

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Early Winter - November 2012

Coalitions gather for first provincial meeting

While a record snowfall blanketed the city, coalition members from across Alberta hunkered down in the University of Alberta's Conference Centre to talk about their strengths, challenges and future.

The first provincial gathering of early childhood development (ECD) community coalitions attracted nearly 130 participants from 83 coalitions. The gathering, entitled *Connecting Communities*, was held on November 7 and 8 in Edmonton and was organized by ECMap.

Participants swapped business cards, stories and experiences, and dreams. They also got a chance to connect with ECMap's sounding board, which was meeting for the first time as well.

The sounding board provides feedback to ECMap on its work and includes representatives from school districts, municipalities, rural networks, early learning and care, family and community service providers, libraries and health.

Sustainability was a key issue that underlay much of the discussion during the gathering. (ECMap is scheduled to end on August 31, 2014.) Coalition members raised questions, such as whether Early Development Instrument (EDI) information would continue to be collected in Alberta and how they would support their community work when their seed grant funding ran out.

The two days were structured to encourage group work and sharing, rather than having 'expert' guest speakers. Edmonton-based community development organizer Michael Walters acted as the main facilitator. Walters reminded coalitions that change begins with the grassroots, at the local level.

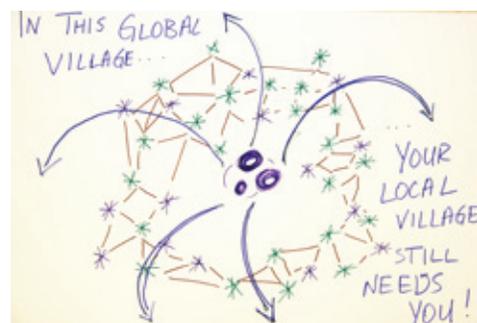
On the first jam-packed day, coalitions discussed their strategies to increase awareness about the early years in their communities, the challenges they face and the pressures their families and communities are experiencing. They also talked about developing local leadership and building creative partnerships.

On the second day, they shared their visions for their own families and their communities and coalitions before tackling the practicalities of forming a provincial network of coalitions. Sharing resources and speaking with a unified voice were seen as the main advantages. A number of coalitions expressed a strong concern, however, that local independence must be maintained within any larger umbrella organization.

What happens next? Coalitions will have further opportunities to meet regionally over the coming months and continue the discussion of whether a provincial network would be practical and beneficial.



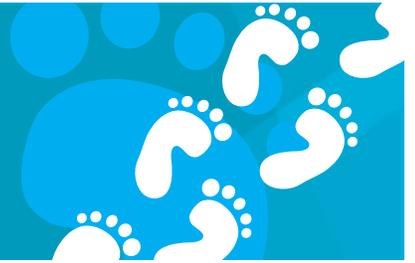
Dawn Campbell, coalition coordinator from Hanna, creates a picture of her group's vision of a supportive community at the provincial fall gathering in November.



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Early childhood development



Slow pace is better for kids, best-selling author says

Award-winning journalist Carl Honore knew something had to give when he tried to edit *Snow White* down to three dwarves.

Like many busy, harried parents, Honore found himself speeding up the bedtime story ritual, skipping paragraphs and sometimes whole pages to get through stories more quickly.

“Daddy,” his four-year-old son asked him after he’d raced through *Snow White*, “what happened to the other four dwarves?”

Mortified, Honore stopped and asked himself what turned out to be a life-changing question: “How is it I’m so busy that I’m prepared to fob off my son with a sound bite?”

The question sent him on a personal and professional quest for a more satisfying lifestyle. The result was a best-selling book, *In Praise of Slow*, which touted the benefits of a decelerated pace of living. Dubbed the godfather of the slow movement, Honore turned his attention to child-rearing next and

wrote another best seller, *Under Pressure: Putting the Child Back into Childhood*.

The London-based author was in Edmonton in September as a keynote speaker at the 2012 Alberta Early Years Conference. He also revisited his old neighbourhood in this city where he lived for six years and found the streets where he once played hockey and other rambunctious outdoor games eerily devoid of kids.

