

## Mother Centers

The original model of mother centers was born out of Germany in the late 1980's as a grassroots, self-help movement. Modernization in the country led to a dichotomy between the public and private spheres of life. The public sphere was geared toward adult concerns and pursuits and so children and family life were relegated to the private sphere. Women who were at home with infants and young children often felt isolated and cut off from public life because it was not socially acceptable to go out with children. The development of mother centers offered mothers of infants and young children the opportunity to contact with each other and to develop peer support networks in the public sphere. Mother centers were situated in the community but also within public view, not simply in someone's home. This created a public space in which women felt comfortable to be who they were at that time, mothers.

The women themselves organized and operated the mother center and if others were present, they assumed a supportive rather than a leading role. Often funders wanted to have a professional lead or run the center but it was found that this presence did not allow the women to develop their self-help and leadership potential in the same way. The women were considered experts in their own lives and experiences and they were able to support each other and create their own problem solving strategies. The mothers approached each other by relating to their strengths and capacities rather than by relating to their problems. All women were invited to bring their ideas, talents, and resources to the table and use these to contribute to the center.

The mother centers were run on a drop-in basis that fit with the needs of the family but also offered some scheduled programming to keep the interest in coming on a daily basis. There were also opportunities for women to work out of the mother center to not only make extra money but also to increase self esteem and self confidence. Mother centers also provided an opportunity for mothers from different ethnic and economic backgrounds to gather together and further their understanding of those who were "different". They were able to offer and receive peer support and break down the barriers that isolated them from one another and larger society.

Many groups in many countries used this original model of mother centers and adapted it to fit with their communities. MINE (Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment) is an international network that facilitates co-operation and exchange between mother centers in those countries. Although each mother center is different in response to the needs of the community it serves, the underlying principles are the same. These are self-managed spaces in neighbourhoods for mothers and children to meet. The primary focus though is on the interests and needs of the mothers, which is different than traditional playgroups' focus on the children. This opens up the possibilities to include education, job training, and community work which end up benefiting the mother, her children, her family, and her community. Improving the lives of families in the community, improves the community itself. Some of the impacts on communities created by mother centers include revitalization of neighbourhoods, generation of support systems, improving access to family services, empowering community members to increase their employment and therefore self-sufficiency, and increasing involvement in local politics and policy development.

One example of a mother center in Canada is the Aboriginal Mother Center Society which operates a mother center in Vancouver B.C. Their primary goal is to supply a continuum of programs and services to Aboriginal women and their children. Women in the community are able to feel safe to bring their children and access community-based services that meet their needs. The activities and programs are designed for helping low income families reduce their expenses and develop community volunteerism. Women work cooperatively and voluntarily in a non-hierarchical setting and they develop leadership skills in the revitalization of the neighbourhood and community. The center is open daily from 10am to 6:30pm. There are 11 fulltime staff and a group of 70+

volunteers who receive a small incentive stipend. Hot meals are served on an open door policy. Some of the programs and services offered are:

- Mother's Daycare Center – licensed by City of Vancouver
- Aboriginal Headstart Program – early childhood development program
- Small Business Development Center for Aboriginal Women
- Community programs and services – Elder activity center, community kitchen, program addressing Aboriginal homelessness, parenting skills workshops, second hand shop
- Community Learning Center for Aboriginal Women

The mother center currently is government and community funded but they are working toward self sufficiency through small business development. The funders include Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, First Nations Employment Society, Lu'ma Native Housing, and the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services. There is a small business operating that makes wool blankets, scarves, toques, and conference bags. There are also plans for a jewellery and craft business with aboriginal artists and a courier business.

There is interest in the community for a mother center in Saskatoon's core neighbourhoods. Community members stated they would like to see a place which was comfortable, where mothers could gather and address the feelings of isolation. They would also like resources available but without the power relationship that can exist between resource "provider" and "receiver". It was also suggested that a midwife or lactation consultant be on hand for drop-in questions or concerns on breastfeeding as well as encouragement. Having this resource available in an atmosphere that is accepting and comfortable would be something people would be more willing to access rather than a more structured health professional and client situation. Community members liked the idea of the center being geared toward the mother's needs. That would involve things for the children (play area or drop-in childcare) but the programming is for the mothers. These mothers also liked the idea that it would be run by mothers, not a professional. This would give the group a sense of this being their own space and that would also make it a more welcoming and comfortable environment. The philosophy that everyone has something to share and contribute was seen as an important one. Everyone would be working toward the center's success with their own strengths and resources.

## References

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