

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Early Winter - 2013

Mapping the link between community resources and early development

The Bow Valley coalition had planned to start its community resource mapping before this fall. Those plans were washed out by the record floods that hit southern Alberta in the summer, however.

“The flooding put everyone into survival mode for a while,” says coalition member Ellen Thuringer. “We’re now moving forward with our resource mapping.”

The Bow Valley Early Childhood Development Coalition is among the scores of coalitions across Alberta working with ECMap to create digital maps of their community resources. ECMap anticipates that 70 per cent will have submitted the information needed to map their resources by the target date of January 31st.

“We assume that community resources affect early development, but we need to better understand the relationship between the two,” says ECMap Director Dr. Susan Lynch. “What are the differences in the resources available in different communities? Are there differences between urban and rural areas? Do community resources impact some areas of development more than others? Answering these kinds of questions will give us a clearer picture of early development in Alberta and will provide a helpful basis for planning.”

The Bow Valley coalition, which serves Canmore, Banff, Lake Louise and Exshaw, is building on the work it did earlier through focus groups and a survey, which asked community members what programs and services were working well, what challenges families experienced in accessing resources and how young families and children could be better supported.

The responses helped the coalition to determine what resources were available and how effective they were. Answers change over time as the community and conditions change, notes Thuringer. The recent flooding affected community resources. Some, like the Exshaw Community Centre, a vital hub in that town, were damaged and closed, for example. Flooded homes worsened the existing housing shortage in Canmore.

“As a coalition, we feel that it’s really important to engage in asset mapping,” says Thuringer, who is also supervisor of the Bow Valley Parent Link Centre. “It helps us to keep in touch with what’s happening in our community and how we can continue to support our young families and children.”

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Bow Valley coalition coordinator Irene Macklem (left) and member Ellen Thuringer review a list of community resources.

Early childhood development

Study looks at community responses to EDI

Are Early Development Instrument (EDI) results mobilizing communities to make positive change for their young children?

Magdalena Janus, one of the creators of the EDI, wanted to find out if sharing research information with communities on how their young children are doing leads to community action to improve supports for children and families.

Janus, a researcher at the Offord Centre for Child Studies and professor of psychiatry and behavioural neuroscience at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, summarizes her findings in a recent report, *From Results to Action Survey*.

The report, which surveys five provinces that have been collecting EDI data, identifies a number of common community responses and results, including:

- more awareness of the importance of the early years,
- increased cooperation among community sectors, service providers and governments around early child development (ECD),
- the creation of intersectoral ECD coalitions, and
- the use of EDI data in program and policy decision-making by municipal and provincial governments, school authorities and community organizations.

Questionnaires were sent out to participants in B.C., Saskatchewan, Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island in the summer of 2011. The provinces surveyed had been involved in EDI collection for three to seven years. Alberta did not participate because at that point EDI results were not yet available for all the communities in the province and

community coalitions were just getting off the ground. Alberta will be included in a more in-depth study that the Pan-Canadian EDI Network and the Offord Centre are planning as a follow-up.

“It takes a while to take stock of the results and figure out how to respond,” says Janus. “The report shows that clearly. It takes time just to bring people from the various sectors — health, education, social services, child care and the community — to the table.”

Her study found that EDI results are being widely used to identify communities and neighbourhoods where young children are experiencing the greatest developmental difficulties. These geographic areas are then targeted for programming and/or other supports. In Ontario, for example, EDI data was used to help identify Best Start neighbourhoods to promote healthy early development. In Manitoba, EDI data is one of the criteria used to locate family resource centres. In Saskatchewan, a community identified the neighbourhoods where children are most at risk and brought service providers together to address their needs, including housing.

Communities are also looking at their EDI results to see in what areas of development their children are doing well and where they are struggling. Literacy programs have been developed to improve language development and communications skills, Roots of Empathy and other similar programs to aid social maturity, and nutrition programs and physical activities to boost physical health and well-being.



Magdalena Janus is one of the creators of the EDI and a senior researcher at the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.



The study points to a trend in many communities and provinces to take a more integrated approach to supporting young children and families by creating community resource and activity centres that provide multiple services from health to child care and parent education. The EDI has also had a big impact on schools and school boards, which are now recognizing the link between early development and children’s success at school and are better preparing young children for their entry into school.

“The EDI does not provide any solutions,” notes Janus. “But the data can be used in many different ways to improve children’s lives when people from diverse sectors come together to look at what’s happening in their community.”

To read the full report, please go to http://www.offordcentre.com/readiness/pubs/EDI_to_Action_Survey_Report.pdf.

Community coalitions



B.C. shares its lessons on community mobilization

Ten years ago, if you asked a typical banker in B.C. his thoughts on early development, he likely would have scratched his head and not had much to say.

The response would be different today, says Joanne Schroeder, deputy director of the Human Early Learning Partnership. HELP, which is based at the University of British Columbia, analyzes Early Development Instrument (EDI) results in B.C. and studies the impact of early experiences and environments on child development.

