

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Fall 2014

Tremendous achievements: just count 'em

Numbers don't tell the whole story, but they do provide a good glimpse of what's been accomplished in five years of research and community engagement around the early years in Alberta.

Consider these numbers:

70,206: That's the number of kindergarten-aged children included in EDI (Early Development Instrument) baseline results in Alberta. We now have solid data that shows how our young children are developing and can be used to track change over time.

1,100: Kindergarten teachers in approximately 1,100 schools participated in EDI data collection.

1,130: That's how many people are actively involved in 102 ECD (early childhood development) community coalitions in Alberta. These are core members who regularly attend meetings and contribute to coalition work.

The scope of the work has been tremendous. Coalitions have brought a broad cross-section of their communities together to support positive early development, shared their results widely and mobilized local responses to the data. The results are currently being used to inform programming and policy-making by government, community organizations and service providers, including libraries and school boards.

Baseline results were released to communities in April in the *How are our young children doing? Community profiles of early childhood development in Alberta* report. The report showed that a high percentage of young

children are struggling in Alberta, higher than the Canadian norm. Nearly 29 per cent are experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development, as compared to 25.4 per cent for the Canadian norm.

More detailed provincial results will be available later this fall. The findings so far indicate:

- > There is a strong correlation between socio-economic status and EDI results.
- > Geography does not appear to be a factor in EDI trends. High and low EDI results — and everything in between — can be found in rural and urban areas, more densely and more sparsely populated areas and in all the regions of the province.
- > Although a higher percentage of children living in low socio-economic communities experience developmental difficulties, the largest numbers of children who are struggling are found in middle class communities.

Results for children with disabilities will also be completed and released in a separate report (*How are our young children doing? Children with special needs in Alberta*) this fall.

Interactive maps will be launched on our website www.ecmap.ca this fall. Visitors will be able to click on a community or subcommunity in Alberta and access EDI results, socio-economic data and information about community resources for that area.

What happens next? We'll let you know as soon as we know.

Meanwhile, the work continues.



Kelly Brooks, The Barrhead Leader

Maureen Fiebich, coordinator of the Communities for Children coalition, helps Jordan Veenstra, 3, pick out a book from a Little Free Library in Barrhead. Coalition members contribute thousands of volunteer hours to their communities every year. See story on page three.

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Early childhood development

Stress reduction tools help young children cope better

High levels of anxiety and stress can have a huge impact on young children's brain development, health, learning and behaviour.

Nearly 15 per cent of children aged two to five living in urban areas in Canada struggle with emotional problems related to anxiety, according to a 2011 national report (*The Well-Being of Canada's Young Children*). And the percentage is rising.

Stress in young children is often not recognized or properly understood and confused with one of its main symptoms — difficult behaviour. Children are reprimanded and punished for acting out, rather than getting the support and tools they need to handle stress more effectively.

The good news is: Awareness has increased about the effect stress can have on preschoolers. The demand has also grown for information on how to help youngsters to develop better coping skills.

Since January 2013, about 1,365 people have taken part in *Kids Have Stress Too*® workshops organized by EMap in 60 communities across the province. Participants have included parents, school superintendents, teachers, public health nurses, RCMP officers and day care providers.

"The intent is to build capacity in the community," says La Vonne Rideout, EMap community development coordinator for southwestern Alberta who has led 15 workshops in her zone. "The workshops provide a useful, practical tool that can be used to improve the emotional and social development of young children. The response has been extremely positive."

Not all stress is bad, as Rideout points out. A certain amount keeps us focused, motivated and alert. Extreme, chronic stress (caused by abuse, neglect and acute poverty, for example) can be very damaging to young children, however, by keeping the body on permanent high alert, weakening the immune



Photo supplied by Community and Family Services, Municipality of Jasper

system and developing faulty brain connections. Even everyday stress can interfere with a child's sense of well-being and ability to cope.

"As a society, we are dealing with more stressors and the stress that we as adults experience is transferred to children," says Rideout. "By learning how to recognize stress and how to respond to it, parents and other caregivers can help children to build their own skills and become more confident and resilient. Children gain tools they can use to handle the unavoidable stresses that come up."

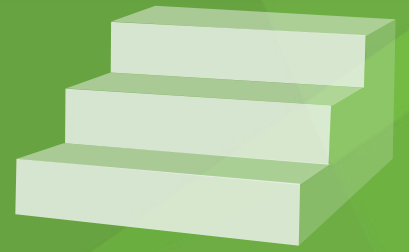
The Kids Have Stress Too® program was developed by the non-profit Psychology Foundation of Canada to help parents, caregivers and teachers to become more aware of children's stress and learn stress reduction and relaxation strategies they can use to help children cope better. EMap coordinators were trained in how to use

the program and have led workshops in communities at their request. The workshops are provided free of charge other than the cost of materials and meeting space.

"They open up conversations about early childhood development," says Kathy Crothers, EMap coordinator for west central Alberta. "They also provide coalitions with a way of responding to EDI (Early Development Instrument) results," particularly in relation to the areas of emotional maturity and social competence. EDI results show one in four young children in Alberta experiencing difficulty or great difficulty in these two developmental areas.

For more information, contact the EMap community development coordinator in your area or the EMap office at ecmap@ualberta.ca.

Community coalitions



Looking at coalition strengths and challenges

The things that make coalitions strong are also the things that create problems when they're missing.

