

# Steps

## ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

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## Supporting early development is everyone's business By Line Perron



Line Perron is community development and mobilization manager for ECMap. She can be reached at [line@ualberta.ca](mailto:line@ualberta.ca)

An astounding 75 early childhood development coalitions have emerged across the province in the last two years, bringing together people who are passionate and committed to nurturing young children in their community.

Many service providers who work with children are participating on these coalitions. A great number and variety of 'unusual suspects' have also become involved. The diversity of response has been truly inspiring.

Mayors, business people, parents, grandparents, politicians, youth and seniors are all contributing their gifts and talents. Communities benefit from this richness of perspective and experience. They are better able to identify their strengths and gaps, and plan appropriate, effective responses.

In Fort McMurray, for example, a study by students enrolled in the Childhood Studies Program at Keyano College found that local parks were not designed for preschoolers. Early development results for Fort McMurray

also showed that a high percentage — nearly 29 per cent — of young children are experiencing difficulty or great difficulty in the area of physical health and well-being by kindergarten. The college instructor who assigned the parks study is also a member of the local coalition. She put the two pieces of information — her students' findings and early development results — together. The coalition was then able to use this information as part of their presentation to the mayor and city planners.

The community of Hanna is another example. The coalition there is looking at working with local businesses to create and distribute colourful placemats with key messages and fun activities to promote positive early development. In Calgary, coalition members have been invited by Telus Spark to tour the new science centre and offer suggestions about making the facility as user-friendly as possible for young children and families.

Supporting early childhood is everyone's business. When you cross-pollinate the ideas and expertise of individuals from many walks of life, you tap into a community's full potential. You can then create something that is truly representative of what that community can achieve.

### we engage

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# Early childhood development

## Universal public education recommended for 2-5 year olds

A new national report on early childhood education and care recommends the expansion of public education to all children aged two to five.



Kerry McCuaig

Parents would decide if and how often their children would attend.

The study points to a large body research that shows children who attend quality preschool programs are better prepared for school, acquiring the social and emotional skills that are needed to focus and learn. They also tend to do better throughout school.

The authors of the *Early Years Study* — the third released since 1999 — see early education as part of the existing public education system. “We have this wonderful asset of public education in Canada,” notes Kerry McCuaig, a lead author of the study and a University of Toronto-based expert on early childhood policy. “We have a well-developed infrastructure with great facilities and human resources, and it’s largely underutilized.”

Canada has a “hodge-podge” of private and public preschool programs, including day cares, nursery schools, pre-kindergartens, junior kindergartens, drop-ins and family resource centers. This patchwork programming is inefficient and inadequate, the report says. It fails to address the developmental needs of many young children and child care needs of many working parents.

By kindergarten, more than one in four children are developmentally vulnerable, says the study, citing Early Development Instrument (EDI) Canada-wide results. Children who struggle in kindergarten are more likely to fail in school. As adults, they are more likely to experience

poor physical and mental health, addictions, and difficulties in personal relationships and in finding well-paying, skilled jobs.

“This is an indication that we are failing many young children in their early years,” says McCuaig. “It also shows that many parents are having to make do when it comes to child care. That is what happens when you have to make do.”

Universal early education does not mean pushing academic learning on preschoolers. The report recommends a play-based curriculum delivered by trained early childhood educators.

“This is not about putting young children behind desks,” explains Jane Bertrand, lead researcher for the report. “It’s about providing young children with safe, stimulating environments to learn and explore, overseen by trained educators. The years two to five are a period of very rapid, critical brain development, which involves planning, thinking ahead, getting along with others and learning many other skills essential to succeeding in the world. Children really do seem to benefit from being with other children in guided play situations during this period of time.”

