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The F-words for Child Development: Lessons Learned

Since the creation of the F-words for Child Development in 2011, there has been flourishing interest and uptake worldwide. For this reason, our CanChild F-words Research and Knowledge Translation Team has had the opportunity and pleasure to present on the F-words in hundreds of workshops, presentations, and invited talks around the world. Through these presentations, and correspondence with interested researchers, parents/caregivers, and health professionals globally, we have learned about several questions, concerns, and misunderstandings regarding the F-words. In this document, we report and respond to these inquiries and illustrate the power of these comments to help us improve our ideas.

We thank people who take the time to share their ideas with us – together we are stronger. If you have any questions about the F-words, or further concerns and/or comments, please do not hesitate to reach out to our F-words Team at fwords@mcmaster.ca.

- ***“We don’t need a new assessment measure! There are already enough!”***

The F-words are not an assessment tool, nor are they a measure. They do not provide a diagnosis or a prescriptive approach to intervention; there is no F-words ‘score’, nor do they displace current assessment tools. Rather, the F-words help to bring together (‘rule in’) both conventional information and offer a strengths-based holistic account of the child and family, providing a larger canvas on which to paint a fuller, personalized picture with which to move forward.

- ***“The F-words are nothing new... everyone knows and does this already!”***

It is indeed true that none of the individual elements of the F-words framework is new. People recognize the words and concepts of the ICF and the terminology of the F-words. We all know that ‘environment’ and ‘personal factors’ influence the lives of the people with whom we work.

What are new with the ICF/F-words approach are: (i) the integration of these self-identified child and family ideas into a single interconnected set of interdependent elements; (ii) the possibility to offer interventions anywhere and everywhere within these components of a person’s life rather than just at the biomedical components of impairment; (iii) the opportunity to build on strengths; (iv) the emphases on functioning and wellbeing, beyond ‘fixing’ and ‘normality’; (v) the expectation that we actively identify, explore, and take account of personal and environmental aspects of people’s lives; and (vi) the opportunity to bring fun into therapy by working on meaningful goals.

- ***“We have our own tried-and-true frameworks, and don’t need a new one!”***

The F-words framework is, as noted above, an integrative way to bring together the information we acquire in our history-taking, assessments, and on-going work with a child and family. It is an innovative approach, expanding our horizons without in any way intending to displace other approaches. In fact, as of spring of 2021, work is underway to address this concern more explicitly by exploring and illustrating the complementarity of the F-words with many frameworks and approaches in our field (e.g., Solution-Focused Coaching, Signs of Safety, Universal Design for Learning, etc.).¹⁻³ We are trying to make the case that the F-words framework is, and certainly can be, orthogonal to other ways of framing our thinking and our work: a both/and rather than an either/or approach.

- ***“We want to change the F-words, and add/subtract/adapt... Can we do that?”***

People have been using the same F-words, but adapting materials to fit a variety of local concerns. Indeed, the increasing richness of the F-words resources on our F-words Knowledge Hub (www.canchild.ca/F-words) owes a huge debt of gratitude to generous families and colleagues around the world for their contributions to the adaptations of these ideas. As of November 2021, the number of visits to the F-words Knowledge Hub home page is >91,000 of which >71,000 were unique visitors. We encourage creative application of the F-words, but offer some advice:

What we ask of people is to ensure that the F-words framework is not changed (i.e., do not add or subtract from the original six F-words that we have identified), and that the F-words are properly represented in association with the ICF concepts on which they are based. This can be done with an integrated graphic, as illustrated in our [ICF Framework and F-words](#) poster. This allows people to see how the F-words and ICF are intricately connected and not simply arbitrary ideas and words.

We also ask that people include references to the ICF, the original F-words paper, and CanChild’s F-words Knowledge Hub so the academic contexts are clear. Doing so allows people to see where these ideas have come from, and to look on the CanChild website where further details, and a host of free F-words resources, can be found. We also encourage translation/cultural adaptation of existing materials, but ask that translators reach out to our team (fwords@mcmaster.ca) for details about the process.

- ***“This framework ignores important F-words that need to be there!”***

Many people have told us that words like ‘feelings’, ‘faith’, ‘food’, ‘funding’ should also be included – and our answer is always the same: (i) the F-words we have chosen are based on decades of childhood disability research, and are words that we believe are essential to child health and development; and (ii) we have chosen these words as a way to bring to life the ICF concepts with which they are associated. While we believe it is important to keep the F-Words framework consistent, we do recognize that there is always, within the ICF/F-words frameworks, a place for any word/concept, be it an ‘F-word’ or not!