Three factors were identified as most important to coalition success during an EMap analysis of the sustainability of early childhood development (ECD) coalitions:

- strong, positive leadership,
- a clear sense of vision and purpose, and
- a diverse membership that represents the community.

The analysis is based on reports submitted by EMap community development coordinators based in 10 zones throughout the province. It shows that a broad diversity of community members is engaged in coalition work. Eighteen sectors were identified amongst the total membership. The following five were most often represented at the table: health (85 per cent of coalitions had representatives from health), schools (78 per cent), parents and community members (73 per cent), libraries (70 per cent) and Parent Link centres (69 per cent).

Coalitions have attracted a total core membership of about 1,130 people, who regularly attend meetings and participate in coalition work. An additional 3,215 are affiliate members, who are kept informed about coalition activities. The volunteer hours invested by coalition members is enormous — more than 40,000 hours annually since coalitions have been established in the province. That's a conservative estimate that includes the hours spent in regular meetings, but not on subcommittee work or in organizing community events.

A large majority of coalitions use social media to connect with their members and communities. Facebook, by far the most popular, is used by more than 60 per cent. About a third of coalitions have their own websites.

Almost all coalitions (98) applied for seed grants and about 40 per cent were able to access other funding as well. Most coalitions



Kelly Brooks, The Barrhead Leader

Moms and tots from the Barrhead Public Library's weekly story time attend the summer launch of a new Little Free Library set up by the Communities for Children coalition and the library in Barrhead.

hired local coordinators to assist with administrative and community-building functions. A high turnover of coordinators was a problem for many coalitions. Thirty-seven per cent went through two or more coordinators during their two-year project grants. The part-time nature of the positions, often one-day a week positions, was largely blamed for the high attrition rate. Turnover in membership and leadership capacity were also challenges for many coalitions.

The information gathered by EMap coordinators builds on the *Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalitions* study, which looked at how a broad range of coalitions have developed in Alberta and what has

contributed to their successes and challenges. The study, which was undertaken by Alberta Education, Alberta Culture and EMap, also included a literature review of more than 100 academic articles, case studies, guides and web content published about and by coalitions.

EMap's follow-up analysis of ECD coalitions corroborates many of the findings of the *Harvesting the Wisdom of Coalition* study, notes Line Perron, who has been closely involved with both and is EMap's community development and mobilization manager.

"We now know what contributes to the sustainability of coalitions," says Perron. "This points the way on how to move forward."

Profiles

A simple question roped this Calgarian in

Mark Snyder got more than he bargained for when he asked what he thought was a simple question.

He wanted to know what the early development results were for his northwest Calgary neighbourhood.

“You live in Calgary NW?” was the response he got from EMap’s Calgary coordinator Launa Clark. “Perfect. We need someone to head that coalition.”

The next thing he knew he was chairing the Calgary Northwest Coalition. Not that Snyder had much spare time to take on more volunteer duties. A registered psychologist, he juggles two part-time positions (as a therapist with Early Childhood Mental Health Outreach and as a co-founder of the Kin-Der Education Foundation, which supports children with developmental delays and disabilities) with a private practice counselling children and families. He’s also a hands-on dad to three children, aged eight, six and two.

“I’ve always loved kids,” he says. “They are so much fun and have so much energy. They come into the world ready to relate and learn. They are a wonderful model of openness and responsiveness.”



Mark Snyder is the chair of the Calgary Northwest Coalition and can be reached at marksnyder.psychologist@gmail.com.

Kids can also be a big challenge, Snyder says. As a therapist, he deals with the kind of behaviours that can get young children expelled out of playschool or daycare, but he also works with families who are struggling with everyday issues related to such things as feeding, toileting and bedtimes that can turn family life into an exhausting battleground.

“We don’t live in a culture of strong parental readiness,” notes Snyder, who had to climb a steep learning curve himself as a first-time father. Good information on the different stages of early development and on strategies to handle problematic behaviours, which inevitably arise, can be enormously helpful, he says. Parents can be reluctant to seek out help and resources, however. “We need to normalize the process of parent education.”

He is a strong believer in forging partnerships and his coalition works closely with the First 2000 Days Network, which serves as an umbrella group for coalitions in Calgary. Calgary Northwest has also teamed up with the nearby Calgary West Coalition, which has similar demographics and EDI (Early Development Instrument) results. The two coalitions share a coordinator and plan family events together, including a family festival in September, to publicize their EDI data and coalition activities.

Finding time for the coalition has involved some tricky family scheduling, Snyder admits, but fortunately both he and his wife value the work. He enjoys being part of a solid, committed team that is full of positive energy and ideas. “I get inspired and energized. That’s what keeps me engaged and coming back for more.”

FYI

Alberta Early Years conference

Coalition members will lead a panel discussion on “community approaches to transforming early childhood” during the **Alberta Early Years conference** in October. The conference lineup covers a wide range of topics from parenting to the impact of stress on children, benchmark survey results on what Albertans know about early development and early childhood development results. More information on the October 6-7th gathering, aimed at parents, educators, service providers, researchers and policy-makers, can be obtained by going to the website <http://albertaearlyyears.ca>

Contact us

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

You may also contact us at ecmap@ualberta.ca 780-248-1574

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If you are not on our subscription list and would like to receive the newsletter, please contact Olenka Melnyk, communications coordinator at olenka.melnyk@ualberta.ca or 780-492-4057. We welcome your story ideas, resources, links, province wide event listings and feedback.

Mapping a bright future for Alberta’s young children