

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Spring - 2014

Resource mapping nearly complete

Being wrong can be wonderful sometimes.

We set a goal in late fall to engage at least 75 per cent of community coalitions in identifying and mapping their community resources by March. We thought we were being overly optimistic at the time.

We were wrong.

Virtually all coalitions participated. We now have information on early childhood development (ECD) community resources for 98 out of Alberta's 100 communities.

This feat was achieved through the herculean efforts of coalitions, who worked closely with the ECMap mapping and data team and community development coordinators to meet tight timelines.

We needed to gather as much information about and map as many community resources as possible for our community early development report that is scheduled to be released on April 28th.

More than 23,600 resources have been identified and mapped. The message that we've been getting from coalitions is: That was a lot of hard work but it was worth it. Here are some typical comments:

"We learned so much about our community and what's available for children and families during the early years," says Sherri Henderson, coalition assistant for Edmonton Southwest Early Years.

"It was especially helpful to be able to position our resources on the map and get a clear picture of where they are located and to see the gaps," adds Lana Brenneis, coalition assistant for the Southeast Edmonton Early Childhood Community.



Alison Brenneis, 5, gets a peek at a community profile created by ECMap data and mapping team manager Cindy Post. Alison's mom, Lana, is coalition assistant for the Southeast Edmonton Early Childhood Community Coalition.

Photo: Fahim Hassan

Information on community resources will be published in the report *How are our young children doing? Community profiles of early childhood development in Alberta*. The report will be made available to coalitions during their second provincial gathering April 28-29 at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. The information will also be posted on ECMap's website at www.ecmap.ca.

The report includes Early Development Instrument (EDI) results and socio-economic information for communities across the province. The EDI results are based on information collected by school authorities between 2009 and 2013 on 70,200 kindergarten-aged children. The results form a baseline for future comparison.

Provincial EDI results show that 46 per cent of kindergarten children are developing

appropriately in all five areas of development. Nearly 29 per cent are experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development as compared to the Canadian norm of 25.4 per cent.

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Early childhood development

Self-regulation puts children, caregivers in the driver's seat

Self-regulation plays a key role in children's capacity to learn, and their health and well-being. A growing body of research indicates that it may be more important than intelligence in determining how well children do in school. Not surprisingly, it's become a hot topic in early learning and parenting circles.



Dr. Clancy Blair

Dr. Clancy Blair, a leading U.S. researcher in developmental psychology, describes self-regulation as "a useful framework for incorporating our scientific knowledge about the brain

and our goals for early development. We want our children to be able to manage their emotions, impulses and attention, so that they are able to learn, form healthy relationships and behave appropriately."

His research with three to five year olds showed that self-regulation was a better predictor of early math and reading skills than IQ. He also found that high levels of stress had a negative impact on self-regulation and learning, and that children from low-income homes experienced more stress.

Self-regulation is closely linked to the development of executive function, explains Dr. Blair, who delivered a series of lectures at the University of Alberta earlier this year.

Executive function involves complex thinking skills that allow us to process the constant flood of information into our brain. It enables us to plan, organize, evaluate, remember things and shift our attention from one thing to another. If we learn how to regulate our emotions and energy levels in our early years, our executive function develops properly and we are less likely to experience problems later in life.

Self-regulation is often compared to the multiple tasks involved in driving a car. You have to brake, accelerate and shift gears smoothly, adjust your speed to road and traffic conditions and speed limits, and respond quickly to what's happening around you. Learning to drive takes time and practice.

High levels of stress shut down executive function. The overloaded brain switches into instinctual flight-or-fight mode. Children who are overstressed, anxious or aggressive are not able to manage their emotions and behavior, focus and learn.

The costs are high. It's been estimated that as many as half of all children enter kindergarten with self-regulation issues that will affect their success at school.

The good news is that self-regulation can be developed and parents, caregivers and early learning educators can support this process. "Supporting self-regulation may be one of the most important things we can do to safeguard and promote children's development," says Dr. Blair.



Quick tips on self-regulation

1. Children's ability to handle stress and stimulation varies a great deal. Figure out what a child's tolerance levels are and sets him/her off.
2. Self-regulation develops gradually. Parents and caregivers help infants regulate their emotions by responding promptly and appropriately to their needs, by calming and soothing. Toddlers are encouraged to express their feelings through language and gestures.
3. Children learn to regulate themselves through self-awareness. 'How is my engine running? Is it fast? Too slow? Just right?' Help them develop strategies to get their motor running right. E.g. rest, eat, take a couple of deep breaths, run, play.
4. Limit stressors. E.g. Turn off the TV. Reduce noise.
5. Practice self-awareness and effective self-regulation strategies yourself.

For resources, check out the Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative at <http://www.self-regulation.ca/about-us/canadian-self-regulation-initiative-csri/>.

Community coalitions



Mountain View County coalition awarded \$25,000 in RBC funding

The Mountain View County coalition has received \$25,000 from RBC, the maximum amount available for children's mental health projects.

"I'm buzzing," says coordinator Rita Krebs, who, along with other coalition members, was presented with the oversized cheque by Didsbury RBC branch staff in February.

