

The Parent Voice

Learning from the
Village: Gathering
the voice of parents

*A community based learning
project supported by:*



Funded by Alberta Education



The Voice of Parents

Introduction

THE EARLY YEARS CONTINUUM PROJECT (EYCP), funded by Alberta Education, actively collected the voice of parents over the course of the Project since its inception in April of 2010. Building strong and meaningful community connections takes time but throughout the project, as is the Alberta Approach to early childhood, genuine engagement was one of the guiding principles.

Background

THE PURPOSE OF THE EYCP WAS to learn how to create and sustain a comprehensive continuum of community services and supports for families with young children.

THERE WERE THREE OVER-ARCHING GOALS:

1. Families have access to a comprehensive continuum of early learning and care services in their communities;
2. Children have opportunities to build a strong foundation of learning and development prior to school; and
3. Parents' needs and interests inform decisions regarding environments to support their child's development.

Three community sites operated as "learning labs" to discover what enables continuums of care and support for families with young children in Alberta.

- **High Prairie** created strong networks for safe and supportive environments for children at risk for developmental delay in High Prairie and surrounding communities.
- **Lymburn** and area, which includes three west Edmonton communities - Callingwood, Lymburn and Ormsby (CLOC), focused on strengthening and expanding networks to create strong "virtual communities of caring amongst the early childhood community".
- **Knottwood** in southeast Edmonton formed "Parents as Champions" to champion the voice of parents to be the best they can be and set direction for community networking and learning.



Context

THIS PARENT VOICE DOCUMENT

is intended to synthesize and highlight some of the key themes that emerged from the parent engagement process in this project. The richness of the “voices of parents” gathered from the three sites over the course of the project is captured more fully in the Early Years Continuum Project Final Evaluation Report.

PARENTS PARTICIPATED IN:

- **453 parent surveys** (parents who were involved with the EYCP as well as parents from the general population in the communities)
- **7 focus groups** (3 groups included parents and service providers and 4 were conducted by researchers at University of Alberta)
- **3 “photovoice” projects** (completed in each community site)

The information is not separated out by community but for the most part, attempts to represent a voice that is common to many parents in many communities. Some of the information however will be more identifiable to a particular site.

Survey Data

WHO RESPONDED?

The majority of the 453 respondents to the survey self-identified as “other Canadian citizens” (65%) with the second largest cohort identifying as Aboriginal (17%). In High Prairie, 41% identified as Aboriginal and in Lymburn 32% identified as having English as a Second Language. Most parents indicated having children from 4 to 6 years of age.

HOW DO PARENTS FEEL ABOUT BEING PARENTS?

From the surveys, in aggregate, parents clearly indicated they feel good about being a parent. In addition:

- 96% enjoy doing things with their children;
- 94% feel good about themselves as a parent;
- 93% feel they are doing the right things as a parent;
- 88% feel they are the best they can be; and
- 91% provide their children with activities that help them learn.

WHERE DO FAMILIES GO?

The top five activities parents facilitate for their children include going to:

- playgrounds;
- recreations programs;
- the Library;
- Preschool; and
- informal parent get-togethers.

WHERE DO PARENTS ACCESS INFORMATION?

Parent survey respondents indicated their preferred sources of information when looking for programs, services and supports are:

- Other parents 11%;
- Online/website 24%;
- Social media 10%;
- Community newsletter 12%;
- School 12%

The “voices” of parents were expressed not just through their words but through their actions. In some cases, it will be actions, events or observations as described by service providers or other project participants that are represented. For the sake of brevity, this document does not contain all the research descriptors and qualifiers from the original documents but attempts to succinctly portray common themes and trends that stand out and will be valuable to those developing continuums of service in communities.

Discoveries

This is What was Discovered through the Voices of Parents

The following findings clearly demonstrate that the third goal of The Early Years Continuum Project is right on in that parents very much want to be involved in decisions that affect their child's development.

1. PARENTS FEEL AND DO BETTER WHEN FEELINGS OF ISOLATION ARE REDUCED AND PARENT AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT IS INCREASED.

Some of the data seems to indicate an emerging trend that when parents are linked in with one another through a shared source such as EYCP, they develop relationships that are supportive in finding needed information.

- Parents find it helpful to feel a “sense of community”, friendship and shared experience among parents. Trust and belonging emerge and networks develop.
- Parents who met together on a regular basis created new and firm relationships; increased awareness of common needs; and gained understanding of the diversity of families. They became more focused on the needs of those new to the community and finding ways to engage one another.