Schroeder likes to use the banker example to illustrate how public awareness about the importance of the early years has increased in B.C., largely as a result of the community development work done by coalitions and 12 years of EDI data collection.

HELP estimates that more than 700 early childhood development (ECD) initiatives and community projects have been supported by EDI results. These range from diaper change tables installed in local park and business washrooms to early literacy programs, children's charters adopted by municipalities, breakfast clubs in inner city neighbourhoods, community family fun events and the StrongStart early learning program now offered to young children and parents in every school district.

Coalitions in B.C. have learned a number of invaluable lessons in how to organize and make the best use of EDI results, says Schroeder.

- Make sure that high-level decision-makers — people who have the power to actually change things — are represented at the table.
- Look at the community resources you already have and build on those.

- Focus on improving accessibility to services and supports for families and young children.
- Take the time to thoroughly investigate your EDI results and ask the crucial 'So what?' questions. What do the results mean? How do they reflect what's going in your community?

The Richmond Children First coalition has successfully used these strategies in this fast growing, culturally diverse B.C. community, 20 minutes from downtown Vancouver. Sixty per cent of Richmond's population of 200,000 are immigrants. The poverty rate is higher than the provincial average and 34 per cent of the young children are developmentally vulnerable.

The coalition's steering committee includes three senior municipal staff, including a city planner, as well as representatives from all the non-profit agencies that work with young children and families. Their input has helped the coalition to identify areas of growth and need, notes coalition manager Helen Davidson. The planners on the committee



Joanne Schroeder



Helen Davidson

advised the coalition, for example, that 40 new high-rise towers were slated for development in Richmond City Centre. The neighbourhood is the poorest in the city, has the highest rate of child development vulnerability and few resources. Funds have been targeted for additional resources, well before the expected population boom.

Schroeder is proud of these "pockets of innovation," but says more needs to be done to turn around B.C.'s high child development vulnerability rate of 32.5 per cent.* "Socio-economic factors have had an enormous impact on early development," she says. "Families face more pressures than ever in raising children. Without a sustainable public investment to address those underlying issues and a reform of our fragmented ECD support system, we won't see systemic change."

**(B.C., unlike Alberta, includes children with special needs in its EDI community results, so results from the two provinces are not easily comparable.)*



Photo: Supplied by Richmond Children First
Three generations participate in a play and learn program at Richmond Public Library in Richmond, B.C.

Profile

Growing big ideas in Big Sky Country

Growing up on a cattle farm near McLennan in northwestern Alberta, Chantel Napier revelled in the wide open spaces all around her.

When she had her own children, she wanted them to experience the spaciousness she had enjoyed as a child, and the freedom that was rooted in strong family and community ties. And so after living and teaching in Britain for nine years, she moved back to Alberta with her husband and two daughters, now aged three and four.

"I always knew that I wanted to raise my family here," says Napier, who lives near Grande Prairie and is the coordinator for the East Grande Prairie County coalition, or SPARKED (South Peace Area Rural Kids Early Development). She also teaches junior kindergarten (for three- and four-year-olds) at St. Clement Catholic School.

The northern Alberta landscape has profoundly influenced her internal mindscape. Napier likes to think big. "I'm always trying to see the bigger picture," she says. "I like to take a big vision or a big idea and break it down into components and work on the pieces."

She likes to share that big perspective with others. When she's 'manning' the coalition display booth at community events, like the Teepee Creek Stampede or the Clairmont Fall



Photo: Holly Handfield

Chantel Napier is the coordinator for the East Grande Prairie County coalition.

Fair, for instance, Napier tries to get people to "stop and reflect a bit" about the information in the leaflets that she's handing out. She wants them to look beyond the pie charts of Early Development Instrument (EDI) results and envision the children behind the stats. What will their future be like?

On the surface, the stats look pretty good. Twenty per cent of kindergarten-aged children in East Grande Prairie County are experiencing

great difficulty in one or more areas of development, as compared to the provincial norm of 27 per cent.

"It's not that great, however, when you consider that one in five is falling behind," she says. "There is much room for improvement."

Collaborating with the other coalitions in her region is part of Napier's overall vision. SPARKED developed a Children's Charter for Northwest Alberta and worked with eight other coalitions to persuade local municipalities to endorse it on National Child Day on November 20th.

Napier makes a point of engaging other sectors and organizations in the coalition's work. The coalition has involved municipal departments, such as recreation, and Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) in mapping community resources, for example, to make sure the information gathered will be useful and relevant to them as well.

SPARKED is midway through its seed grant funding, but Napier is already planning a workshop on future sustainability. "We want to be around doing this work for years to come," she says.

Napier can be reached at sparked.ab@gmail.com.

FYI

Brain development made easy

ECMap has developed a PowerPoint that explains key concepts of brain development. Download *Building a brain – building a life* at <https://www.ecmap.ca/ECMap-Materials/Pages/default.aspx>. Save or open the "read only" version.

Brain building in 4 minutes

The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative has launched an animated video that explains brain development in four minutes. <http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-brain-development>.

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