

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

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Australian community steps up to the plate



Sally Brinkman, right, with Magdalena Janus, one of the developers of the EDI.

In 2009, Australia became the first country in the world to implement the Early Development Instrument, or EDI, nationally. The EDI was developed in Canada and is used by many provinces, including Alberta. This is the story of one Australian community that is working to give its young children a better start.

The Mirrabooka Square Shopping Centre teems with refugees from Africa, Iran, Iraq and Sri Lanka, alongside long-time immigrants from Greece, Italy, Vietnam and other Asian countries.

“If you were an outsider and were suddenly dropped into the Mirrabooka shopping centre, you’d have no idea where in the world you were,” observes Sally Brinkman, an epidemiologist who pioneered the use of the EDI in Australia. “Mirrabooka is one of the most complex, multiculturally diverse urban regions in this country.”

Mirrabooka was one of the first communities to pilot the EDI in Australia and has become a case study of how a community with a high

poverty rate and many social disadvantages can begin to turn things around for its vulnerable young children.

A fast-growing suburb built on former bush land, the Mirrabooka area has 31,000 residents, including 3,000 children aged five and under. A high proportion is aboriginal or refugee. The EDI was first collected in the region in 2003 as part of a pilot led by Brinkman in Western Australia. The results for Mirrabooka, given its challenges, were hardly surprising. Fifty-four per cent of five-year-olds were found to be vulnerable in one or more of five areas of development.

The community decided to take action and received federal funding to get the ball rolling. When EDI data was collected in 2009, as part of Australia’s national roll-out, Mirrabooka saw significantly improved results. The most dramatic change was the drop in developmental vulnerability in physical health and well-being from 29 to 13 per cent.

“We’ve started to see a gradual reduction in other domains as well,” says Brinkman.

What changed in six years?

After the first EDI, Mirrabooka mapped its community resources, such as parks, libraries, playgroups and child health centres to see how community needs were being met. One of the first things that became obvious was that most services were clustered in the Mirrabooka Square Shopping Centre, but the mall was not well served by public transit. The community convinced transit officials to change bus routes to make services more accessible. Agencies also began working together more closely to offer preventative, continuous services.

we engage

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Better lighting was installed in parks, which were regarded as unsafe and underused. Outdoor community programs were also organized to draw families into the parks. An ambitious family literacy project was launched to improve English-as-a-second language and reading skills.

“It was a fantastic program, but unfortunately we haven’t seen a great improvement in language and cognitive skills in children yet,” says Brinkman. The community is now trying to figure out why.

Brinkman cautions that change takes time. “Communities cannot be expected to take total responsibility for improving development outcomes,” she adds. “There are many things that impact children’s lives, such as economic forces or policy decisions, which are simply beyond the scope of the community. But the more people know and care about early childhood development, the more support there is to affect change at all levels.”

To find out more about the Australian Early Development Index, please go to www.aedi.org.au

Early childhood development

Muttart Foundation invites public debate

How can Alberta best support high quality early childhood education and care?

The Muttart Foundation is inviting a public discussion on this critically important issue and has released a paper — *In the Best Interests of Children and Families: A Discussion of Early Childhood Education and Care in Alberta* — to serve as a starting point.

“We wanted to create space for an informed, engaged discussion around early childhood (EC) education and care in Alberta,” says Christopher Smith, the foundation’s assistant executive director. “After giving out (EC) grants for a number of years, we observed that service providers were facing many challenges in the field. So we thought ‘Why don’t we stand back and look at some of these challenges? Why don’t we ask some of the big questions? What are we doing in terms of early childhood education and care, why and how?’”

This is a timely discussion, says Smith, given the fact that the majority of Alberta’s 281,061 preschoolers (age five and under) receive out-of-home care. Families have changed dramatically since the 1960s when 35 per cent of mothers with young children worked outside the home. Today, the number is 70 per cent.

Research findings have also advanced our understanding of how important the early years are in laying the foundation for future health, learning and behavior, says Smith. Public policy has yet to catch up to changing family needs and to emerging early childhood research, he notes.

The paper, written by ECD expert Jane Bertrand, puts forward a number of ideas for developing a comprehensive, integrated and quality approach to early childhood education and care in Alberta. The proposals were first



Christopher Smith, with son, Pierce, four, daughter Lauren, six, and wife, Elaine Hoy

discussed at an Edmonton forum in December. Other meetings will be held in Calgary, Grande Prairie and elsewhere in the province this spring.

To read the paper, go to http://www.muttart.org/sites/default/files/report/ECEC%20Discussion%20Paper%201011_0.pdf If you would like to find out more about the forums, please contact the foundation at www.muttart.org/contact or 780-425-9616.

Where have all the snowmen gone? By Line Perron



Perron with her young neighbour, Maya Watchman, four

As I looked out my kitchen window and watched the four children next door build snowmen and help dad clear snow for an ice rink, it occurred to me what a rare sight this has become. I remember the hours spent

outside as a young girl, building forts with my sisters, sliding down the hill at the back of our house and racing each other at the local ice rink. We have a neighborhood that is vibrant with young children but I never see them in the winter. In one generation, kids have moved from the great outdoors indoors.

With winter lasting up to six months in Alberta, it is alarming that many children are disconnected from the outside world and that their physical activities are limited to what they can do in their living rooms or basements and the structured activities they are enrolled in.

Consider the following statistics:

- Only 12 per cent of Canadian children meet Canada’s physical activity guidelines of 90 minutes per day.
- Childhood obesity in Canada has tripled in the past three decades.
- Seventeen per cent of Canadian children and youth are overweight and nine per cent are obese.
- Canadian kids spend six hours a day in front of television, video game and computer screens.