“Our streets and public spaces are emptied of children because we overprotect and bubble-wrap them,” he told conference participants. “We’re afraid to let them take risks.”

Children are overscheduled, rushed and hyper-managed, with little time for the unstructured play that they need to think creatively, socialize and develop properly, Honore said. Neuroscience has shown that the most rapid brain development occurs during the early years, but this has been widely misinterpreted to mean that the more stimulation a child gets and the earlier, the



Writer and journalist Carl Honore champions slow parenting.

smarter he or she will be. Studies show, however, that young children do best in environments where they are encouraged to do what comes naturally, namely play.

“It’s the slow, simple stuff that builds their brains. Babies and young children are hard-wired to seek out the input that they need and this input is embedded in their everyday experiences.”

Honore emphasized that his book was not supposed to be another parenting manual for parents who are already dealing with too much pressure and stress. His intention was to get readers to take a step back and rethink childhood and parenthood. He cautioned against overfocussing on developmental milestones, which can become millstones.

“We need to take time to slow down with our children and get to know and observe them. But first we have to start with ourselves. We need to reconnect with our inner tortoise,” said Honore.

Overparenting is a middle class issue, he conceded. A number of conference participants, who are service providers, pointed out the impracticality of advising clients, who are working long hours or two jobs to feed their families, to slow down. “Sometimes the best you can do is to look for the calm in the middle of the storm,” he responded. “Start small. Try to eat dinner together as a family.”

“It takes time to slow down,” said the self-described reformed speedaholic, who has discovered that “*Snow White* is really better with seven dwarves.”



The slow movement encourages parents to micromanage less and enjoy their children more.

Community coalitions



Coalition members share their views

Here is a sampling of what coalition members from different parts of Alberta had to say after attending their first provincial gathering. A more comprehensive summary of the November 7-8 event is being compiled and will be posted on EMap's website www.ecmap.ca.

"When I first walked into the room, it really hit me that this is a big project. People are doing this all over Alberta. The conference was a wonderful opportunity to learn about the diverse directions other coalitions are taking. There was so much experience in the room."

Christine McWillis, Lakeland Area Early Child Coalition, Cold Lake; Family and Community Support Services manager

"I think that we gained a better appreciation that there are issues that have to be dealt with collectively, not just independently. There has to be high-level support (e.g. from government and school boards) for raising awareness and making policy changes. You need a bottom up and top down approach. It can't just be left to coalitions."

Muriel Dunnigan, Edmonton Southeast Coalition; retired deputy school superintendent

"I'm new at this and our coalition is relatively new. It was very helpful to hear about the ideas other coalitions have initiated around the province, including in rural areas. Parents from rural areas often feel they are being left out of the loop."

Dale Schaffrick, Barrhead Area Communities for Children Coalition; farmer, school trustee

"I came because I wanted to gain a better understanding of what our coalition should be doing. I'm just starting to put the pieces of the puzzle together. I understand better now why it's important to map early development and the influences on children's lives. I can go back to my community and tell people 'This has real value. This is why it's relevant to our community. We need your help.' We're thankful not to be forgotten in Fort Chip."

Kelly Piche, Fort Chipewyan Coalition for Early Learning; daycare executive director



Close to 130 participants from 83 coalitions attended the first provincial gathering of coalitions in November in Edmonton.

"There is tremendous value in collecting EDI (Early Development Instrument) data. It gives people something concrete to respond to. We need to continue to educate the public about early childhood development and we need the resources to commit to this. Our non-profits and volunteers (in rural areas) cannot continue carrying the bulk of the work. Our volunteer base is exhausted."

Lisa Cottrell, Wetaskiwin and Area Early Child Development Coalition, coordinator

"The (research) data is only as useful as the action it generates. I found out about lots of things other coalitions are doing that I can do with my own coalition. You don't have to reinvent the wheel all the time. We already have a citywide group — First 2000 Days — in Calgary. I think that a provincial network would give coalitions legitimacy and lobbying power. We could act as a think tank, have better access to resources and share knowledge."

