

SFI Follow-up Evaluation

Final Report

August 2014

Background and Purpose of the Evaluation: This follow-up research, termed Post 2 for the second evaluation after program completion, was tendered for purposes of obtaining longer-term and broader understanding about the impact of the SFI program on its participants. Participants from all three family resource centres/parent link centres in Cochrane, Edmonton, and Lethbridge who had completed the SFI program 13-22 months prior to the evaluation were contacted and asked to complete a questionnaire almost identical to the one they had completed at baseline (entry to the program) and at the one year follow-up (Post 1). One additional instrument was added to the previous packet of surveys. The participants then spoke on the phone with a Smith College graduate social work student for approximately 45 minutes, answering questions about how the program impacted them as individuals, couples and co-parents, and parents. They also were asked to discuss aspects of the program they found most useful, and to offer feedback about the group leader and case manager roles, in particular.

Forty-nine participants distributed evenly from all three sites (Cochrane = 18; Edmonton = 15; Lethbridge = 16) completed the follow-up questionnaire; one additional participant participated in the interview without filling out the questionnaire.

Participants: The 50 participants had a profile very similar to the larger pool of SFI participants (n=165) from whom they were selected. It was our intention to select the participants randomly from among those who had completed the program 15-22 months prior, in order to approximate the final follow-up at 18 months conducted in California when establishing the evidence base of SFI. By enlarging the pool to 13 months, we were able to interview most of the participants who fit into this time frame. Almost all families who were able to be reached by the case managers agreed to complete the follow-up assessment. Participating parents were between ages 18 to 54 years. A majority of them (86%) were born in Canada, with over 70% who self-identify as having European heritage background, 11% as Asian Canadian, 11% as First Nations/Inuit, and 8% as Other. Most (85%) of the couples indicated they were married, 9% were living separately and raising a child together (separated or divorced), and 6% were single (never-married or never-cohabiting couples). A majority of mothers and fathers finished high school or technical/trade school (88% of fathers and mothers) and some (31% of mothers; 29% of fathers) completed college or professional school. The average combined family income ranged from \$50,000 to \$60,000, with some participants (predominantly from Edmonton) poorer and many participants (predominantly from Cochrane) having incomes closer to \$90,000. Only 8% of the couples reported being on financial assistance.

Questionnaire Results:

The questionnaire consisting of standardized or widely used instruments was given to parents prior to their phone interviews. Parents were familiar with the questionnaire, which assessed some of the major domains that are the focus of SFI: individual well-being (depression), couple relationship communication and satisfaction, co-parenting relationships (balance of family work roles), and parenting stress, as well as child behavioral outcomes.

Parenting Domain

- Both parents' reports of *father involvement* (Who Does What) improved significantly.
- Both parents' impression of a *balanced workload in childcare* (Who Does What) increased significantly.
- Both parents' perceptions of their *parenting stress* (Parenting Stress Index) showed significant declines over the same time period.
- Parents' judgments of their child as *difficult* (Parenting Stress Index) significantly decreased, along with reports of significant decrease in their *dysfunctional interactions with their children*.

Couple Relationship Domain

- Given the decline in relationship quality for parents of young children in longitudinal studies (e.g., Twenge et al., 2003; Hirschberger et al., 2009), stability of *couple relationship satisfaction* (Quality of Marriage Index) over 13 to 24 months is a positive outcome for Alberta couples.
- The couples' *violent problem-solving* behaviors (yelling, throwing things, hitting) as assessed on the Couple Communication Questionnaire reduced significantly.
- Couples reported significantly less *overall conflict* (Couple Communication Questionnaire).
- A near-significant trend revealed that mothers reported less *conflict with their partners about their kids* (Couple Communication Questionnaire).
- There were no significant differences on the Couple Communication Questionnaire in the amount of couples' *avoidant or collaborative problem solving*. The latter remained high, as it appeared at baseline.

Child Adaptation

- Compared to expected increases in problem behavior found in control groups, children's *hyperactive or social isolation behaviors* remained stable over time.
- Even better, a non-significant trend showed a decrease in parents' ratings of their child's *aggressive behavior*.
- Children's positive *leader* behaviors stayed steady after a Post 1 increase.

Individual Well-Being

- No significant changes were found in parents' reports of their levels of *depression*.

Income

- Fathers reported a non-significant increase in *family income*. This finding showed only a modest gain from the Post 1 assessment, in which both parents reported a significant increase in income.

