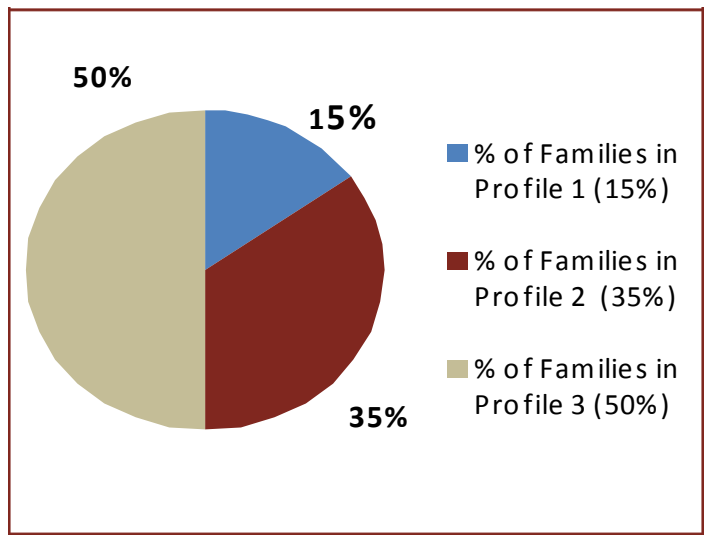


Image 2: Children's Presenting Diagnoses

Case Study— Social Value Created: Profile One

Parents of a five year old girl were struggling and worried about her excessive emotional meltdowns, which included screaming episodes and difficulty with taking her out in the community.

She had a younger sibling who was being negatively impacted by her aggressive behaviour. Her father worked long hours and some weekends. When he came home after a long day at work, he needed some down time and not to be bombarded with the challenges of the day.

As a result, the mother felt that she was parenting alone and not getting support. This resulted in marital stress and tension within the home.

With the support of the COMPASS Family Support

Worker, the parents learned to effectively communicate their needs. They implemented a schedule and routine that worked for the whole family. The father went to the gym after work, and additional work was done after the children were in bed. As a result, he became successfully and consistently involved in evening and bedtime routines.

Mom also built self-care time into her schedule. She learned how to proactively increase positive attachment with her five year old daughter and spent more one-on-one time with both children.

Both parents developed age appropriate expectations and successfully implemented positive parenting strategies which significantly reduced their daughter's outbursts and the sibling rivalry was also reduced significantly. Family outings became a pleasure rather than a chore.

Social Value Created: Profile Two

A nine year old boy was referred to the COMPASS Program because of his physical and verbal aggression at home and school. The school had reported that he was unfocused, disruptive, impulsive and unable to complete his work. He was diagnosed with ADHD by his pediatrician.

His parents are divorced and their divorce was not amicable with both parents having very different points of view. Mom, who has health concerns, is under-employed and trying to make ends meet financially and emotionally, acknowledged that there was frustration with her children's behavior and not much follow through on consequences. The children had regular weekend visits with their father who did not agree with the ADHD diagnosis.

With the COMPASS Family Support Worker's involvement, the mother realized the importance of

consistency and routine as core parenting techniques, including consequences. Together, they set goals for developing her parenting skills and practice of specific strategies to address her son's verbal and physical aggression.

The mother became involved in her son's school and a school conference was held with both parents where it was identified that their son was behind academically and was visibly frustrated. As a result, the father gained a better understanding of his son's challenges and supported the pediatric recommendations.

The Mom gained confidence in her parenting skills, improving her relationship with both children. Tutoring helped to improve the child's school results and his self-confidence in his school work. This end result was improved behaviour, better coping skills, focus and task completion both at home and at school.

Social Value Created: Profile Three

An eleven year old was referred to the COMPASS Program due to anxiety and severe angry outbursts at home and at school. He often missed school as a result. The family consisted of a single mother and two children.

The family had a history of domestic violence and no longer had contact with the father. The family was isolated and the mother was unemployed and appeared to be depressed.

When the COMPASS Family Support Worker became involved, the mother shared that she was experiencing anxiety and panic attacks. She struggled to get through the day. This was impairing her ability to function as a parent or work outside of the home.

With the support of the Family Support Worker, the mother was able to seek medical attention to address her depression and anxiety. The Family Support Worker referred her to individual counselling and the children to play therapy to address the trauma they had experienced.

Both enabled the mother to become more involved and responsive as the parent and less isolated. The mother's confidence grew and she was able to implement effective parenting strategies.

Mother and the children have more of an understanding of their fears, anxiety and anger. They have more empathy for each other and better coping mechanisms.

**"I use a lot more empathy to deal with my children's anxiety and worries."
COMPASS Mother**

The mother began to access recreational activities for her children, which had a positive impact on their self-esteem and created a sense of community. The mother developed the confidence to enroll in a course to upgrade her education so that she could seek better employment opportunities. The eleven year old learned more appropriate ways to express his anger and cope with his anxiety which reduced outbursts both at home and at school. His attendance was no longer an issue at school and he became more confident in the community.

Conclusion

Families that work with the YWCA COMPASS Program have a life-changing experience. As parents learn how to effectively apply new parenting techniques and calm turmoil within the home environment, their child's behavior changes. A child's behavior changes in response to their parent (s)' new skills, and in response to the application of new skills of their own.

COMPASS clients have shared how dramatically their lives have been improved. Key changes experienced include improved family time, a significant drop in family stress, decreased sibling rivalry, improved parent child relationships, improved adult relationships, increased socialization and sense of community, newfound resiliency and improved mental health. While these changes typically occur over a 6 to 12 month period, and result from practice and the implementation of new routines, the value of involvement extends far into the future.

The alternate outcome to COMPASS involvement includes potential social isolation and family breakdown. **A ratio of \$5.83 of value created per 1 dollar invested** is a conservative estimate of the ongoing future value of the YWCA COMPASS Program.

References

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