Tyler Belgrave, First 2000 Days North of McKnight Coalition, coordinator



EMap Director Dr. Susan Lynch records feedback from group discussions.

"This really helped me to see the big picture and the diversity of communities in Alberta. At this point, we're concerned about maintaining our momentum when our funding ends (in March). We're concerned that fund-raising will become our focus rather than the work in the community that we are doing."

Sandy Last, Bow Valley Early Childhood Development Coalition, coordinator

Profile

Two- to five-hour commutes all in a day's work

Life is a Highway is something of a theme song for EMap community development coordinator Laurie Lafortune.

The chorus of Canadian rocker Tom Cochrane's hit song plays in her head as she pulls out of her Red Deer neighbourhood and heads east towards Highway 11. She then turns east again on to Highway 12 and heads out to one of "her" communities. It could be Hanna, Coronation, Drumheller, or Stettler. Lafortune serves 12 early childhood development (ECD) communities — and their coalitions — in zone 4 in central Alberta. The zone stretches from Drayton Valley in the west to Consort in the east, and from Red Deer in the north to Drumheller in the south.

In one month this fall alone, Lafortune logged nearly 3,000 kilometres on the road. She can typically spend anywhere from two to five hours driving to and from meetings. To keep herself alert and awake, she keeps her radio turned up to a caffeinated level. Her routes are now so familiar to her that she knows exactly when to nudge the dial over to keep the station she's listening to in range. Some of her favourites are Lacombe's Sunny 94, Drumheller's DrumFM 99.9 and Edmonton's CKUA. She also enjoys *The Trading Post* on Stettler's Q Country 93.3.

"You never know when you'll hear about a good deal on a set of tires," says Lafortune, who will undoubtedly wear out a couple of sets by the time EMap wraps up.



Laurie Lafortune is EMap's community development coordinator for Zone 4, central Alberta.

Lafortune brings a solid background of ECD mapping to her position as EMap coordinator. She managed the Understanding the Years (UEY) project in Red Deer. The project, which concluded in 2010, was one of 50 run by the federal government across Canada. UEY, like EMap, used the Early Development Instrument (EDI) to collect information on kindergarten children and mapped the results, along with socio-economic data.

Lafortune began her professional career as a keen, idealistic junior high school teacher. "There was not a great deal of awareness about the importance of the early years back in the

1970s when I was an education student," she says. "When I got into the classroom, it didn't take me long to realize, however, that by junior high many kids were already entrenched in certain behavior and social patterns, and experiencing a deep sense of failure."

She switched her career focus to early childhood education. She began to fully appreciate the importance of equity in early year experiences after becoming executive director of the Saskatoon Community Schools Pre-Kindergarten Board. The board operated nine pre-kindergartens in Saskatoon's inner city core. Young children, most of them from low-income households, thrived in the enriched, play-based programs, which included specialized supports and field trips. Family involvement was also strongly encouraged, with family members welcomed into the classroom.

Lafortune, who is the mother of three grown children, is a passionate advocate of the concept of equity.

"Every child in Alberta — and Canada — deserves an equal opportunity to reach his or her potential," she says. "One out of every four of our children is already struggling by the time they reach kindergarten. We need to do something about that."

Laurie Lafortune can be reached at laurie.lafortune@ualberta.ca or 403-848-0349.

FYI



Looking for ideas on how to engage your coalitions and communities? Tracy Smyth and Tammy Dewar, authors of *Raising the Village*, have written a follow-up, step-by-step, community action guide. Entitled *Village Raising: Learn, Think, Innovate and Act Together*, the guide outlines four basic steps to community planning and action and 60 activities.

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To find out more about the book, please go to the authors' website www.raisingthevillage.ca

Contact us

The Early Child Development Mapping Project (EMap) is part of the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative, which is funded by Alberta Education. EMap 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

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Mapping a bright future for Alberta's young children