

ART
AS A TOOL FOR
PARENT SUPPORT
AND INTERVENTION

In family resource centres



Fédération
québécoise des
organismes
communautaires
Famille

ABOUT

Family resource centres (FRCs) throughout Québec

A family resource centre (FRC) is a true ally ready to support parents during the major stages of their family life, from pregnancy to when children reach adulthood. FRCs are places where families are welcomed and listened to and where they can talk to other families. They are local organizations offering services that meet the needs of families of all types. They adapt to the changing needs of parenting, recognizing that any family can experience turbulence or special situations.

Present in all regions of Québec under various names, these front-line organizations offer parents a continuum of services and resources such as workshops and presentations; activities that support stimulation, early literacy, and readiness for school; respite and drop-in daycare services; collective kitchens; and coffee meetups among parents. Every day, FRCs have a positive impact on the lives of families. They help families thrive and foster the full potential of children and their parents.

Autonomous community action for and with families (ACAF)

FRCs are part of the large-scale autonomous community action movement in Québec. Created on the initiative of people in their community, they have a mission that fosters social transformation and they implement citizen practices and broad approaches focused on the global nature of the problematic situations addressed. "Autonomous" refers to the fact that each FRC is led by a board of directors independent from the public sector.

Aimed at individual and collective empowerment, FRCs have developed a global approach based on three foundations: welcoming spaces, enriching the parental experience, and popular education. It is a local, preventive, and universal approach.

Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille (FQOCF)

Since 1961, the Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille (FQOCF) has represented, supported, and sought to increase the outreach and professional development of almost 270 member organizations in addition to promoting their unique expertise in supporting parents. In its nationwide activities of addressing public decision-makers and the media on the issues families face, the FQOCF is driven by the experience of its members and by their privileged perspective on family life.

The Federation is a proud ambassador for families, drawing on the daily social impact of its members and their model of parent support. It is a leader that brings people together to help all generations thrive in a more just and inclusive society.

The FQOCF is an agent of social transformation and an inspirational and innovative organization. It has positioned itself as an essential partner in the family ecosystem through its ability to develop and maintain relationships with strategic partners. In that capacity, the FQOCF exercises strong leadership to protect the interests of all Québec families and contribute to their well-being.

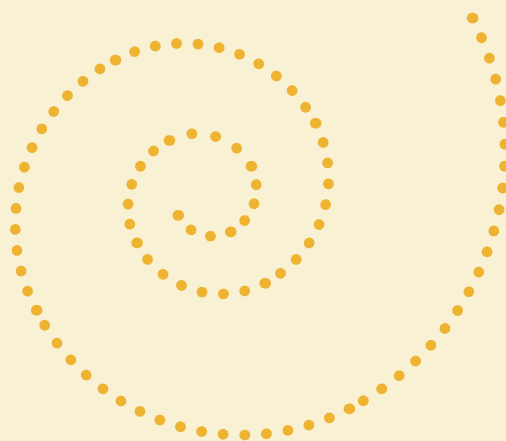


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INTRODUCTION

During the November 2022 national meeting of the Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille (FQOCF), a workshop on the use of art in family resource centres (FRCs) was offered. This document is a summary of participants' experiences and reflections drawing on their inspirational collective discussion on the presence of art within their FRC.

For many years the FQOCF has been observing numerous initiatives to use art with parents in FRCs. The Federation itself set up certain processes and went on to produce reference and facilitation tools on giving families a voice through photographic art (the [Optique Familles \[Through the family lens\]](#) initiative) and on helping parents make books based on their stories and on what drives them as a family (the [Il était une fois nos histoires \[Once upon a time... our stories\]](#) program).

The FQOCF strongly believes in the many benefits of using art in interventions and in social action. Furthermore, the organization wants to continue its efforts in this field, because the initiatives we observe are consistent with the three foundations of autonomous community action for and with families (ACAF). The use of art is based on the “welcoming spaces” facilitation method, on enriching the parental experience, and on popular education, while breathing new life into all these approaches.


