



Getting the message across about early childhood development



Communities play a fundamental role in helping children thrive and do well. Yet studies in Alberta and elsewhere show that early childhood development is not well understood by the general public. Many myths and misconceptions remain.

The key concepts outlined in this sheet are aimed at helping early childhood development (ECD) community coalitions to build understanding by providing simple messages about the critical importance of healthy early development. Tips are also provided to help coalitions craft their own key messages to inform, inspire and motivate their communities to support young children in the early years.

Why the early years are so critical

- **The early years, from before birth to age five, set the course for a child's future.** Studies show that early development influences how well children do in school, their physical and mental health, job prospects, relationships and even incomes.
- All children deserve the best possible start in life and the opportunity to achieve their potential.
- **More than one in four young children** in Alberta — and Canada — are experiencing difficulties in development by kindergarten.
- Children who grow up in poverty or with other social disadvantages are more likely to experience difficulties in development. The middle class has a smaller percentage of vulnerable children, but the **greatest numbers of vulnerable children come from middle-class homes** because of the sheer size of the middle class in Canada.





How the brain develops during the early years

- Between birth and age five, the brain grows faster than at any other time. It is most adaptable and open to change during this period.
- A child's early experiences shape brain structure. Genes provide the blueprint for brain development, but early experiences determine how this potential is fulfilled and the brain grows and develops.
- Positive interactions between children and their environment are essential for healthy development.
- The brain is built like a house through a step-by-step process that begins with the foundation. A strong foundation creates a sound structure.
- Emotional, physical, social and intellectual development is interdependent and cannot be separated. All are essential to positive development.
- Severe, prolonged stress such as physical and emotional abuse, extreme poverty, severe maternal depression, chronic neglect, chaotic and unpredictable environments can damage the developing brain. Extreme stress can negatively impact lifelong physical and mental health, learning, behaviour and ability to cope.



Why community counts

- Communities, as well as families and caregivers, play an important role in children's early development. Children's early development also has far-reaching effects on communities.
- Communities can affect early development positively or negatively.
- Studies show that children tend to do better in strong, supportive communities. Families that have access to high-quality supports and services are better able to help their children thrive. Community resources can offset the effect of poverty, toxic stress and other risk factors.
- Healthy early development is a collective concern and responsibility. The costs and benefits affect us all. By working together, communities, families and government can create positive environments for the healthy development of every child in Alberta.

Why the EDI (Early Development Instrument) is an important tool

- The EDI provides information on how groups of children are developing physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually by the time they reach kindergarten.
- Having good information about how young children are doing helps parents, communities, service providers and government to support positive early development.



Why positive early development pays off



Every dollar spent on the quality early care and education can save taxpayers up to \$13.00 in future costs.

Research shows that children whose development is nurtured early in life are:

- more successful in school,
- hold better jobs and earn more,
- are physically and mentally healthier throughout their lives, with a lower risk of heart disease, Type II diabetes, obesity, depression and substance abuse, and

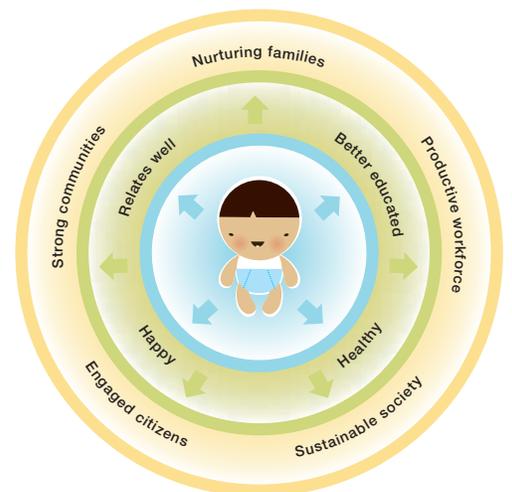
and less likely to:

- have learning disabilities,
- be involved in crime or with the criminal justice system, and
- require social assistance and other income supports.

Every dollar spent on the quality early care and education can save taxpayers up to \$13.00 in future costs. Investing in early childhood makes economic sense.

It's easier to "get things right" in the early years when the brain is most adaptable and changeable.

Positive early development provides the building blocks for lifelong health, productivity, high education levels, good citizenship, successful parenting and strong communities.



Crafting key messages

How do you get your important messages out to your community? Every coalition will have different things to say and different ways to say them. Here are some tips for crafting your own key messages.

What is a key message?

Key messages are short, clear chunks of information that sum up the most important ideas we want to communicate. They can stand alone, or be used to develop other materials, such as fact sheets, posters, brochures, etc. They act as easy-to-remember “take-home” information. Key messages should reflect your coalition’s values and goals, and fit into your larger communication and action plan.

Steps



1 Identify your audience.

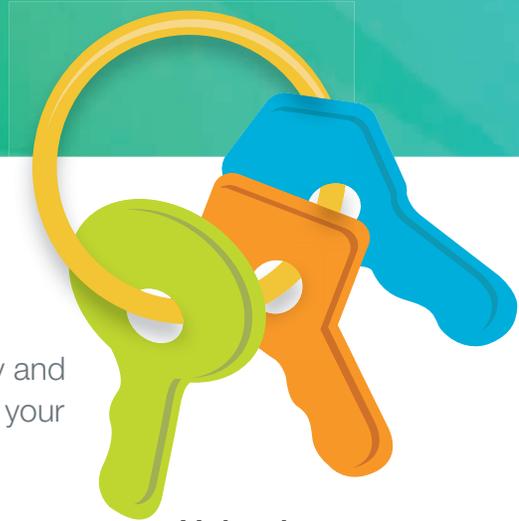
The more specific, the better. Have a picture in your mind of the “person” or people you’re addressing. Are they parents, teachers, politicians, entrepreneurs or service providers? Different audiences will have different concerns and interests.

2 Identify the most important things you want to say.

What do you want your audience to remember? What do you want them to do? Start by identifying all the things you’d like to say, and then focus on the most important.

3 Strip down each idea until it’s as simple and clear as possible.

It should be easy to understand and remember. Be specific. Use simple sentences. Use active verbs. Take out any words that aren’t essential.



Using key messages

Use key messages as:

- stand-alone messages,
- topic sentences or “headlines” for additional information, and
- jumping-off points for discussion.

Animate your key messages by using examples. Plant a visual image or a story in the minds of the audience, one that will resonate with people’s common experiences.

Back up key messages with supporting points, statistics or quotes.

You can find some of this information, as well as key messages that you can use and build on, by going to the ECMap website: www.ecmap.ca

TIP

Will your audience care about your key messages? Will they inspire them to act?