

The Early Years

Introduction

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT significant brain development takes place in the first six years of life and sets the foundation for learning throughout our lives.

Children's brains develop best in strong, nurturing relationships.

These relationships buffer toxic stress, and include a “serve and return” process where children’s attempts to interact with adults are met with attention and returned, much like serving and returning a ball in a game of tennis. When children lack these enriching interactions, they have less opportunity to develop their brains in critical ways.

As a community, we all have a role to play to ensure children have responsive environments and experiences they need to help them learn, develop and thrive.

In the early years, a continuum can be defined as the experiences of continuity and careful management of transitions between settings.

EYCP Literature Review

The Early Years Continuum Project

THE PURPOSE OF THE EARLY YEARS CONTINUUM PROJECT (EYCP) was to learn how to create and sustain a comprehensive continuum of community supports for families with young children (prenatal to school entry). The project engaged three Alberta communities to better understand the essential qualities of family and community environments necessary for healthy early childhood development (ECD); to identify needs and challenges, assets and opportunities; and create strategies to establish effective continuums of services and supports for families.

OVERARCHING GOALS:

- Families and children have access to a comprehensive range of early learning and care services in their communities;
- Children have opportunities to build a strong foundation of learning and development prior to beginning school; and,
- Parents needs and interests inform decisions regarding environments to support their child’s healthy development.

ADDITIONAL CROSS CUTTING GOALS:

- Communities develop capacities for creating change; and
- Increased capacity for evaluation, communication and translating learning to inform change in practice and policies.

“Through its design and evolution, we believe the EYCP adds a unique and valuable contribution to the overall work being done through various ministries and initiatives by providing focused attention on, and inclusion of, the parent voice.”

Focus group participant



Funded by Alberta Education



The Early Years

Community Focus for Learning

High Prairie (Rural Alberta): Community Capacity Building

Examples of activities:

- Early Years Directory: Led to increased collaboration and coordination across partners and communities. It increased understanding of services available.
- Doula Project: Supported healthy pregnancies and links to pre/post natal support services (locally).
- Service Pathways: Community engagement and conversations to develop service delivery pathways increased awareness of the need for access to the right service at the right time. Particular focus was placed on early identification and support for children at risk of developmental delays.

Knottwood (South East Edmonton): Parents as Champions

- Activities: Innovative responses to parent identified needs (Parent book club, babysitting club, presentations from services).
- Events: Linking to and expanding on existing Community League events and creating parent events to strengthen networks.
- Learning: With a focus on increasing capacity, community based learning opportunities related to early learning and child development were provided.

Lymburn (West Edmonton): Leveraging and Strengthening Connections

- Brown Bag Lunches (BBL): Created intersectoral community service provider meetings (now called Building Better Linkages).
- Community Hubs: Centres of Community Connection were developed as places of collaboration for parents and service providers to share information and support. Each was a natural place where parents gather such as the library, schools and health centres.
- Appreciative Inquiry: Cross sector training for community conversations and a lens focused on strength based dialogue and engagement.

We are moving to an understanding of the breadth of resources and depth... All the tools have been great; all the brochures and information. It's like a quilt of care.

Service provider

Promising Practice - What Worked?

Early Years Continuum Project achieved success through activities that focused on opportunities to:

- Work Collectively;
- Engage Parent Voice;
- Build Capacity; and
- Build Community Awareness.

WHAT WORKED?

- Focused on multiple approaches including “no wrong door” – network and relationship building at the service level;
- Broke down silos of where we provide services, went where parents are;
- Created Community Connection Centres based on a “hub model” of service delivery in multiple locations;
- Supported key navigators/ coordinators to build links and focus time energy and resources on looking at transition points and ways to better support parents and children;
- Engaged broad stakeholders with a common vision;
- Engaged parents through events and opportunities to have a voice;
- Linked to other work taking place to leverage opportunities;
- Built capacity where needed to achieve collective goals;
- Used a communication schematic to focus our messaging with key audiences;
- Created and disseminated information in a multitude of ways;
- Learned from each other along the way!

Evaluation

Measuring Impact and Progress

EVALUATION WAS CONDUCTED

by E. Krupa Research and Development Inc. contracted through the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research. Developmental Evaluation “walked along side” the project and individual community sites to measure change and track the journey in order to inform recommendations at local and provincial levels with multiple audiences.