In addition to making it easier for its members to share tools and knowledge, the FQOCF also wants to develop a common language that would support and inspire FRCs in the development of such initiatives.



A workshop for sharing experiences that brought together more than 85 people

The workshop on using art was offered twice, drawing on testimonials from people who work in FRCs and who have centred their support for families around the use of art. These testimonials inspired creativity among the participants and spurred the discussion. The workshop was enhanced by the participation of Joëlle Tremblay (Université Laval) and France Lepage (Maison de la famille Des Chenaux), who gave a brief presentation on their observations of the workshop discussions. In all, more than 85 people from FRCs participated.

The workshop was led by Lucie Hébert, a passionate artist and community consultant.



1. WHY

USE ART AS AN INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT TOOL?

Art is an incredible tool for self-expression, the collective sharing of experiences, and the development of individual and collective empowerment. While it is used on a regular basis with children, for example in drawing, stories, songs, and puppets, it might seem less obvious to use it with adults. However, what people experience at FRCs demonstrates the unique and exceptional way in which art supports interventions with parents. From the observations collected, we find that the use of art in facilitation leads to a wide range of benefits.

Breaking social isolation

Parents create bonds when they participate in artistic activities. When someone is engaged in an art workshop, they feel safe in the comfort of a space dedicated to creativity, sheltered from everyday problems. This sharing space fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity with other parents. Participants can take advantage of the present moment, mutual support, and mutual encouragement. They see each other in a new light, and the group has a stimulating effect for the participants.

Encouraging self-expression

An art workshop allows people to be themselves. “During the workshop, I forgot that I was the mother of... I was just me!”¹ It sometimes brings out emotions and forgotten stories and helps us “recognize parts of ourselves that we can rediscover,” like buried treasure. By being attentive, we can show all the positive aspects. Artistic activity opens doors that rational thought locks, and then illustrates this discovery in a creative way.

¹ The quotes come from testimonies heard by the FRCs during facilitated activities and from the FRCs themselves.

Taking a different path to self-discovery

Touching the material and playing with images, colour, sounds, and movement gives participants a self-discovery experience through the senses and through the body. The experience is something they feel, rather than something they simply talk about. Art can help them go outside the lines and explore something other than everyday life and the parenting problems that come with it.

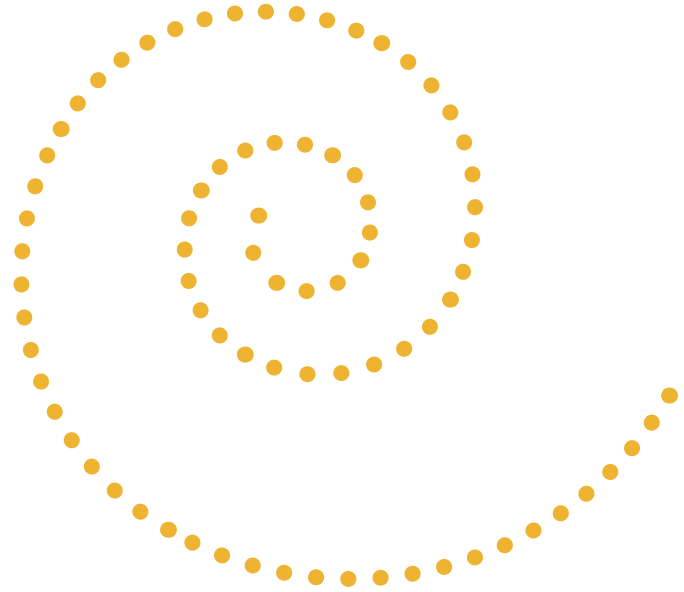
Creativity within the visual arts also serves as an anchor that is always there: "When I drink from the mug that I shaped myself, I think back to the workshop." Art also allows us to create symbols or meaningful images that support participants' resilience and quest for well-being. It's another form of intelligence that lets them "create magic"!

