

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Fall - September 2012

Myth-busting: Getting the facts right

We're now past the midway point of our five-year project. Ninety-nine early childhood development (ECD) communities have been identified and mapped in Alberta. Ninety coalitions are now working in communities to support research and promote positive early development locally.

This is a remarkable achievement, made possible by the hard work of hundreds of Albertans. Let's celebrate — and let's take stock.

This is a good time to review key messages and clear up some misconceptions that have cropped up. Getting the facts straight will help to keep us all on track.

Myth #1: Early childhood development is what happens between ages 4 to 6.

Fact: It actually covers the prenatal period to age 5. This is when the brain develops most rapidly. This formative period has lifelong implications on everything from health to learning, behavior and overall well-being.

Myth #2: ECMap's focus is on children who are 'at risk'.

Fact: The Project is about all children and ensuring that all children are raised in supportive environments. Every child deserves the best possible start in life and the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential. The research shows that the best early development outcomes are achieved when high-quality, appropriate supports are available for all children.

Myth #3: Parents are solely responsible for raising young children.

Fact: Parents are important, but the whole community ("village") has a role to play, too. The community affects children indirectly by supporting parents and through good community planning, and directly through positive interactions with children in everyday encounters.

Myth #4: The best way to support positive early development is through programs.

Fact: Although programs can be valuable, they are only a part of the everyday circumstances and environments that affect young children's development. These environments include the immediate family and neighbourhood, the community (libraries, medical facilities, parks, etc.) and physical surroundings (safety, clean water and air, access to healthy food, etc.), and broader society (public and social policy, economic factors, etc.)

Myth #5: ECD coalitions are made up of service providers.

Fact: Coalitions are broad-based, community organizations that include service providers, parents, grandparents, businesspeople, artists and other citizens as the "village" comes together to raise happy, healthy young children.

In this issue

<i>Myth-busting:</i>	
<i>Getting the facts right</i>	1
<i>Milestones are not written in stone</i>	2
<i>Coalitions reach out across Alberta</i>	3
<i>Launa Clark:</i>	
<i>Connecting Calgary</i>	4
<i>FYI</i>	4
<i>Contact us</i>	4



Early childhood development

Milestones are not written in stone

By Dr. Susan Lynch

Steps is the name of our newsletter. It's also a metaphor for many aspects of the EMap Project and of early childhood development, including the idea that children develop step by step through a series of milestones, each in the same sequence from babyhood to kindergarten. There is a growing interest, however, in how steps in normal development can vary widely from one child to another, even missing some of the



Dr. Susan Lynch

steps that used to be thought as essential. For example, some normally developing babies may walk early, skipping the crawling stage altogether.

Researchers have become increasingly interested in learning more about individual variation in normal development and are exploring the reasons for differences. Some studies have identified wide variation in personality or temperament right from birth. Other studies have looked at ways in which the culture in which children are raised can produce differences in the patterns of normal development.

An interesting example of cultural influence can be seen in children in some Asian countries, such as China and Indonesia, who are surrounded by adults who do paper cutting art as part of their daily lives. By age 2 ½, the children have already begun to develop highly advanced paper cutting art skills using scissors and other cutting instruments, far beyond what would be seen in children at that age in North America.

Research into brain development has begun to track how a child's experiences can trigger genetic predispositions, change the way the brain grows and develops, and impact the behaviour of some children but not others. Researchers acknowledge that information about milestones can serve as a useful tool

for parents and early childhood professionals, but they stress that we should expect to see a wide range of developmental differences in children, at any given age, all within the range of normal development.

What does this mean for our work at EMap? The idea of normally occurring individual difference affects how we interpret and use the EDI data. As a research project, we are looking at how differences in age, sex, culture and other factors may impact results. As we encounter differences in groups of children, we will need to find possible sources of those differences and whether they signal normal development or a deficiency in and a need to change children's environments.

We need to be able to understand when we are looking at results that appear to indicate a large number of young children experiencing difficulties whether these are indicators of cultural differences, and not necessarily of developmental difficulties, for example. Or when results have been distorted by age —

a high percentage of very young children in a particular kindergarten population, to give another example.

Throughout our work, our interpretation of individual differences revealed by the EDI will affect the types of policies or community actions that will need to be considered.

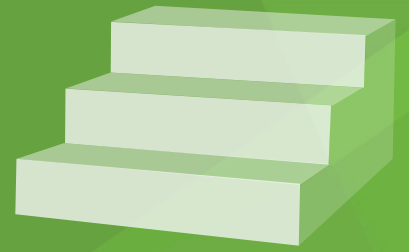


Photos: Dr. Sylvia Chard



Young children in a preschool in rural China create intricate paper cutting art, exhibiting scissor skills far beyond what would be seen in children at that age in North America

Community coalitions



Coalitions reach out across Alberta

About 30 people were clustered at the front of the meeting room, waiting to transfer the sticky notes stuck to their fingers to the big posters hanging on the wall.

They all had something to add to the question under discussion: “How can we use the data from ECMAP to promote the early years in our communities?”

The scene was a lunch ‘n’ learn session in Sherwood Park, attended by 11 central Alberta coalitions, from Athabasca to Camrose and Edmonton.

“Our biggest challenge has been figuring out how to get the research results into people’s hands,” says Victoria Laidlaw, a lunch ‘n’ learn participant and member of the Discovering West Edmonton Coalition. “This enabled us to think through the potential for sharing the information and making the biggest impact.”

