



Discover your early childhood development (ECD) community assets: A tool kit for coalitions in Alberta

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Why

Why research your community assets?

Learn more about the aspects of your community that influence development

Children are born and raised in environments that include their families, the community and broader society. The quality of these environments influences early brain development and has a profound, lifelong impact on everything from health to success at school and work, behaviour, relationships and overall sense of well-being.

As a large body of studies has shown, communities play a crucial role in creating the environments that shape critical early development. Knowing what assets your community has will enable your coalition to better understand how well your community is supporting young children and families. By gathering and sharing this information, you will also contribute to important research that is being done across Alberta as part of Alberta Education's Early Child Development (ECD) Mapping Initiative.

This tool kit outlines a three-step process to assist you as coalitions in working with your communities to identify assets that relate to early childhood development. These are called early childhood development (ECD) community assets. Having this information will help you to:

- determine your strengths as a community,
- build upon existing strengths,
- pinpoint gaps, and
- effectively promote positive early development at the local level.



Communities play a crucial role in early development

In doing this research, it is important, first of all, to understand the role that communities play in the broader context of early development. Communities are part of the early environments in which young children develop and grow. These environments are often described as a sphere of relationships that begins with the most immediate, the family, and extends outwards to the community and broader society.

Each of these relationships has a different function and impact, but they also overlap and are highly interdependent. To keep their children healthy and well, for example, parents have to have an adequate household income and nearby healthy food outlets to buy nutritious food. They need access to medical clinics, prenatal care and well-baby clinics, and green and recreational spaces in their neighbourhoods for their children to play in.

Here are some of the ways in which communities, families and society support early development.

FAMILIES OTHER CAREGIVERS

can support children by:

- providing proper nutrition and housing,
- learning what behaviours and abilities to expect from children at various ages, through books, local health clinics, a doctor or parenting programs,
- being attentive and responsive to children's needs,
- offering consistent love and affection,
- reading to children from the time they are infants,
- playing with babies and children, thus furthering their emotional, cognitive, physical and social development,
- providing safe opportunities for children to explore their surroundings, and
- avoiding constant, harsh criticism and punishment.

TIP

What other factors are involved in each of these three environments?

COMMUNITIES

can support children through:

- safe, walkable neighbourhoods,
- recreational facilities and sports programs,
- parks and green space,
- meeting places for young families,
- affordable, high-quality child care and preschool centres
- access to enrichment programs for babies and preschoolers, such as music, library or play programs,
- access to affordable, healthful food,
- training and information for families in, for example, parenting skills, nutrition and children's health,
- caring adults throughout the community who value and contribute to positive early development,
- literacy programs, and
- an inclusive, caring community spirit.

SOCIETY

can support children through:

- a balanced approach to emotional, social, cognitive and language development,
- health and family programs that include regular monitoring of babies and young children,
- employment standards that allow for more flexible work arrangements,
- high-quality early education and care standards and quality, accessible programming,
- comprehensive, accessible health care,
- child- and family-friendly policies and programs, such as parental leaves and income support policies that mitigate poverty among families with children,
- job and educational training opportunities for parents, and
- enhanced co-ordination among local, regional and national services that support families with young children.

Definitions

What is a “community”?

Community refers to a geographical area with recognizable boundaries. It is a place where the residents share a sense of belonging or ownership and identify with some or all parts of the area.

What is an ECD “community asset”?

ECD, or early childhood development, community assets are aspects of a community that members of the community identify as having value in raising young children. Assets can include features, characteristics and resources which some community members consider to be relevant to their children’s well-being. An ECD asset is something that the community identifies as valuable.

What is an ECD coalition?

An **early childhood development (ECD) coalition** is a broad-based, representative group of community members that have come together to support early childhood development locally and to work with the Government of Alberta’s Early Child Development Mapping Initiative to share research results.

Community members are the experts

As ECD coalitions, you have a leading role to play in collecting valuable research information about the impact your communities have upon early development and in strengthening your community. Only you and the people in your community can answer the questions that will yield this important information. You are the researchers.