How did the project contribute to community services and service providers? Improved access, effectiveness, learning and sustainability

CAPACITY TO CREATE CHANGE

At each site and at the provincial level, evaluation measured an increase in capacity in key domains:

- Participation and engagement;
- Leadership capacity;
- Sense of community - organizational structures and networks;
- Ability to obtain resources for communication; and
- Collaboration among stakeholders.

COMMUNITIES PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION:

73% Increased collaboration in providing supports and services.

55% Services are more supportive of a continuum of services.

93% Improved networking and information sharing among early learning.

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN HAVE ACCESS

72% Increased ability to help families' access resources they need.

72% Increased ability to make successful referrals.

PARENTS INFORM DECISIONS

80% Increased understanding of what parents want in services.

65% Increased parent input into program planning and delivery.

525 Number of parents engaged (Through surveys, focus groups, photo voice).



Community Story

Over the last three years we have watched participation at community events grow from 40 to over 200 and hear parents say they feel more connected to their community.

Major Lessons Learned

1. Communities learned how to engage parents and service providers to create a continuum of services and supports and transform environments.
2. Community and provincial teams built capacities to learn, create and sustain change.
3. There were **6 keys to success** in ECD community capacity building and action:
 - **A strong project management team:** mentors who were well connected and able to navigate complexities;
 - **Community Coordinators:** resourceful and respected communicators in touch with their communities;
 - **Evaluation support:** reflective and evaluative thinking with support to clarify situations, inform decisions and build capacity;
 - **Community controlled resources:** empowered communities able to respond to local needs and dynamics;
 - **Strategic assessment/ planning and action:** enabling people with information and support for understanding and decision making;
 - **Adequate time:** to allow community development, build relationships, clarify roles, engage stakeholders, create collaboration, understand complexities, take action and create change.

Call to Action

Recommendations

1. Build on the early childhood networks and champions that exist in communities throughout our province. Navigators and connectors are essential!
2. Build from the grass roots ability to self evaluate, take action and advocate for early childhood in community.
3. Connect projects focused on child development in the early years, so we can share with each other and continue to support local community work.
4. Make sure ECD is on every agenda and find ways to overcome barriers and create opportunities.
5. Continue to invest in understanding of how children are developing in our province (such as EDI) and increase understanding of relevant research so we can learn from what works.

“Before people just sat back, “That’s the way it is.” People are finally motivated, with a voice, and a platform, bringing groups together with a plan.

Parent

Listen to community voice

FAMILIES ARE EACH UNIQUE and have different and emerging needs over time. The goal is to have a strong system of coordinated supports and services in community that create a comprehensive continuum from prenatal through school entry.

Strong continuums of support in the early years are essential in order to provide a strong foundation for life-long learning, and to ensure we thrive and prosper as a society now and in the future. We have an opportunity to utilize the learning from this project to achieve the vision of improved well-being for all young children in Alberta.

WHEN ASKED TO IMAGINE THE DESIRED FUTURE, PARENTS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS ENVISIONED:

- A local and provincial framework for ECD that emphasizes development of a continua of services and supports;
- Inclusive community hubs, with staff trained in cultural competency, and skillful in welcoming families that move into an area, including new comers to Canada;
- Focused social media and public awareness campaigns and dissemination of ECD information; and
- Use of learnings from evaluations and research to improve early child development policies and practices.

What you can do

THROUGHOUT THIS PROJECT, we have had the opportunity to build stronger links and provide recommendations from our learning for a stronger early system of support for families with young children. We encourage others to listen to the wisdom of communities and families who participated.

There are multiple efforts taking place in Alberta to better support families with young children. We encourage people leading such work to think about how each component can link in order to leverage resources and learning from others to create strong continuums of support for children and families prenatal through school entry, and so all children have a healthy start.

SOME TANGIBLE IDEAS FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES AND SERVICE PROVIDERS:

- Ask parents about their needs and their experiences in accessing supportive environments for their families;
- Reflect on how your well your services and the transition points are currently connected to support access for families in your community;
- Identify areas for improved coordination or collaboration with others to make supports more easily accessible and better suited to family needs; and
- Find out more about the strategies used within the Early Years Continuum Project and outcomes of the project and recommendations for action.

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