“Coalitions are finding it extremely useful to get together and explore ways of working with their (early development) data,” says Laurel McCalla, ECMAP community development coordinator for the Edmonton area and organizer of the lunch ‘n’ learn. “Community-based research encourages communities to frame questions around data in a relevant way and look at what’s happening.”

This is uncharted territory for most communities in Alberta, which are actively participating in early childhood development research for the first time and developing local action plans to respond to the emerging data.

“There are no 20 steps for how they should do this,” notes Laurie Lafortune, ECMAP community development coordinator for the Red Deer region. “As coalitions develop their own community processes, they benefit enormously through sharing ideas, tools and strategies.”

Lafortune and colleague Donna Cushman, ECMAP coordinator for southeast Alberta, organized a one-day session for their coalitions in Drumheller in June. Each of the 13 participating coalitions gave a 10-minute presentation on their activities. The rest of



Left: Victoria Laidlaw shares her ideas at a lunch ‘n’ learn session organized for central Alberta coalitions on May 31 in Sherwood Park. **Right:** Mike Bowerman is working with Calgary’s citywide coalition to collaborate on common issues.

the day was spent discussing practical issues such as using social media, submitting seed grant applications, hiring coalition coordinators, recruiting and retaining coalition members and collecting information about community assets.

“Coalitions are at different stages, from those that are just applying for seed grants to those that are well on their way,” says Mellissa D’Onofrio-Jones, co-chair of the Drumheller Early Childhood Coalition. “It’s great to be able to brainstorm and learn from other people’s experiences, what worked and what didn’t. How do you put together a survey for parents? How do you organize a community early years fair?”

Coalitions are meeting formally and informally across the province more and more frequently for networking, professional development and training, and sharing resources. As Lafortune points out, coalitions in different geographic areas are finding it useful to meet to discuss issues they have in common. Rural areas may share a concern for declining populations and the distances residents have to travel to access services, for example.

Coalitions in Calgary have banded together in a citywide coalition that is looking at ways to collaborate. “We can have a much greater impact if we speak with a unified voice and work together to achieve our shared goals,” says Mike Bowerman, an active member of both the Calgary citywide and the Calgary Downtown coalitions.

Provincial meeting

The first provincial meeting of coalitions will be held Nov. 7-8 at the University of Alberta Conference Centre in Edmonton. Every coalition is invited to send two delegates. For further information, please contact the ECMAP community development coordinator in your area: <https://www.ecmap.ca/About-ECMap/Staff/Pages/Contacts.aspx>

Profile

Launa Clark: Connecting Calgary

Launa Clark likes to tell the following anecdote to illustrate the benefits of constructive competition.

She first heard the story from a coalition member, who grew up on a dairy farm and heard it from her dad.

When a calf is a reluctant feeder and fails to thrive, farmers will sometimes “borrow” a calf that’s a good nurser from another cow and introduce it into the pen. The arrival of the milk-guzzling intruder galvanizes the apathetic calf. The apathetic calf will push its way forward, asserting its own right to nurse, and begin suckling with new enthusiasm.

“Competition is part of animal — and human — nature,” says Clark, EMap community development coordinator for the Calgary area. “It injects that certain edge that can get things going and accomplished.”

Clark grew up on a dryland farm near Cardston, in southern Alberta, but she can easily relate to the story because it reflects the rural values that she was raised with. Like most farm kids, Clark was combining on her own, driving a John Deere 9500 on the family’s 40,000-acre spread, well before her teens. She describes her childhood upbringing as one instilled with



Launa Clark is community development coordinator for the Calgary region.

competitiveness and cooperation. Both qualities had their place and were necessary for survival.

Those values have transplanted well, Clark says, in her work in Alberta’s entrepreneurial oil capital, where she serves coalitions in 12 early childhood development communities.

“I love the can-do energy in this town,” she says. “The strike-while-the-iron is hot attitude. I love how entrepreneurs and philanthropists are willing to sit down at the table together.”

“Competition can be a great motivator, but it shouldn’t happen at someone else’s expense,” she adds. Clark advocates co-opetition, a business strategy that promotes cooperative competition for everyone’s mutual benefit as an alternative to the winner-takes-all approach.

Clark, who now makes her home in Okotoks with her husband and four children, has been involved in early childhood development for more than 20 years. She started out as a preschool assistant at the Cardston Community Preschool, ran her own day home, taught at Lethbridge College and Mount Royal University, and supported early child education and care professionals through the accreditation standard process.

Her main function as an EMap community development coordinator is to act as a “connector,” she says, bringing people from different sectors and walks of life together in her communities.

Launa Clark can be reached at: clark@ualberta.ca or 406-871-8061.

FYI

Alberta Early Years Conference

EMap Director Dr. Susan Lynch is conference ambassador for the Alberta Early Years Conference in Edmonton Sept. 20-22. The biennial conference will be held at the Edmonton Marriott at the River Cree Resort. For more information and to register, please go to <http://www.albertaearlyyears.ca>

EDI on the Go

To get the latest news on EDI (Early Development Instrument) Projects in Canada and across the world, check out the Offord Centre’s new newsletter at <http://www.offordcentre.com/readiness/pubs/publications.html>

Contact us

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For further information, please go to www.ecmap.ca

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Mapping a bright future for Alberta’s young children