By doing this research you can:

reach out to hear what your community values in raising young children

make connections with the people who can help enrich the lives of young children

identify opportunities to mobilize your community

build new knowledge by contributing to Alberta’s ECD Mapping Initiative research on the relationship between community context and young children’s development

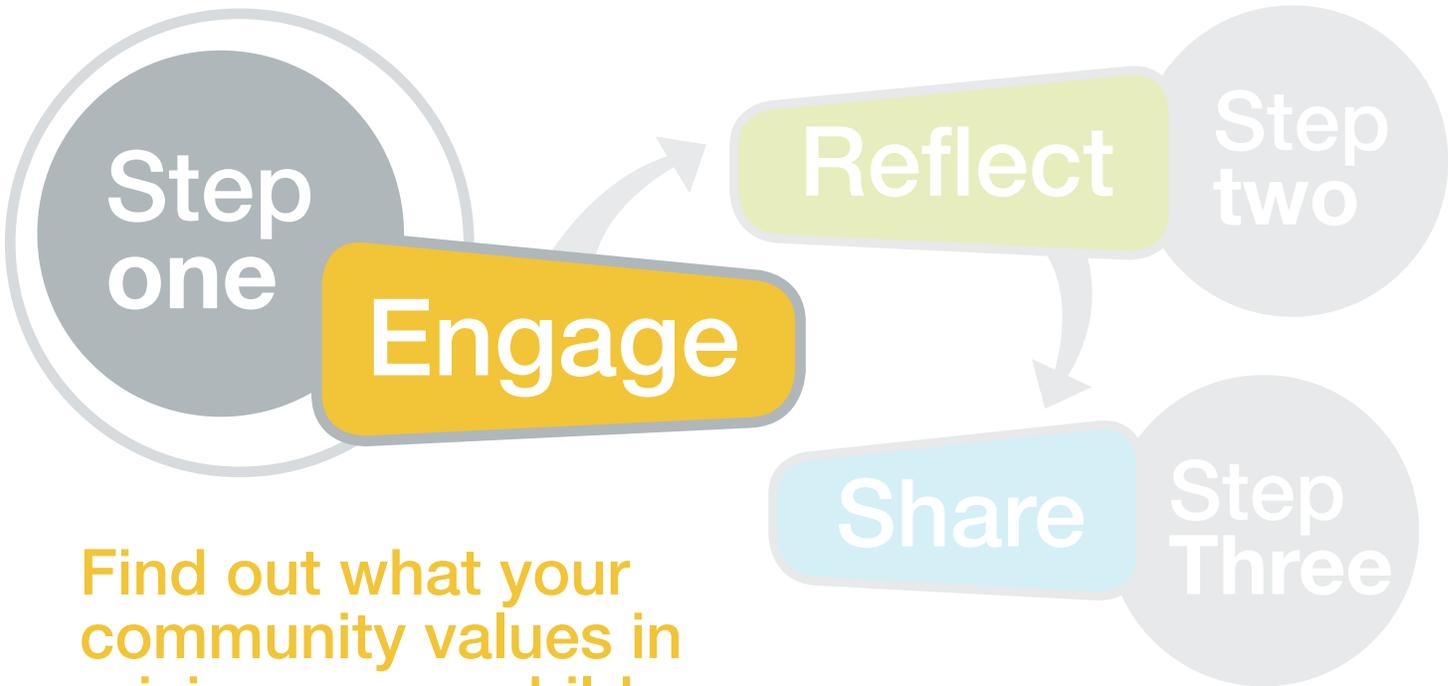
make a lasting contribution in your community and in the field of early child development research.

Putting research into action

Your research findings – the information you collect – will help identify ECD strengths and opportunities in your community and help you plan the best ways to take action to support ECD.

How

It's a three-step process



Find out what your community values in raising young children

Begin by asking these four research questions about what currently influences early development and what could influence it in the future.

1. What influences early development in our community?
2. What are the positive influences? (These are called assets.)
3. What are the negative influences?
4. What would we like to see in our community that could improve or better support early development?



What is 'research'?

Research is a systematic pursuit of new knowledge.

Keep this meaning of research in mind as you move through your community research process.



Consider 3 categories

Things in your community that influence early development may fall into one of these three main categories.

Defining influences

Positive, neutral and negative

As you move forward in your community asset research process, try to focus on the positive. What are your community's existing strengths? What are potential strengths? But don't ignore things in the community that are not so positive. These can make a difference, too. Try to balance your attention between positives, negatives and influences that may be neutral— or ones that not everyone agrees on.

Direct and indirect

Influences on early development can be **direct** — such as ECD programs and services — and **indirect** — such as a new sidewalk or crosswalk that helps parents feel safer when they are walking to a park with their young children.

Mappable and unmappable

Some things have an easily definable physical location — you can plot them on a map — and others aren't as easy to locate in physical space.



