

Families & Schools Together

Families and Schools Together (F&ST) is a universal, selective and indicated prevention-based program which has been running in Guelph and Wellington County since 2002. The program is designed for elementary school children and their families, with a goal to reduce factors associated with school failure, juvenile delinquency and substance use in later adolescence. There are three different curriculums designed to target children at different age ranges, including an Early Years Program (children ages 3-5), an Elementary Program (children ages 5-8) and a Middle Years Program (children ages 9-12). The program brings whole families together for 8-11 sessions to participate in specific research-based activities aimed at enhancing family functioning and decreasing child problem behaviours that impact school performance. Specifically, the identified goals for F&ST are to:

- Enhance family functioning by strengthening the parent-child relationship and empowering parents to become primary prevention agents for their children;
- Prevent school failure by improving the child's behaviour, empowering parents in their role as partners in the educational process and strengthening the child and family's affiliation with the school;
- Prevent alcohol and other drug abuse in the family by increasing the family's awareness and knowledge of substance abuse and its impact on child development and linking the family with appropriate assessment and treatment as needed;
- Reduce the stress that families experience in daily life by developing an ongoing support group for parents and at-risk pre-teens, linking the family with appropriate community resources and building the self-esteem of each family member.

The program begins with outreach, whereby parent and professional dyads visit isolated and stressed families, inviting them to participate in the F&ST program. The school plays a key role in suggesting of vulnerable families. The sessions themselves bring 10-15 families together for 8 or 10 weekly meetings of carefully planned social activities. These include: creating a family flag, sharing a family meal, singing together, playing communication and/or feelings identification games, engaging in peer self-esteem building activities, one-to-one time with children, and parent networking. In the one-to-one time component, parents are coached in non-judgmental, non-directive play therapy or communication with their children. By continuing this activity daily at home, parents reinforce their role and relationship with the child.

When families graduate from the sessions, they join an ongoing, collective of inter-dependent families who meet monthly for two years, in a program called F&STWORKS. These F&STWORKS groups are led by families who have graduated from the program, with the support from a collaborative team of parents and professionals. One F&ST parent graduate is a paid partner of the team who plans and leads activities that strengthen the children's bonds to their family, school and community.

A number of partners collaborate in the implementation F&ST program including schools, not-for-profit mental health agencies, addiction agencies, and families. In Guelph and Wellington County, the lead agency is Family Counselling and Support Services, with partners including Trellis Mental Health and Developmental Services, Family and Children's Services, Guelph Police Services, Wellington County Day Care Services and the Upper Grand District School Board. The Early Years, Elementary Program and Middle Years Program are currently being delivered. For more information, contact:

Family Counselling and Support Services:

519-824-2431

<http://www.familyserviceguelph.on.ca/>