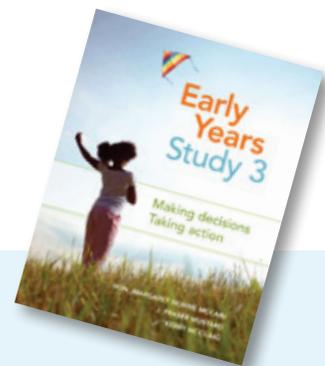
The report envisions the expansion of schools into family-oriented, community-based centers with broad-based supports for families and children. Pilot projects in Ontario (*First Duty*) and Saskatchewan (*Schools Plus*), and in Britain and Australia (*Community Schools*), have demonstrated the effectiveness of such an approach.

Canada has fallen behind other industrialized countries in investing in the early years, the report says, partly blaming concerns over cost. Early year investment is sound economic policy, however, the report says. Cost analyses of Quebec’s public early childhood system show, for example, that programs can pay for themselves. Ambivalent attitudes towards the roles of family and government have also been



a stumbling block. Highly charged debates ignore the reality that 70 per cent of mothers with children aged five and under work outside the home and that most families rely on some form of child care.

In summing up the report, McCuaig says: “The key message that we’d like people to take away is that the early years make a difference and that intelligent public policy can make a difference for children in their earliest years – and throughout their lives.”



To download a copy of *Early Years Study 3*, please go to

[http://earlyyearsstudy.ca/media/uploads/report-pdfs-en/ey3\\_en\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://earlyyearsstudy.ca/media/uploads/report-pdfs-en/ey3_en_full_report.pdf)

# Community coalitions



## Grandparents bring wisdom and experience to coalition table

### Just about everyone in Clairmont knows Sharon Nelson.

Nelson, and her husband Don, have run the corner convenience store, which doubles as the local post office, for 23 years. Nelson is also a second-term councillor for the community of 1,400, located five kilometers north of Grande Prairie. She has a long history of community volunteerism, dating back to her days as a 4-H member and candy striper at the local hospital.

Now 58, Nelson is giving some hard thought to the legacy that she'll leave behind. "I'm deeply concerned about the kind of world that we will pass on to future generations," says Nelson, a grandmother of 14. That concern has sparked a deep interest in the environment. It has also gotten her involved in the local early childhood development (ECD) coalition.

"Grandparents have invaluable knowledge and perspective to bring to the table," says Nelson, who is secretary of the East County of Grande Prairie Coalition.

Grandparents have many skills, she adds. The Clairmont and Area Seniors Centre, where she sits on the executive, has offered to act as the coalition's fiscal agent when it applies for a seed grant.



Sharon Nelson serves on the executive of her local coalition.

Nelson is among a growing number of silver-haired volunteers — grandparents, retirees and seniors — who are contributing their well-honed wisdom, practical skills and life experience to ECD coalitions.

Retired school teacher Hope Olsen co-chairs the MD of Taber-South County of Warner Coalition. When the coalition called for volunteers last fall, it didn't take much convincing to get her to join. Olsen, who has three grandchildren, understands the benefits of healthy early development. As a kindergarten teacher in Warner School, she filled out Early Development Instrument (EDI) questionnaires for children in her classroom during two rounds of data collection. She also observed first-hand the importance of nurturing, stimulating environments on young children's development.

"A lot of people don't realize how critical the first five years of development are," says Olsen, who taught for 32 years. "The tendency is still to focus on the school years."

Grandparents and retirees may have the time to take on volunteer duties that busy working parents are hard pressed to tackle. Time can be an issue for some 'retirees', however. Some, like Carol Demas, find themselves as busy as ever after they have supposedly stopped 'working'.



Hope Olsen with her granddaughter

Demas is a retired elementary school vice principal and special education teacher. She is also a "committed" grandma heavily booked by her seven grown children to help out with their children, 15 in total. She is president of her women's church group and volunteers at Raymond Elementary School where she taught, and has served on her local library board.

She also co-chairs the Cardston County-North County of Warner Coalition. "I'm convinced that if we get children on a solid early path, then they won't face as many challenges in junior and senior high school and their later years," she says.