“The project has been a meeting place to find other parents and build a great mom’s group. People are coming to the Community League’s suppers and other events now too. Meeting others energizes you to attend these events because it is hard to go to them alone.”

- Parents indicated robust agreement with feeling more connected with their community and having more connections with other parents and/or caregivers.
- Some parents want to stay connected through this work as their children grow and transition to different schools. The bonds that were created have value and purpose.

“...Just to be able to talk with other parents and get out into the community. You know you are not the only one whose kid has a tantrum in the grocery store. Other parents are going through the same thing...”

“When my friend first started coming she didn’t know anybody. Now she is connected with lots of other parents and they do play-dates and go to the park. This is so important.”



Early Learning Services

Mothers in the study were knowledgeable about the early learning services available in their communities, and considered carefully the kinds of services they used. Their stories showed that child care experiences were integral to and profoundly shaped the extent to which families experienced well-being. Child care also impacted decisions about work-family integration.

*U of A Child Care Study
Evaluation Report*



2. PARENTS GAIN STRENGTH FROM DEVELOPING A SENSE OF WHAT THEY NEED AND WANT IN THEIR COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN AND PREPARING THEM FOR SCHOOL ENTRY.

Some of the highlights from the data indicate the development of social capital among the parents and an increasing ability to encourage healthy development in their children – both trends of note.

- Parents indicated that they know more about what they can do to support and participate in the healthy development of their children. They have valuable information to help them make parenting decisions.
- Parents are more aware of and more confident in supporting their child's healthy development. They know more about when to seek supports and services.
- Parents feel more supported in their role as a parent and caregiver.
- Providing parents of young children with resources, activities and a contact person such as the site co-ordinator, increases their capacity to support their child's needs.
- A parent who participated in the photovoice project said the Splash Park was an important part of her community as it allowed her to watch her child explore the world on his own in a safe place. It is important that parents and children have opportunities to learn together.

"...We are learning how to pull people together. For instance, we went to a low income neighbourhood and planned a party with them. And because one of us used to live there, people came because of the relationship. But then they saw relevance and support in the play party we had all put together..."

"...Just the parent groups that we've had... We now look at every other child as we walk by as our own. And those children have been brought into the fold, because we say, 'O.K., you are our target.' And we look at that child who is lost, or the one who may need more support and say, 'That is who we need to support in our next meeting.' So we are looking proactively at the community, as in: 'We need to figure out how to help you and your family'. So this is our process now. Not just my family, but maybe something can be done to help the others..."



The "Help Me" Fence

"The fence could be symbolic of feeling like some days as a parent you have support when you need it and some days you don't. Some days you can hold it together and some days you just fall flat. Some days you try your best to make the world see that everything is okay, but behind the fence it's all a big mess."

Photovoice



Discoveries

3. PARENTS GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR COMMUNITY'S ASSETS AND GAPS THROUGH THEIR ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES.

The Knottwood Community League has new understanding of the value of its facilities and ways in which they can be used. The EYCP has invigorated the use of the amenities through its own events and the participating families have discovered purposes for them, as well.

- Parents expressed being more aware of programs, services or supports available.
- Parents attended reflective thinking sessions to increase capacity to evaluate community provisions, assets and gaps.
- Parents met with service providers to discuss their needs and attended information and resource exchanges.
- Project partners participated in community events to help parents learn more about community services and supports and about early childhood development.

“Over 240 families attended the first Early Years Exposition designed and implemented by the EYCP team. Newly elected community leaders were present and over 35 volunteers supported the occasion at which service providers and businesses showcased what they had to offer the local families. Across the range of local stakeholders, a continuum of health, learning, human services and community leadership has evolved. A young mom, supported by her doula, safely delivered her child in Grande Prairie and returned in time to attend the event.”



Community Connection

A parent participant commented that she had no idea, until being involved in the EYCP, that she could be part of the community in this way.

Focus Group



4. PARENTS KNOW WHAT IS HELPFUL TO THEM TO BECOME ENGAGED AND TO BE COMFORTABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN PROGRAMS, ACTIVITIES AND IN “COMMUNITY”.

“...We are starting to see significant change with community members, people are starting to come out to events; High Prairie has been a fragmented community for many years. For example, we are creating an FASD walk...and that would not have been possible earlier, but now we are sure it will be supported and people will come...”