As but a single example: the word ‘faith’ may reflect either or both of an individual’s values and perspective on life (currently illustrated in the ICF framework’s ‘personal factors’ or by the word ‘fun’), and an environmental factor of community engagement (illustrated by ‘family’). In other words, ideas like these are welcome and can find a place when important in a particular context, however they are spelled!

- ***“This is a health-focused framework for physical disability, but does not address other health or life concerns.”***

There is a grain of historical truth to this concern, insofar as the F-words ideas were first imagined in the context of ‘neurodisability’, with conditions like cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual differences then at the forefront of the authors’ minds. However, there was never an intent to exclude anyone, or any condition; rather, with experience, challenges like this are being welcomed and addressed. For example, collaborative work is actively underway with colleagues in the child and youth mental health sector. Together, we are exploring how the current F-words concepts and language can be applied to make explicit how these ideas are just as applicable in mental health as anywhere else. The ICF, on which the F-words are based, is a framework for health for all individuals, and we believe the same is true for the F-words, which can be applied to all our lives!

Indeed, there is an ever-expanding interest in and uptake of these ideas as organizing structures for whole service programs for children and youth (e.g., intake and assessment materials, goal-setting tools, and framing of services) as well as in the educational systems (e.g., Individual Education Plan documents and Transition to School documents), linking and coordinating language and concepts across the community. There are also efforts to bring these ideas into the world of adult services.

- ***“The F-words (or this or that F-word) don’t apply to me or my family.”***

There is always a challenge to assess whether a concept like the F-words can transcend language and culture. As people have translated the F-words into other languages (now over 30), a few realities have become apparent. The first is that on rare occasions, a person objects to the social connotation of ‘the F-word’. Second, the idea of ‘F-word’ in English loses its connotation in other languages. Even when translations are done, efforts to find words that start with the letter ‘F’ can end up with stilted and inadequate words. In languages that use scripts other than the Roman alphabet, we obviously need to have an entirely new approach to these concepts.

One idea that works well, and is being promoted, is to refer to the F-words as ‘My Favourite Words’, and to strive for cultural translations that capture ideas like ‘family’ and ‘fun’, rather than creating literal translations. We are also being challenged to consider ‘translating’ the graphic representations of the pictures shown in our F-words figures and posters (e.g., the ICF Framework and the F-words poster) to encompass racial and cultural diversity recognizable and appropriate to people in their own contexts.

A few parents have raised the legitimate concern that the word ‘friends’, used to illustrate the ICF concept of ‘participation’, can be challenging for some young people with any of a range of impairments in physical, social, or behavioural function. We agree and have discussed these issues with parents. While there are no easy answers to this personal and social dilemma, it may be possible to expand the concept of ‘friends’ beyond the implied peer relationships to include a wider scope of meaningful relationships within families, including with adults and pets. To convey such an idea, we suggest that visual illustrations could be used to enrich this concept.

As well, some parents are initially bemused by the idea of ‘future’ – added by us to the cross-sectional ICF framework to remind people about the idea that children are a ‘work in progress’ and that our work with them and their families can and should have this longer-term perspective in mind. It is important to note that when we speak about future we consider both the short-term (days, weeks), as well as longer-term future (months and years). For example, in the Vietnamese translation of the F-words, the concept of ‘Future’ is captured as ‘aiming well for tomorrow’.

- ***“The F-words Framework doesn’t align with current services in which we need to focus on ‘deficits’/‘issues’ as a way to access services...”***

This is a frequently expressed concern. Service providers want to use the F-words, but say they must focus on deficits in order to establish eligibility for services and to access funding. Similarly, families continue to tell us how challenging and disheartening the intake and assessment processes can be in order for them to receive services, because there remains an administrative preoccupation with deficits. We are aware of these challenges, and have no easy answer; we do, however, take every opportunity to argue that a balanced view of a child and family’s strengths as well as impairments in no way invalidates the realities of their needs. This is an on-going knowledge translation and practical challenge for all of us!

One emerging idea is to articulate young people’s strengths and their goals, and then identify the gap between current functioning (as impacted by impairments) and desired function, for which interventions are being sought. Such an approach recognizes both the challenges and the existing abilities, and provides a clearer context for the interventions and services to be offered.

References

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