Demas takes great pride in the innovative, award-winning preschool program that was developed at Raymond Elementary School. The integrated program served up to 100 four-year-olds, including children with special needs. Its success turned her into a strong proponent of play-based preschool programming, which pays off, she says, in greater social skills, independence and problem-solving skills in young children.

Changing family dynamics are motivating grandparents to get involved with ECD coalitions as well. Many live far from their grandchildren and are not able to interact with them as much they'd like, as Nelson points out. Coalitions provide an opportunity to nurture and make a positive contribution to the upbringing of the next generation. "Elders have so much to offer," Nelson says. "Their wisdom and values are great assets in the raising of healthy young children."



Carol Demas cuddles two of 15 grandchildren.

# Profiles

## On the trail of unusual suspects



Community development coordinator Kathy Crothers can be reached at [kathy.crothers@ualberta.ca](mailto:kathy.crothers@ualberta.ca) or 780-913-8876.

### *ECMap community development coordinator Kathy Crothers searches for community connectors in Zone 7 in West Central Alberta*

About a year ago I was in a Hinton hotel, eating dinner and preparing for a community presentation. My eyes were caught by an article in the local paper about a local realtor. I immediately recognized 'Pat' from a Healthy Families team that we had both worked on.

I decided to contact her, pretending at first to be a buyer looking for a big pink house with a white picket fence and a live-in maid, cook and gardener. Reconnecting with Pat was energizing. She was able to tell me about the population, child ratio, economics, trends and programs in the community. As part of her job, Pat "sells" information on a daily basis. She knows exactly where people can go to find resources. She also knows a lot about surrounding areas, like Jasper and Edson.

Last month Pat, who is a grandmother of eight, attended her first early childhood development coalition meeting in Hinton. The coalition will find her to be a great asset!

I have connected with other realtors in Zone 7, and they've all pointed me in valuable directions. I have also had good "connecting conversations" with Canada Post employees. They know the history of the area, which is often the most meaningful way to begin conversations and develop relationships.

Not long ago, I stopped in at the General Store in Fallis, which is also the post office, liquor store and local café. I stopped to ask for directions, but before I knew it, the post mistress had walked out to the car with me to pick up newsletters and fact sheets to give to the morning moms who meet at the café for coffee. She also enthusiastically promised to give my card to the playschool committee president who stops in for her mail.

Unusual suspects are everywhere. They are the key to the community. Even if they don't come to the table right away themselves, they will point-push-pull-convince others to get involved.

### Links

#### **New deal needed for families**

The generation raising young children today is squeezed on all sides, says Dr. Paul Kershaw, research scholar at the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), based at the University of British Columbia.

Families are struggling with less time, stagnant household incomes and skyrocketing housing costs as compared to parents in the 1970s. Dr. Kershaw says that it's time to cut a new deal for families. He proposes three policies in his *A New Deal for Families*.

Download at:

[http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/uploads/documents/Family%20Policy%20Reports%20and%20Resources/does\\_canada\\_work\\_for\\_all\\_generations\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/uploads/documents/Family%20Policy%20Reports%20and%20Resources/does_canada_work_for_all_generations_fact_sheet.pdf)

### Contact us

The Early Child Development Mapping Project (ECMap) is part of the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative, which is funded by Alberta Education. ECMap is led by the Community- University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (CUP), Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta.

For further information, please go to [www.ecmap.ca](http://www.ecmap.ca)

You may also contact us at [ecmap@extn.ualberta.ca](mailto:ecmap@extn.ualberta.ca) 780-248-1574

ECMap  
Community-University Partnership  
Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta  
2-410 Enterprise Square  
10230 Jasper Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6

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](mailto:olenka.melnyk@ualberta.ca) or 780-492-4057. We welcome your story ideas, resources, links, provincewide event listings and feedback.

*Mapping a bright future for Alberta's young children*