Comparison among the benchmark (California SFI) and Alberta couples group evaluations at Post 2 Assessment

	Benchmark	Alberta
Number of couples	95	25
Parent-Child		
<i>Father Involvement</i>	Positive	Positive
<i>Balanced Family Workload</i>	Not reported	Positive
<i>Parenting Stress</i>	Positive	Positive
Couple		
<i>Quality of Relationship[^]</i>	No Change	No Change
<i>Violent Problem Solving</i>	No Change	Positive
<i>Conflict over kids</i>	Positive (father)	Positive trend (mother)
Child Behavior Probs.		
<i>Aggression</i>	No Change	No Change
<i>Hyperactivity</i>	No Change	No Change
<i>Social isolation</i>	No Change	No Change
<i>Leader</i>	Not reported	Positive
Family Yearly Income	Positive	Positive trend (father)

[^] No change is positive finding when compared to benchmark control group

Questionnaire Results Summary.

SFI resulted in longer-term positive changes in father involvement, parenting stress, couple relationship satisfaction, violent problem solving, and stable child hyperactive, aggressive, and withdrawn behaviors. These changes replicate findings from the previous SFI California benchmark study. Moreover, two findings not published from the SFI study - positive changes in parents' perceptions of balanced family workload and children's leadership behaviors - were

obtained in Alberta. Finally, two positive trends in positive directions did not reach statistical significance in this smaller sample. These included mothers' reports of conflict about the kids and paternal reports of family income. The one area that did not show change in Alberta but did in CA was parental depression, despite efforts to enhance this aspect of the curriculum. Qualitative evidence presented below suggests that the program did have a positive impact on this area, as well, though not through the standardized instrument used in the evaluation. Altogether, these findings show that positive findings from the one year assessment held and/or were extended up to another year for most variables, showing the Alberta evaluation to be an effective indication that SFI is appropriate and highly beneficial for Albertan parents.

Interview Results:

Since many SFI staff described changes in parents' behaviors and self-descriptions that seemed to reach beyond insights that could be captured through the questionnaires, a set of interview questions were designed to invite parents to elaborate on ways SFI did or did not enhance their functioning in individual, couple, parenting, and co-parenting domains. The interviews were conducted by phone. Overwhelmingly, participants described changes they attributed to the SFI program that are summarized below.

Individual Changes

--Two salient changes on the individual level set the stage for all other changes described by participants. First, they described becoming more *reflective*. Fathers and mothers described greater awareness regarding their own feelings and their reactions to their partners and children. This self-awareness was accompanied by a sense of *empathy* toward themselves, their partners, and their children. Participants "listened more", "paid attention to their children's feelings and needs" and "had a better understanding of what their partners are experiencing."

--Partners also reported feeling more *confidence* in themselves: "I can use what I learned...to better myself as a person and myself as a spouse".

--Parents noted similar changes in their partners. They specifically mentioned increased *reflectiveness* after SFI, a greater *ability to understand their partner's and their children's perspectives*, along with greater *patience*.

Depression

Participants, especially mothers, rated themselves as high on depression on the questionnaires. This did not change despite enhanced program focus on the issue. In order to understand how depression was affecting SFI families before and after the program, questions specifically addressed emotions and behaviors symptomatic of depression.

--Prior to SFI, participants reported feeling *anxiety, overwhelmed, difficulty coping, sleep dysregulation, lack of self-care, isolation, moodiness, loss of identity, and reduction in general functioning*. Contributing external stressors most often centered on issues related to having new infants: *Parents described feeling surprised and overwhelmed by the amount of work involved in caring for newborns, and a lack of familiarity with parenting skills*. Two other themes were *conflict with partners and health struggles*.

--How SFI helped: SFI reportedly helped with these symptoms by *normalizing* them, focusing on *coping skills related to role arrangements, dealing with conflict, and communication*. *Self-care strategies* and improved *personal mental health* were also mentioned.

--Even among those who were not depressed prior to SFI, some reported feeling better afterwards. One father illustrated: "I wouldn't say [that I was] depressed, but I definitely feel happier... to get the kinks out of our marriage... [it helps] having clear expectations about what she expects of me."

Relationship Changes

--Participants frequently described changes in *communication*: an increase in the *amount* ("we talk about things that are going on, we talk about what's coming up next") and in the *quality* ("We're using different techniques in expressing ourselves in a healthy manner"). Participants connected these changes to *less fighting* with their partners, noting greater "stability" and "calmness" in their family interactions: "I was able to understand [my partner's] feelings more and actually be in a place where I am fully focused and listening".

--Communication improvements included communication *about needs*, improved *listening and attentiveness*, and greater *clarity* of communication: "We're gradually learning how to communicate with each other better, and be more open and transparent".