1

ECD community features

exist in physical space and can be natural or built.

- Natural features include parks, open spaces, hills, mountains, forests, lakes, and rivers.
- Built features include hospitals, places of worship, and schools.

2

ECD community characteristics

refer to qualities in the community usually related to human activities and include the social and economic qualities of the community. Examples are:

- population (number of people resident in a particular geographical area),
- availability of housing,
- industrial activity (oil and gas, forestry, farming, manufacturing, retail sales),
- community cohesion (unity and respect for difference), and
- the histories and cultures that make up the community.



3

ECD community resources

are services, programs, people, organizations and activities that affect or may have the potential to affect child development. They include:

- the skills of local residents (capacities and abilities),
- the power of local associations (community groups, such as Neighbourhood Watch or a parent-teacher association, including their programs and services),
- the resources of public, private, and non-profit institutions (including their programs and services),
- economic resources and local potential, and
- the attributes, capabilities, actions, and strategies that can help or sustain a community in adverse circumstances.

Stay on track

As you develop your list of ECD features, characteristics and resources, be sure to ask yourself: “How can this influence young children’s development?”

TIP

You may find that an item could go in more than one category, or that it doesn’t fit a category at all. That is okay. If it is important to your community, include it in your process.

Your community decides how to value its own ECD assets. What is an ECD asset in one community might not be in another.

Community features, characteristics, and resources can be positive or negative.



Create a list of community asset knowledge holders

Create a list of all the people in your community that hold knowledge about ECD community assets. Every community in Alberta is different, so each list of knowledge holders will be different. Think broadly. Reach out beyond your ECD coalition to all of the people and groups in your community who can provide insight. Be creative and inclusive. Think of the people whose work is not specifically with ECD programs or services, but who have an interest in early development. Don’t forget parents. Create a “dream” list of everyone you hope you can talk to. Even if you can’t gather information from absolutely everyone on your list, start your research with the best list possible.

Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- early child development professionals — those who work directly with children and those who administer or plan programs and services,
- organizations that serve immigrants,
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis organizations,
- organizations that serve children or adults with disabilities,
- parents and parent groups, including those for single-parent families, and gay and lesbian families,
- health care professionals whose work involves young children (for example, public health nurses),
- university and community college early childhood development faculty, and
- people living in the diverse spaces across your community — rural and urban spaces, old neighbourhoods going through transition and new neighbourhoods.

Consult your community

There are many ways you can consult the people in your community who have important knowledge about ECD features, resources and characteristics. Your ECD coalition can use one or more of these ideas — or invent your own.

Ask the people you consult what the best way would be for you to communicate the results of your research. Although many people prefer e-mail, others have different preferences. Those working in early childhood education, for example, might prefer something on paper, as their work day is less likely to involve time spent at a computer.

TIP

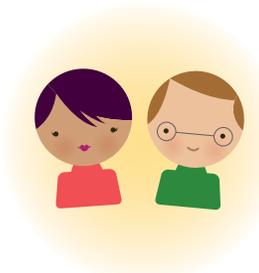
Create a ‘dream’ list of ECD knowledge holders — one that reflects your community in all of its diversity.



Large group meeting — more than 12 people: By hosting a large group meeting, you can gather the views of a large number of people from across your community at one time. The benefits? A large group will provide lots of information relatively quickly. The drawbacks? Some of the quieter voices may not be heard.



Small “focus group” — 12 people or fewer: A focus group can bring together people with something in common — or, people who would not be very likely to meet to talk about ECD together. Either way, focus groups are a great way to consult community members.



One-on-one: In some cases, you may want to speak one-on-one with a community member, especially if you feel that they have a point of view that might get lost in a bigger group meeting. One-on-one consultations can be done in person over a cup of coffee, over the telephone, or even by e-mail. They’re more time-consuming, but can help your coalition to hear quieter voices and gather important details.



Be part of the agenda at another organization’s meeting: Sometimes the easiest way to consult a group of people is to go to them. Your coalition may want to ask to be part of a regular meeting that an organization in your community is already holding. The advantage of using this approach is that you don’t have to worry about attracting attendees. You can ask to be put on an existing agenda, and then ask the group your research questions.

Figure out your approach

There are many approaches that you can take in gathering information about your community assets. You may want to use a combination of different approaches for your community asset research. One common method that you may want to consider is the “Asset Based Community Development” process.