Developing personal abilities

With attentive support, the use of artistic activities helps participants move forward on their personal journey. They learn to trust themselves, to demonstrate perseverance, and to wait patiently for a result. An artistic practice fosters people's ability to use their imagination to find solutions, and to work as a team to help and be helped.

Developing pride

While facilitating artistic activities, FRCs ensure the results are successful. They guide them in a way that helps parents understand that the result of their creations deserves to be seen or heard. In short, art restores dignity. For example, creating handmade gifts restored a sense of pride in people, as it allowed them to rediscover their ability to give in return. There are also cases where parents who visit an FRC have talents or strong skills in specific artistic fields. This allows them to feel a strong sense of recognition when helping to lead a workshop.



Opening minds

Art allows us to be non-judgmental and accepting of the 1,000 faces of creativity. It helps us externalize ideas and take a step back from our thoughts and experiences. It gives us a new perspective on our own experiences and those of others.

Reaching parents who are more isolated

Parents who are not interested in (or feel intimidated by) "discussion workshop" activities (on parenting, etc.) might find a creative workshop more appealing. Actively doing something while having your hands and eyes occupied in a creative task sparks casual conversation. People will forge ties and help each other, and feel a sense of belonging to the organization.

Promoting social integration

Art allows groups of people from diverse backgrounds to get to know each other better, to share their cultures, and to offer their personal perspective on life. Art is thus an excellent way to engage in intercultural and intergenerational activities.



2. ART

AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY ACTION FOR AND WITH FAMILIES (ACAF)

Observations from the perspective of each of the three foundations of ACAF also allow us to demonstrate how the use of art in facilitation aligns with the DNA of FRC practices.



The “welcoming spaces” approach

Through the use of art:

- parents feel welcomed without judgment and with a calming “here and now” kind of attention
- informality makes discussions among parents rewarding and authentic
- the FRC spaces are filled with pieces of art that make families proud and echo what they experience and aspire to



Enriching the parental experience

Through the use of art, parents:

- find non-threatening support to express themselves about their realities as parents
- discover new ways to express themselves and to take a step back from what they experience as people and as parents
- are inspired to enrich the ways in which they support their children in their efforts to express themselves
- find inspiration and motivation to pass on to their children a family legacy of artistic works and influences (as each family discovers and produces its own wealth in terms of visual artworks, poetry, songs, stories, etc.)



Popular education and social transformation

Through the use of art, parents:

- can be made aware of and engaged in issues experienced collectively (situations of injustice, decision-makers’ neglect of collective goods, etc.)
- obtain greater visibility and a voice that resonates more widely to bring to the public space a portrait of their realities and aspirations and thus publicize the solutions they propose (through creations in theatre, song, collective visual artworks, etc., which are even more meaningful when they are created by the very people who are experiencing the situations depicted)

To continue this exploration of the links between ACAF and the use of art, we invite you to browse through the reference guides found in the [*Reference and Facilitation Toolkit on Autonomous Community Action for and with Families*](#) published by the FQOCF.

3. FOR THE SUCCESS OF A PARENT ACTIVITY USING ART



The sharing of experiences during the workshop revealed the common approaches each person uses to prepare and lead their activities.