SOME KEY POINTS THAT SUPPORT PARENTS ACCESS TO SERVICES:

- friendly, knowledgeable and helpful staff;
- knowing you're not alone and feeling supported;
- sharing common experiences and being able to have fun in safe places with friends;
- it is easier to participate when there is a sense of community;
- parents having the opportunity to provide input into program planning and delivery;
- flexible appointment times, dates and facilities located close to home;
- programs that facilitate talking, learning and socializing with your children;
- good referral relationships and agencies involved in the communities they serve;

“The cost of childcare keeps you from going to events, volunteering and meeting people. The project coordinator asks, ‘Do you need a babysitter?’ and then she finds ways to get the service available and affordable.”

“...I have met other parents through the project. I feel as a parent, that I have become a community member, with the meetings and events. With more time, I really want to become involved in my Community League...”



Growing

“The theme of growing refers to my plants and my children. I enjoy planting with my girls and teaching them about where food comes from, how weather affects things, how to nurture and take care of plants. I think it is important for my children to learn and appreciate these things... You don't need a lot of space to grow something good, the same goes with raising children.”

Photovoice



Discoveries

5. PARENTS GAIN CONFIDENCE AND THUS THEIR CAPACITY TO HELP BRING ABOUT DESIRED EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CHANGES.

“There are increased programs for parents that are parent-led. Now service providers can integrate our voice in their planning.”

- Parents reported having gained increased awareness and understanding of matters relevant to the ECD sector.
- Parents attended EYCP specific and community planned events, and training events to build understanding about the early years.
- Posters, brochures, media releases were created to help increase awareness and understanding.
- Participation in the Parents as Champions group directly contributed to increased engagement with the community. Parents observed that their skills and time can make a difference and that they can be involved in the larger issues to good effect.
- Parents feel like they have more influence in decisions about programs, services, and/or supports.
- Parents were happy and felt included to be able to attend the Alberta Early Years Conference in Sept. 2012.
- Parents participated in U of A research on child care issues.

- Parents worked together and developed a pool of trained local babysitters.
- As parents solidified as a group, they developed a first-hand interest in the larger context of the Early Childhood sector. At the same time, they grew their ‘voice’ and began discussion on political and policy matters, many attending a Together We Raise Tomorrow session, joining provincial consultation groups and lobbying local coalitions to increase their attention on providing programs for young children.

“...We are the people as parents who can name why some children reach kindergarten unprepared, that some have not been identified as children with special needs, how that feels, and the barriers we face. But we are not the people to come up with the big solutions. That has to be at a higher government level. We need more quality childcare for working families. Let’s not say we have found solutions to deep societal root causes...”

“Photovoice helped us to go to town council and say, ‘Here are the actual pictures, and here are the voices of the parents and kids who are using these facilities . . . Here is a park that doesn’t have a fence because of the fire-hall expansion.”



Community Navigators

“If your child has special needs, it’s still not easy.... The project found ways to make awareness of services easier.... Having someone in the community as “navigator” makes a big difference...a hub for resources and information, and making things happen...also brings people together, she has a strong sense of community.”

Focus Group



6. PARENTS HAVE A VISION FOR THEIR COMMUNITY THAT INCLUDES HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

Parents of young children would feel comfortable reaching out for support, to either another parent or an agency, and would get their needs met easily and quickly.

Parents envision an ideal continuum of early years services:

- The school would be the hub and centre for activities as an ideal place to centralize after school and community activities, and to keep parents' and community members' volunteer energy focused on their home community;
- All of the services and supports in the community for young families and preschool children would work together and know what each other can offer;
- There would be a broader distribution of information on healthy pregnancy and increased support offered by Alberta Health Services through public health nurse visits to newborns would be beneficial. Babies would be delivered in the community, with proper hospital operating room personnel. People would not need a "whole day's event" to travel to other communities for pre-natal appointments or ultrasound, for convenience and safety for young families, especially in the winter; and
- Every child would feel equally ready and welcome when they enter kindergarten.

Parents want:

- Universal low cost access to preschool with increased early diagnosis of difficulties (e.g., Ages & Stages Questionnaire screening) and access to Program Unit Funding (PUF) and specialist services as needed, to better prepare children for school, prevent their falling behind and being bullied or bullying;
- Inclusive community hubs, with staff trained in cultural competency, and are skillful in welcoming young families that have moved into the area, including newcomers to Canada;
- Increased awareness of activities and other information available through Community Leagues in Edmonton as well as a "welcome wagon" to assist new families with settling into the neighborhood;
- More community building gatherings and celebration, (e.g., block parties and fire pits), providing a way for parents with young children to participate in community events and meet others with common interests;

- Community events would offer on-site childcare;
- Increased access to specialized services such as Speech and Occupational Therapy specifically for young children in the community, without having to travel or wait long periods of time;
- Kindergarten at 5 years of age, including access to Program Unit Funding which is typically available only from age two and a half years to kindergarten.



