



Pilot Project to Implement the Looking After Children (LAC) Approach in Québec

1. Introduction¹

The Looking After Children (LAC) project was funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) between March 2004 and February 2009 (\$972,126). The project targeted at high risk of offending youth living with foster parents, and under Government responsibility. It implemented a knowledge-based approach inspired by the Wraparound model (Debicki, 2009)².

The project aimed to improve care provided to children and youth placed in foster families in Québec in order to reduce risks of future offences. This project was conducted by the *Association des centres jeunesse du Québec* (ACJQ) and four youth centres located in the Outaouais, Bas-Saint-Laurent, Chaudière-Appalaches and Montréal (Batshaw Youth and Family Centres) regions.

This approach was developed in England in the early 1990s to improve the quality and effectiveness of substitute care provided by child welfare services (Parker et al. 1991)³.

The LAC approach aims in particular to identify the children's needs and potential, as well as the personal aspirations of the children as the basis for intervention planning (Ward 1996)⁴. The goal of the LAC approach is to guide interventions to improve the existing experiences and living conditions of foster children, to promote their optimal development and build resilience.

The LAC approach recognizes that the effectiveness and improvement of services depends on a detailed assessment of the child's needs in each developmental dimension (health, education, family and social relationships, identity, emotional and behavioural development, how they present themselves to others, and self-care skills).

With the Assessment and Action Record (AAR) it is possible to identify the child's needs and plan an intervention that sets out actions to take to achieve the desired objectives. The intervention plan followed on the basis of the information in the AAR makes it possible to more effectively set specific, measurable and realistic objectives, clearly identifying what needs to be done in order to achieve them. This approach also promotes partnership between all those involved with the child (family, foster family, social workers and other professionals) to maximize the quality of care provided.

¹ In French, the project was called « Projet pilote d'implantation de l'approche s'occuper des enfants (SOCEN) dans les centres jeunesse du Québec ».

² Debicki, A. (2009). *Wraparound in Canada*. Available from: <http://www.wrapcanada.org/html/pdf/CanadaWrapOverviewMarch12,2009.pdf>.

³ Parker, R., Ward, H., Jackson, S., Aldgate, J. & Wedge, P. (Eds.) (1991). *Looking After Children: Assessing Outcomes in Child Care*. The Report of an Independent Working Party established by the Department of Health. London : HMSO, 205 p.

⁴ Ward, H. (1996). Constructing and implementing measures to assess the outcomes of looking after children away from home. In J. Algate, & M. Hill (Ed.), *Child welfare services: Developments in law, policy, practice and research* (p.240-254). London: Jessica Kingsley.

2. Evaluation of the Program

The process evaluation focused on the implementation of the approach in youth centres, in order to: determine whether the planned resources and activities were put in place; identify factors influencing implementation and explore implementation repercussions.

The impact evaluation aimed to identify LAC's potential impact on the practices of foster parents and caseworkers (intermediate variables) and on the development and well-being of children/young people in foster care (long-term variables).

Telephone and face-to-face interviews were conducted at three points in time with children/youth between the ages of 8 and 16, foster parents and caseworkers (sample size varying from 8 to 72). Some group interviews were also conducted based on a random sample of 17 foster parents, 18 caseworkers, 10 key contacts (local coordinators and trainers), and 14 children and youth.

Lastly, data were collected during implementation advisory committee meetings and from site coordinators. Participants' AARs content analysis was also completed (60 were available all three times). The attrition rates were 51% between the first and second periods and 76.5% between the first and third periods.

In addition to relying on these data, the impact evaluation of LAC also considered how LAC intervention plans (IP) changed over time. It compared the quality of the last IP completed for the experimental group with the control group IP (51 foster children selected randomly). The longitudinal course of the response to participant needs was studied through the AARs.

Objective achievement was measured from the caseworker's point of view, while the views of foster parents provided information on the developmental dimensions. Placement history and incidents occurring over the previous 12 months (before AAR administration) were analyzed for the experimental group (161 cases) and the control group (161). Lastly, the evaluators compared the development of foster children aged 12 and over who participated in LAC with that of 1,103 young people between the ages of 12 and 17 from the general population who had participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).

3. Evaluation Findings

The process evaluation found that:

- Effectively promoting a new approach requires proper preparation and support of the implementation process with the necessary resources before recruiting caseworkers and foster parents.
- The reality of foster families and the working conditions of caseworkers influence the quality of the implementation approach.
- The quality and duration of training have an impact on the attitude of caseworkers and parents, and on their ability to integrate the approach. Training must be adapted to the Québec system and be in coherence with other youth centre programs implemented at the same time. Ongoing development of the skills required for incorporating the approach into practice needs to be enhanced.
- The extent to which the approach is properly integrated and successful depends on the support provided by youth centres.
- AARs should be more closely aligned with the other tools used in youth centres.

The outcome evaluation found that:

- According to nearly 80% of foster parents and approximately 90% of caseworkers, AARs provide a better knowledge of the needs of the children/young people and assist in observing progress. They also help consider the histories of the children and youth, and make it easier for participants to talk about taboo subjects and develop closer attachments to their foster families.

- AARs help build better relationships with the children/young people according to 80% of foster parents and 58% of caseworkers, and they promote relationships between parents and children/young people. They facilitate parental involvement according to 83% of social workers and 70% of foster parents.
- The mental health support provided through LAC is better than for the general population. Overall health and hospitalizations for LAC participants are not significantly different from that of the general population.
- More than 95% of children/young people under the age of 16 get necessary help to learn independent living skills. Between 75% and 85% of the older participants report receiving help to improve self-care skills.
- Destructive behaviour involving property was significantly reduced in the LAC children and youth participants; self-esteem improved significantly between the first and second periods, although it inexplicably then decreased by the third period.
- More reports of crisis situations were made for the control group (73.3% versus 26.7%). In 2008, 81% of emergency measures (temporary placements lasting 0 to 5 days) were carried out in this group, which received a greater number of rehabilitation interventions with placement and therefore more frequent crisis management.
- LAC participants have greater self-esteem than does the general population, although they more frequently exhibit internalized difficulties (anxiety and depression).

4. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The LAC approach and its AAR tool help take into account the child/young person's perspective and take a different approach to the problems experienced by foster families, although the approaches are sometimes demanding in terms of time management.

The LAC approach and its AAR tool allow youth centres to go beyond protection by fostering development, and improving services available to children and youth placed in foster care. The LAC approach helps caseworkers have a more comprehensive view of all developmental dimensions.

5. Conclusion

In 2009, the LAC approach began to be applied gradually to all youth centres. This paradigm shift is leading to a major change in the intervention practices of foster parents and youth centres.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca.

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