- **Take fun and creativity seriously!** FRCs that use art as an intervention tool have on their team or management at least one person who champions art and proudly flies the art flag as an essential part of their mission! The arguments of these people show how important this facilitation approach is in strategic communications with members of the FRC board of directors and with its funders. Because it's all about "making noise to emphasize that art is as valuable a tool as any other intervention approach."
- **Carefully plan the workshops** (facilitation, techniques used, equipment, spaces, configuration) to remain available to greet the parents. It's about focusing on the process rather than the result at any cost. Take care to create a framework and an atmosphere that allow for both organized and spontaneous moments. It is also important to remember that simple is better: "You can do a lot with salt dough, paper, and pencils!"
- **Right from the start, set the golden rule: "Not everything I do has to be perfect or successful."** That is the basis for creativity. From the start, it'll be clear that there is no value judgment on the beauty or success of creations. It's about the importance of participation, perseverance, pride, mutual support, etc. Art is like playtime for adults. Just like children play, adults create art. Children don't wonder whether they're playing correctly or if things will turn out right.
- **Make sure the chosen activities reflect the needs of families.** Opt for "activities that parents identify with, that mean something to them." Leaders will have specified a clear intention that allows for enjoyment, flexibility, and the unexpected. It's often up to the team to be creative by thinking about how the use of art can meet the needs of parents. For example, could a collective artwork foster a sense of belonging?
- **Dare to go outside the lines.** It's about making room for what's possible and unexpected: using corridors, stairs, parks, repurposing recycled materials, etc.
- **Find a balance between enjoyment and success.** You want parents to be proud of their creation, so it's important to dedicate enough time and the right materials to the projects and choose techniques or media that are in line with the organization's financial and logistical capabilities and the parent's abilities. Art is a way for people to express themselves and rediscover their dignity!

4. ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS THAT INSPIRE

During each of the workshops, resource people presented the following initiatives:

- **Pottery art**

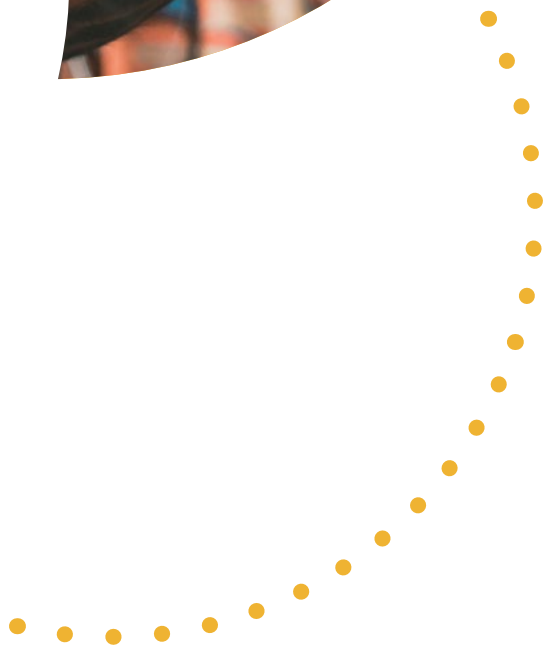
A series of pottery workshops was led by a ceramist at Centre famille Haute-Ville (Québec) for about ten years.

- **Creative exploration notebook**

Escale Famille Le Triolet (Montréal) offered a workshop that aimed to teach parents how to keep a creative exploration notebook, in which they could creatively express emotions and experiences.

- **Expl'Art workshops**

La Maison de la famille La Parentr'aide (Saint-Hubert, in Montérégie) organized an artistic creation workshop for parents. Each week, various art projects were offered on set topics. The workshop allowed participants to develop and explore their creativity and take time for themselves away from daily worries.



- **Fragments d'espaces humains [Fragments of human spaces]**

This photo exhibition was made possible thanks to the active participation of the parents. It depicted a neighbourhood and families that had been transformed. The goal was to highlight what community workers at La Maison des Familles de Mercier-Est (Montréal) do and the positive effect on the lives of the families they support. The organization often holds cultural and artistic activities. La Maison des Familles has also set up workshops on getting to know yourself, putting words into images, and being creative.

- **Optique Familles [Through the family lens] project and exhibition at Des Chenaux**

Thanks to the [*Giving Families a Voice Through Photographic Art*](#) guide (published by the FQOCF following the *Optique Familles* initiative), in the midst of the pandemic La Maison de la famille Des Chenaux invited parents to be photographers and show how their FRC made a difference in their family life. The photos and write-ups produced by the parents were put together in an exhibition. La Maison de la famille Des Chenaux regularly offers artistic activities in its programming.

- **Doctoral thesis *L'art qui relie : un modèle de pratique artistique avec la communauté***

Joëlle Tremblay, a professor at Université Laval, presented her experiences using theatre and drama in social action settings. Her work is based on her doctoral thesis *L'art qui relie: un modèle de pratique artistique avec la communauté*, published in 2013.