The Big Hill

To this family, and especially the children, the Big Hill is a 'big deal'. It is a special place for exploring and imagination, family time, physical activity (jogging and walking) and a place to take a bit of time out from the day.

Photovoice



Discoveries

7. PARENTS KNOW WHAT THEY WANT IN EARLY LEARNING AND CARE PROGRAMS

Without exception, mothers in the four focus groups conducted by the Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, expressed a desire for quality child care environments for their children. Quality child care environments were equated with child care that mothers could trust.... Additional detailed information can be found in the complete report.

- The most common type of child care utilized by parents in our study was grandparent care, followed by parent turn-taking, care by other relatives, babysitters, and friends and neighbours. Day care was the least used type of care followed by day home use. The findings in our report suggest that a key reason for using informal care arrangements was that families could not find formal care arrangements that they could trust.
- Mothers consistently cited three key barriers to finding the child care they required: quality, access, and affordability. Parents describe in detail the veritable struggles they had with these issues, and how this impacted their family well-being and decision-making in regard to work-family integration.
- Although not all parents wanted full-time, centre-based child care, many parents expressed a desire for opportunities for their children to grow and develop in high-quality, structured programs with a curriculum. Parents linked these early learning opportunities to their children's healthy growth and development but also discussed broader societal benefits of quality early learning environments.
- For some, centre-based care was preferred because trust was equated with indicators such as an early learning curriculum, the ratio between caregivers and children, and caregiver education.
- Importantly, some mothers indicated that the most important measure of quality of child care for them was their child's happiness in a child care situation.
- As part of an ideal scenario, mothers discussed the logistics of child care, including the location of child care, pick-up and drop off, the "disconnect" between kindergarten and day care locations and transportation.



Parent Leaders

In all sites, more parents started taking initiative. Parent leaders emerged in several circles: School Parent Councils; playschool involvement and development; social planning committees; and mobilizing and coordinating community events for other parents.

Focus Group



In Summary

THE PURPOSE OF THE EYCP

was to learn how to create and sustain a comprehensive continuum of services for families with young children. Clearly, one of the great successes of the Project is the wealth of rich information and insight garnered from the Voice of the Parents. This body of knowledge will greatly enhance the development of successful continuums of early learning services and supports. As identified in The Early Years Continuum Final Evaluation Report, the Voice of Parents needs to be included in all future discussions and decisions regarding ECD environments and services. The Voice of Parents must be part of the collection of information driving our system changes.

It is clear from the thoughts, dreams, hopes and aspirations expressed that parents know what they want and need in and from their communities to help them raise their children to be the best they can be. If listened to, the voices of parents will continue to inform ways in which to improve practice and develop more comprehensive continuums of “early years services”.

Service providers, community organizations and leaders, municipal and provincial government representatives must actively find ways to engage parents and be mindful that:

- Parents want opportunities to participate in leadership roles and to provide input into programs, events, services and policies that impact them. They are eager to learn about healthy child development. They want to make a difference in their communities.
- Reaching out to parents where they go such as playgrounds, recreation programs and libraries, as well as sharing information in a variety of ways including the internet and social media are valuable strategies. The role of navigator is important in helping parents find and access programs and services.
- Programs, events and services need to be culturally aware and sensitive. It is better if they are offered in communities but if not possible, transportation needs to be readily available.
- Parents want specialized services for children with special needs and affordable access to babysitting.
- Parents are more likely to participate when they develop a sense of community through shared experiences.
- Parents like to participate and explore with their children in clean and safe environments such as green spaces and walking paths.
- Parents will reach out to newcomers to their community and develop their own networks of support when given opportunities.

“There are increased programs for parents that are parent-led. Now service providers can integrate our voice in their planning.”

Focus Group

Information in this document has been summarized from the following documents which can be found on the Success By 6® website at successby6edmonton.info

*Early Years Continuum Project Final Evaluation Report and Appendixes; * Survey Summary Notes; * Knottwood Parents As Champions Summary Notes; * Early Years Continuum Project: “Parental Voice” Final Report Principal Investigator Dr. Rhonda Breitzkreuz; * Photovoice Project Summaries*



EARLY YEARS CONTINUUM PROJECT

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