The **Asset Based Community Development** model is a well-established approach. You can read about this approach, and download resources to help your work, from:

- the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/resources/>),
- and Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement (see their Asset Building resources page <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s22.html>).

You might also want to read *When People Care Enough to Act*, a book by Mike Green, Henry Moore, and John O’Brien (2nd edition, Toronto: Inclusion Press, 2009).

Other methods may be more effective, especially in connecting with people or groups that you can’t reach through a meeting, an e-mail, or a phone call, or in recording knowledge that is held in your community in non-verbal ways.

TIP

*Keep excellent, well-organized records of your consultations.
Consider recording discussions.
Take as many notes as practical.
You will thank yourself later when it is time to consider your results.*

Consider one of the following methods to help your coalition get to the heart of what your community values:

- **Photovoice** gives people — especially those whose voices are often overlooked and not heard — the opportunity to record, reflect and critique personal and community issues in creative ways. To read more about photovoice, visit <http://www.photovoice.ca> or <http://www.photovoice.org>
- **Mapping and art projects** can help community members to come together to express the things they value in raising young children – and can even involve finding ways to hear the voices of young children themselves. Take a look at some inspiring examples:
 - The book *Islands in the Salish Sea: A Community Atlas* documents the collaborative, creative map-making projects completed in a number of communities in British Columbia. Community members and artists created beautiful maps that show important places, community’s assets, and less tangible things, like community histories, anxieties, and sources of pride and wisdom.
 - The book *Reggio Tutta: A Guide to the City by the Children*, shows how children aged two to six participated in an arts-based process to create their own guide to their city (in this case, Reggio Emilia, Italy). Check your local library or the web for books about Reggio Emilia and find out more about how young children can be an active, important part of a larger community engagement project.

Not sure how to get started?

Talk with your Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap) community development coordinator and visit www.ecmap.ca for more ideas and links to resources.



Come together as a coalition and reflect on your results

How do you know you are “finished” consulting with your community to find out what makes a difference — or has the potential to make a difference — to young children in your community? This is where an honest reflection on your community consultation comes in. Consider inviting some of the community members or groups you have consulted to a meeting where you all reflect upon the work that has been done.

Make sure that you, as a coalition, have satisfactory answers to these questions. You may find after your initial round of consultation that you want to go back and talk with more people. If you feel that something — or someone — is missing from the information you have gathered, it’s important to follow up (to the best of your coalition’s ability). Ensuring your consultation is as complete as possible is one important way to ensure that any plans your coalition makes have broad-based community support.

Ask yourselves the following questions before you move forward with analyzing your research information:

- What did we learn about the community’s ideas for available and potential ECD assets?
- What creative ideas emerged?
- Have we consulted everyone we needed to? Are there any missing voices?
- Does what we’ve been hearing reflect the diversity of the community’s values?
- Does each item influence young children? If so, how?
- Did we focus on both the positive and the negative?

TIP

As part of your reflection, completing a “community check-in” can also be useful. Ask your community if the coalition’s “research findings” are a true reflection of what they know and how they feel. If the community responds positively, proceed. But if they are unsure or respond negatively, you will want to find out why.



Share your findings with your community

The final step is to share what you have learned with your community. Make a list of everyone and every group — from parents to community members, service providers, educators, policy makers and elected officials — that you think it’s important to share your research results with. Make sure that you include the people in the community that you consulted.

Develop a plan for sharing your results. For example, will it be through:

- specially called meetings,
- public events that already exist in the community,
- public displays,
- articles,
- web postings,
- video clips,
- PowerPoints,
- printed handouts,
- reports,
- e-mail,
- newsletters?

Cost will be an important consideration. You may be able to take advantage of existing resources and venues in your community. Put yourself in the shoes of different people in your community and figure out how you can communicate to them what they will find most useful or important about your research discoveries.

You may want to consider **how** the information you are sharing could lead to action. Could it potentially lead to changes in the design of parks or recreation programs in your community, or in the development of neighbourhoods, for example?

Assist EMap research

EMap is doing provincial research on community assets as part of its work for the ECD Mapping Initiative. Information is being gathered on community resources, features and characteristics across Alberta using data from a wide range of sources, including government and non-profit organizations. Resources — from hospitals to daycare centres, libraries, hospitals and playgrounds — will be listed and mapped. As this research progresses, communities will be invited to contribute their insights and findings.

For more information

Please contact EMap at 780-248-1574 or ecmap@ualberta.ca