Krebs attributes the coalition's success in receiving the one-year grant to two things: compelling data and a strong coalition. "Our EDI data indicated a significant need in the county. And our community partners showed strong support for the coalition — and early development."

The community received its first Early Development Instrument (EDI) data in June 2012. The results for this Rocky Mountain foothills community were slightly better than for the province: 26.5 per cent of kindergarten-aged children were experiencing great difficulty in one or more of five areas of development. The provincial rate at the time was 27 per cent.

But results for subcommunities showed a troubling disparity. In one subcommunity, for example, only 15 per cent of kindergarten children were experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development. In two other subcommunities, the percentage was a high of 38 and 36 per cent. Certain areas of development appeared to be a particular challenge; language and thinking skills, for example.

The coalition is using its RBC funding to set up action groups in the five subcommunities. The groups will take a closer look at the EDI data, identify family needs and concerns and put together action plans to respond to specific challenges faced by their subcommunities.

"The socio-economic status is fairly constant (at medium) throughout the community," says Krebs. "The subcommunities vary a great deal in other ways, however."



Coalition coordinator Rita Krebs (front row, left) accepts a \$25,000 cheque from the RBC branch in Didsbury. Ron Suave, RBC regional VP for central Alberta, is in the back row.

Subcommunities range from Carstairs and surrounding area, where most parents commute to jobs in Calgary, to remote, rural Cremona and area.

Krebs shared EDI results with community leaders, parents and service providers over the course of "274" one-on-one conversations. She figures she reached an additional 2,000 people at community events throughout the county. She found different issues in subcommunities, but a number of common themes emerged as well.

- Families are feeling increasingly disconnected from their community.
- Parents are under too much pressure and feel overwhelmed.
- Technology is having a negative impact on family life and personal relationships.
- Children's lives are highly structured and overly busy.

- Family core values are being eroded.
- 'Satellite parenting', where one parent works away from home, usually dads employed in the resource industry, is common and impacting family life.
- Parents are doing the best they can.

Ron Sauve, RBC regional vice president for central Alberta, says he was surprised by some of the high rates of vulnerability.

"I'm pleased that our funding support is going towards helping to reduce those numbers," he says. "Children's mental health is rooted in the early years. The coalition's focus on all areas of development fits our priority to fund programs that address the needs of the whole child."

RBC's five-year, \$100-million project aims to improve the lives of one million children and youth; \$150,000 was invested in central Alberta last year.

Profile

Championing families and young children in eastern rural Alberta

Heather Daoust knows well the challenges faced by parents of young children with special needs in rural communities.

Every week Daoust drives from her Smoky Lake home to St. Albert, 120 kilometers away, to take her seven-year-old son, who has autism, to a special social skills program. Her daughter, aged five, has to be driven to the Stollery Children's Hospital in Edmonton, for treatment of seizure disorder. For many years she drove her oldest son to St. Paul, 95 kilometers away, for his weekly appointments with a speech pathologist.

"You should see the kilometers on my car!" says Daoust, an upbeat person who speaks her mind.

She considers herself fortunate in being able to drive her children to the services that they need and are not available in her small town of 1,000 people. She wonders, however, how many families are not able to do so. That's one of things that she'd like to find out as the coordinator of From Baby to Bus, the Smoky Lake early childhood development coalition.

Daoust is a relative newcomer to this tightly knit, central Alberta community, which bills itself as the "Pumpkin Capital of Alberta" and where many families have known each other



Heather Daoust is the coordinator of the Smoky Lake coalition and can be reached at hdaoust@telus.net

for generations. Her family moved to Smoky Lake in 2006 when her husband, a physical therapist, was hired to run the rehab department at the local healthcare center. Daoust, who has a degree in economics and worked as an assistant bank branch manager in St. Albert, was a stay-at-home mom, far from family and close friends.

"I found the community to be very welcoming, but it was a difficult transition for me," she

says. "I floundered for a year. I didn't know what to do with myself."

A neighbour, who was then director of the local Family and Community Support Services, urged her to join the FCSS board. Daoust took her advice and found the sense of connection and purpose she was missing.

As an active volunteer and coalition coordinator, Daoust has her finger on the community pulse. She's discovered that a number of important family supports are missing. A shortage of childcare means many mothers are not able to work outside the home. Many dads are employed in the oil patch, which takes them away from their families and leaves moms to function as sole parents. Services are limited. Daoust has organized two community round tables, one in the day and one in the evening, in March to explore how family needs can be better met.

A regular volunteer at her children's school, Daoust sees many children already struggling by kindergarten. (EDI results show that a third are experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development.)

"I would like to see all children get off on the same foot when they start school," she says.

FYI

First 2000 Days launches website

The First 2000 Days Network has launched its new website at <http://www.2000days.ca/>. You can find Facebook links to Calgary's 10 community coalitions on this site.

How environments influence biology

Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) researcher and medical genetics professor Dr. Michael Kobor explains social epigenetics in layman's terms. Access the 55-minute webinar at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrwlkesLmOg>

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

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Mapping a bright future for Alberta's young children