During the discussions among those who participated in the workshops, the following initiatives were mentioned.

Shared experience/performing arts

- One FRC has set up a space for fathers to hold a guitar jam session. A special time for fathers to take a step back and reconnect with their strength and skills.
- To support popular education, an FRC organized “engagement through film” sessions. Movie screenings were followed by time for dialogue and reflection on the realities and challenges experienced by the characters.
- An FRC created a short video on the parenting experience, which motivated several people to create and produce it.
- A collective theatrical creation presented at an annual general meeting spurred fun, laughter, and new connections among attendees.

Development of a sense of belonging to a family resource centre

- The creation of spaces for and by families. For example, creating original cement “Japanese stepping stones” gave families a walkway to their FRC. The participation of fathers was at the forefront.
- “Leave your mark”: young and old left their hand prints in the hallway of their FRC.



Keeping memories alive (intergenerational/intercultural)

- Seniors use old photos to tell stories about their village or neighbourhood. It's a great way to create connections with the older generation.
- "Les berceuses" [Lullabies]. An activity where participants are invited to tell the group about the lullabies they learned as children. This activity helps preserve lullabies sung across every generation and from every culture.
- Working in collaboration with seniors' associations fosters the transfer of knowledge: songs, crafts, heritage, etc.
- A local Cercle des fermières [rural women's association] creates knitted breasts to raise awareness and educate people about breastfeeding.
- Throughout Québec and especially during the holidays, small intergenerational choirs bring young and old together to perform the songs of the season. These voices brighten up many public gathering spaces in their communities.

Paying it forward

- Care packages, by and for parents. Parents put together welcome packages for the families of newcomers.
- Full day of crafts for Christmas or for Mother's Day, to allow parents to make gifts.
- Christmas card workshop for children and seniors. The cards are placed in the Christmas baskets handed out by the local food bank.

Creation and recycling

- Production of shows with sock puppets made by the group.
- Group creation of a collective story inspired by miscellaneous objects.
- At the end of a workshop, everyone submits a creation that represents what they want for the coming year. Everything is put in a time capsule hidden in the ceiling of the organization's premises. When the box is taken out a year later, participants can see how far they've come.
- A caravan of the arts that tours parks. This activity provides craft materials for on-site projects and is supported by an outreach worker.



5. THE CHALLENGES OF USING ART

It takes more than a magic wand to set up activities that use art. A variety of challenges may arise, during both planning and execution, but solutions exist.

- One of the main challenges is logistical. Some artistic activities can be messy and cumbersome and require space and a lot of equipment that has to be brought out and put away. Sometimes, certain processes are complex and long. *A key strategy is to think realistically about the space available, or to explore the possibility of collaboration with partners: the municipality, an artist's studio, an art school, a community centre.*
- Certain projects require special funding. For example, the creation of sustainable collective works, the use of a more complex medium, and the hiring of artists all lead to additional costs. *Certain funds are available for cultural mediation projects. Some major cities have budgets dedicated to these activities. Similarly, regional cultural councils can be a good resource (the Réseau des conseils régionaux de la culture du Québec has a list). Another option is to request specific donations for a one-time project.*
- It's important for parents to have the space they need to think and create without being disturbed, to be fully present. *Ideally, a drop-in daycare would be offered, the creative space would be far enough away from the noisier parts of the FRC, etc.*
- Participants can be extremely sensitive to other people's judgmental comments and therefore they can quickly develop a sense of failure. *The right facilitation and support are critical, to allow all participants to appreciate everyone's contribution, and for the finished product to be something they can all be proud of.*
- Sometimes an activity might stir up raw or painful emotions. A simple Christmas craft can bring up sad memories or a powerful wave of nostalgia, for example. *Pay attention to the participants. Make them feel comfortable, and show openness to their reactions.*