--Partners reported an increased *awareness of and appreciation for their partner* and their partner's role as a parent: one parent described how she trusts her partner more and is able to better understand his good intentions. While most participants reported trusting each other before the program began, about ¼ of them found that their *trust increased* as a result of participation: "Trust is better now because I know that my [husband] will pull through for me if I can't handle [our child]." A similar proportion reported that their *intimacy (physical and emotional) increased*.

Gender Roles and Who Does What

--Most participants (N=37/50; 21 men and 16 women) stated that they would prefer to divide household tasks in a "50/50" balance between themselves and their partner. Some parents were ambivalent, and a minority (N=8) preferred traditional gender roles.

--Parents described a process after having children where their roles shifted in some unintentional ways. These came with lots of pressures. Parents described a "perfect parent" ideal which they felt they must meet; some equated this ideal with gender stereotypes. One outcome of this ideal was Dads who are disconnected emotionally, moms who are overburdened.

--*Lack of communication* and *differences in expectations* between partners were barriers to achieving parents' ideal division of labor. Cultural beliefs about gender roles passed down from participants' families of origin created challenges among parents who carried different gender role expectations for their partnerships.

Before SFI: Parents described a lot of avoidance, bottling things up.

After SFI:

- SFI helped *remove pressure related to role expectations*.
- Parents described *improved conflict resolution*, as a result of better communication, greater empathy for self and partner, and more understanding of their partner's perspective. The vast majority of parents reported *constructive styles of resolving conflict*, e.g., "talking about it". Several noted that since the SFI intervention, they have been able to *address issues sooner* (e.g., less avoidance).
- *Parenting involvement was portrayed as a way of supporting one's partner rather than a chore*. "It's not so much about the specific tasks that need to be done. It's more about the why and understanding the other person."
- *Appreciating partner differences*: "My husband and I have different strengths, and not only is that not a problem, but it's actually a benefit to [our child]. That was very comforting, and revealing, and healing."
- A common refrain was *Moms stepping back, dads stepping up*: "[SFI] helped me realize that I don't have to do everything myself... I'm more able to... [let] him take the lead with his ideas".
- Participants came away with a sense of the *importance of time for self and self-care*.

Adult Attachment

- The majority of participants reported having an insecure attachment style to their partner.
- Fearful (insecure) mothers had higher levels of parenting stress while secure mothers were happier in their marital relationship.
- Dismissive (insecure) fathers had less parenting stress but were happier in their marriages than secure fathers.
- Implications: These associations between particular kinds of insecure styles among mothers and fathers, parenting stress and marital satisfaction suggest areas for focus in the SFI groups when dealing with relationship issues.

Parenting Changes

--*Dominant parenting beliefs* among participants (not in any order):

- Family comes first (in time and attention)
- Discipline is important to do right (e.g., only when necessary and at the right time)
- Unconditional love and support
- Communication as honest and open discussion
- Respect (between parents and children, flowing both ways)
- Developing character in children (honesty, kindness, being fair, taking responsibility, "doing the right thing"; "passing down good manners" from generation to generation)
- Love for learning (curiosity, value of education, involvement in children's activities to promote the same in them)
- Having fun

--*A recurring theme was wanting to do things differently than they were done in their own families of origin*. Some participants reported that their beliefs in "family first" and the importance of involvement came from their own experience of having uninvolved parents. In

discipline, too, parents offered examples such as: “My parents were very strict so I try to work with my child rather than just be controlling”. Unconditional love was valued because: “It’s probably the lack of being told I was loved. There hasn’t gone a day that my kids have been born that I haven’t told them I love them. So with the lack of me getting that, now I make damn sure my kids get that. Without question.”

--After SFI: The program did not impact all participants’ beliefs (14% reported no change), but the majority described an overall theme related to an increase in sensitive and responsive parenting. Participants reported changes in their attitudes and behaviors:

- *Patient and calmer*: Parents discussed their awareness of being less calm with their children if they had a bad day, and their decision after participating in SFI not to transfer those feelings to their children. Parents described staying focused on doing things with their children and being a calm presence with them.
- *Accepting differences*: “My husband and I have different strengths, and not only is that not a problem, but it’s actually a benefit to [our child]. That was very comforting, and revealing, and healing.”
- *Understanding of their children’s perspective and needs*: This increase in understanding their children and behaviors led to parents not taking the child’s behavior (e.g., tantrum) as personally and being less reactive with their child.
- *Communicating more positively with their children*: Parents talked with their children differently by looking for compromises and giving their children choices.
- *Understanding the importance of their involvement as parents*: Since SFI parents increased time spent with their children and as a family.
- *Worrying less and feeling less stressed*: “Enjoy being a dad, whereas before it felt quite stressful”.
- *Having more knowledge and skills/tools learned from SFI* to call on in parenting situations
- *Loving their role as parents*

Furthermore, participants described how the intervention helped to

- put their values into practice:
- give them a community forum for testing their parenting beliefs, and
- strengthen and reinforce their values and beliefs.