Inspired, I donned my winter clothes and headed out to rediscover the joy of playing in the snow. As our family of snowmen grew, I admired the young parents next door for realizing how important it is for their children to get outside and just play.

Line Perron is community development and mobilization manager for ECMAP.

Community coalitions



Ellen Thuringer reads to children at the Bow Valley Parent Link Centre.

Bow Valley puts plan in place

Bow Valley had a head start in getting an early child development (ECD) coalition off the ground.

The Rocky Mountain region, which includes Banff, Canmore, Lake Louise, Exshaw and the Kananaskis, is one of the 'early adopters' of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) in Alberta. EDI information was collected twice in Bow Valley, in 2007 and 2008, as part of a pilot project funded by the Fraser Mustard Chair in Childhood Development at the University of Calgary.

The results of the second EDI showed that 28 per cent of kindergarten children in Bow Valley were vulnerable in one or more areas of development. The results were higher than the national average of 27 per cent, and sparked a local reaction.

"After the EDI data was released, the community started asking 'How can we move these numbers?'" says Dr. Laura Ghali, director of research and community partnerships for the Fraser Mustard Chair at the U of C.

"We invited a broad spectrum of the community, from day care staff to school authorities, the library, town officials,

midwives and Family and Community Support Services to try and figure out what to do," says Kate Belford. Belford is the director of student services at Canadian Rockies Public Schools and a member of the Early Childhood Development Committee for the Bow Valley.

The group sought outside expertise, inviting Dr. Frank Oberklaid, an internationally recognized ECD expert from Melbourne, Australia, over twice to give workshops. Members of the group also travelled to Revelstoke to meet with the ECD community there. They were impressed with Revelstoke's EDI results, one of the lowest vulnerability rates in B.C., and felt they had much to learn from their sister Rocky Mountain community.

"Figure out your mandate and your goals; we heard this over and over again," says Belford. "What does your community need and what can you do to support this?"

Work began on a three-to-five year strategic plan. The first step was to determine what resources the community already had. A survey revealed a lack of public awareness about existing services and a need to promote these better.

More people had to become involved, especially as membership dwindled, says Ellen Thuringer, another coalition founding member and supervisor of the Bow Valley Parent Link Centre. Associate memberships were offered to people who wanted to participate but were unable to attend every meeting. The coalition also applied for funding to hire a coordinator from the ECD Community Response Seed Grant program launched by the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative.

Family demographics vary widely in Bow Valley, notes Thuringer, from affluent families to those who are struggling to make ends meet in the face of high housing costs and a tough economy. Many are newcomers, who moved to the region during the boom years, leaving behind extended families and other support networks.

"We want to make sure Bow Valley is a family-friendly place," she says. "This is a critical time to be looking at family supports."

To contact the coalition, please e-mail Ellen Thuringer at ethuringer@canmore.ca or Kate Belford at kbelford@crps.ab.ca

Grant update

The committee responsible for approving ECD Community Response Seed Grants met on January 6th and has approved 20 grants. Coalitions may continue to submit applications throughout the year. Applications will be reviewed as they are received.

The seed grants aim to help communities respond to research information emerging from the Early Child Development Mapping Initiative and to plan community approaches to positive early childhood development.

For further information, please go to <http://www.ecmap.ca> and click on seed grants.

Profiles



Danica Martin is EMap's community development coordinator for Zone 3, which encompasses Calgary, Airdrie, Cochrane, Irricana, Crossfield, Carstairs, Olds, Didsbury and Bowden. She can be reached at 403-449-0280 or danica.martin@ualberta.ca

The true meaning of a cup of coffee

By Danica Martin

If I have learned one thing over these past 10 months as an EMap community development coordinator, it is that a cup of coffee is so much more than just a cup of coffee.

In April, when I started my job, I consumed many cups in my office as I read texts, articles, websites and documents related to EMap, child development, brain research, community development and mapping projects.

In May and June, as I travelled through my zone, meeting with people from various walks of life — educators, researchers, health professionals, service providers and community members — I noticed that with every cup of coffee came a conversation. Over a simple cup of coffee, I learned about the amazing people who live and work in Zone 3 and the things they are already doing to support healthy early childhood development.

I didn't fully realize yet how important those many cups of coffee would be.

When September hit, I was back on the road, meeting many people for coffee, some for the second or third time, and listening to them talk about their hopes and dreams for the children in their communities. I began to understand that with each cup of coffee I was building *relationships* — relationships that would lead to community engagement and action around EMap and early childhood development. The coffee meetings were really learning conversations.

After more than 100 coffee-and-conversation meetings, I found that within each area in Zone 3 someone had stepped forward to take the lead, excitement was brewing behind the scenes, coalitions were forming, communities were mobilizing, boundary mapping was happening and action planning was occurring — all thanks to coffee and a conversation.

When friends ask me about my job now, I reply that I drink a lot of coffee and have wonderful conversations with people about healthy childhood development in their communities. I also tell them that I now understand the true meaning of a cup of coffee.

Links

The Forum for Early Child Development Monitoring has stepped forward to fill the gap left by the closure of the Council for Early Child Development in the fall of 2010.

The forum is made up of individuals and organizations interested in early child development (ECD) monitoring. Its long-term goal is to help build a comprehensive, population-based system of monitoring ECD across Canada.

To find out more, please go to the website at <http://www.childdevelopmentmonitoring.net/>

Contact us

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

For further information, please go to www.ecdmapping.alberta.ca

You may contact us at ecmap@extn.ualberta.ca or 780-248-1574 or

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