- Facilitators might have to deal with the imposter syndrome some parents feel. This syndrome hampers their creativity and enjoyment, and once it takes hold, it can prevent them from being fully engaged. *Parents must rediscover their “right to create.” This should be taken into account in the choice of artistic medium and in how it is presented to parents so that it is not intimidating.*
- Sometimes it’s hard to attract participants the first time a workshop is offered. But once it’s well established, demand can soar! Keep in mind that the maximum number of participants is limited due to space and equipment requirements. But as art brings great benefits, it’s normal to want to accommodate all parents. *That’s what we call being a victim of your own success! The options are to create additional groups, train new facilitators, etc. As this requires additional resources, fundraising strategies should be aligned with a realistic vision for the short, medium, and long term, to meet the needs of both the parents and the FRC team.*
- It can sometimes seem as though art reaches women more easily than men. Moreover, many fathers do not immediately think that an FRC will offer activities that interest them and make them feel welcome. *Art doesn’t discriminate! In fact, in cultural settings, male artists are often more prominent than female artists. Some organizations have proposed specific activities for fathers by designing promotional tools targeting them in particular. In one case, it was a percussion activity on large white plastic pails for a group of fathers and their children. A joyfully loud success!*
- Art is often downplayed in comparison to sports, for example. In some social narratives, even in the field of social services, art is sometimes seen as “DIY” and a waste of time compared to more formal support practices. *This is an invitation to highlight the successes! An exhibition, a public presentation, or an article in the local newspaper are all opportunities to demonstrate the value of these activities.*
- It is sometimes difficult to recruit people who have technical and artistic skills as well as intervention skills. Some artists excel in their discipline, but have no experience in facilitating a workshop. *When a person in charge of parental support is paired with a person responsible for the artistic component of the workshop, joint facilitation is the ideal solution to meet everyone’s needs. Over the course of the sessions, each facilitator opens up and learns from the other. It’s an investment that pays off in the short and long term.*
- FRCs often have to get by with limited space and human resources, which can make it difficult to include artistic activities in their programming. *One step at a time! In this situation, management and the work team should take the time to make decisions, and seize opportunities as they arise.*

Two FQOCF publications, the [Guide d’animation sur le programme Il était une fois nos histoires](#) (a guide on helping parents make books) and [Giving Families a Voice Through Photographic Art](#) (sharing the experience of the *Optique Familles* initiative), offer other support points to guide artistic activities and ways to address the challenges that may arise.

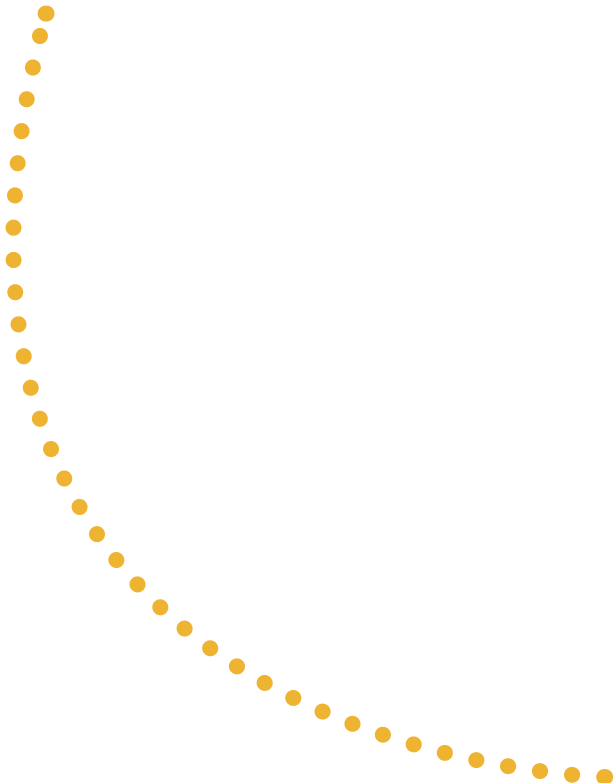


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