SFI “challenges your own thoughts and opinions on what it is to be a good parent, and how to be a good parent, and what that looks like in day-to-day life”; SFI teaches “parenting kids as individuals and being positive and present in their kids’ lives”.

Father Involvement Changes

-- *Being more involved with day-to-day activities* and spending additional time *playing and being imaginative* with their children.

--Hearing about the importance of involved fathering for child development was a key factor that reinforced an increase in involvement. Fathers described seeing firsthand the impact of positive reinforcement in the healthy development of their child’s maturity.

--Parents developed a better understanding of the *ways fathers can be involved* with their children. One father explained that he learned to “get down to his [kids’] level” and be more “in the moment” with them.

--Mothers reported that fathers were taking a *more active parenting role*, showing increased *comfort* and, and an increase in *understanding ways to interact* with their children. “He used to just buy stuff, I think that’s really changed. Now they spend more time, they do something that’s an activity, he’s really involved... and more fun”.

Co-parenting Changes

-- Themes from co-parenting questions indicated that parents *collaborated* more with one another, *communicated about differences* in their parenting styles, learned to *take the other partner’s perspective*, and *increased their awareness of the importance of spending time together as a couple*. “We’re more of a parenting team”; being *consistent and unified* as a team was a great improvement for the family.

A Sense of Community

--Having peers in SFI to connect with weekly helped participants feel “*less isolated*”

--They focused more “on connecting with friends and others in their community”.

--SFI groups *normalized parents’ experiences and challenges*, which parents connected to a sense of acceptance and lower pressure: “It’s nice to know that, these feelings I’m having – I’m not, you know, an alien or something. Everyone has ‘em. It just kind of lightened the load a little bit, and the pressure”; “I think before I was really focused on being a perfect mom, and hearing from other people in the group and learning that the problems we have in our family are really similar to the problems that other people have... it made me sort of relax.”

What was most beneficial about SFI?

--Participant replies to this direct question were grouped into 4 categories.

1) *A sense of closeness*. Participants described doing more together as a family and a sense of feeling unified as parents and as a family.

2) *A chance to be better as a family*. Specific examples included *becoming more involved with their children, communicating better, being open to trying different parenting techniques, reevaluating family values, and gaining insightful information about how to operate as a family unit*. SFI also carried families *through hard times*: SFI “laid a foundation for healing and restoration and moving forward, something consistent to look forward to and to focus forward instead of behind us”.

3) *A sense of community within the group*. Many parents spoke to a sense that “we weren’t alone.” They turned to each other for *friendship, support, and advice*.

4) *Connecting with resources*. This included *wider involvement with the agency housing SFI* and with other agencies: “To become part of a program...it sort of solidified my commitment to community-based programming and it sort of got me networking better in a community sense”. The *meal* and *childcare* were also cited as important resources toward being able to participate fully in the SFI group.

When asked about *changes for SFI*, the vast majority of changes requested were for a longer program, more meetings, or a second part to SFI. A few people requested more time in the program with their children, more time spent on parenting issues or on couple issues or separate groups for men and women.

Case Manager/Family Worker Role

--Participants described how CMs/FWs provided a *supportive environment* and helped families establish a connection to *community resources*. Parents especially appreciated their availability and approachability on any topic needed. It is also noteworthy that nearly a third of participants had not utilized them for support.

Group Leader Role

--Participants addressed the GLs' helpfulness with adjectives such as *caring, friendly, approachable, non-judgmental, and down-to-earth*. They especially appreciated their *listening skills*. Their *knowledgeability* manifested itself in their ability to explain things in a way that was easily understood, use their own experiences as a model for healthy relationships, and provide valuable advice for problems that arose.

Summary Benefits from SFI as Established in this Evaluation

- Focusing on **empathy and attunement** between couples can decrease resentment and a sense of isolation, lead to constructive problem-solving approaches, and create healthier dynamics around division of labor and other parenting and co-parenting responsibilities.
- Supporting families in having **open discussions** about differences in roles and expectations, and making **intentional, mutual decisions** may help ease the difficult transition to parenthood.
- SFI not only offered supportive instructors but also the **time, space, social support, and resources (such as childcare) necessary to enable parents to grapple with issues.**
- Connections to communities of other families can help relieve the intense pressures of early family life and sense of isolation that many couples experience by **normalizing** the challenges involved in becoming parents and providing. **a safe and supportive forum for experimenting with changes in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with partners and children.**