

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

Summer 2013

Seed grants grow community support for early development

Family beach-theme parties. Kite festivals. Town council presentations. Meetings with MLAs. Conferences. Facebook pages. Websites. Children's art projects. Community resource directories.

These are just a few of the many different ways in which coalitions have grown their seed grants. Ninety-eight coalitions have received Early Child Development Community Response Seed Grants since early 2011. The grants aim to help coalitions share local Early Development Instrument (EDI) results and promote positive early development in their communities.

"They help to build community capacity to support early development and create local networks that will advocate for young children and families," says Line Perron, ECMap community development and mobilization manager and a member of the grants committee.

The two-year grants of up to \$50,000 are provided by Alberta Education (\$3,900,000) and Alberta Health (\$650,000) as part of the Early Child Development (ECD) Mapping Initiative.

Communities play a central role in the ECD Mapping Initiative, notes Perron. Local EDI results are released directly to community coalitions, which decide how to best share the information and use it in their planning. They also participate in the research by gathering information about their community resources.

The grants provide coalitions with a basic tool to begin the process of community engagement, says Perron. "Most coalitions have hired a coordinator on a part-time basis at least to do some of the initial work. Coalitions have been remarkably successful in attracting in-kind donations of labour,

resources and materials, and sometimes additional funding from other sources."

The final reports from the early grants are now rolling in. Vicki Cooke, a grant committee member and senior manager, Early Learning Branch, Alberta Education, remarks on the different approaches taken by coalitions.

"This reflects the diversity of communities and the distinct makeup of coalitions, whose membership may include mayors, bankers, priests, pediatricians, librarians, day-care providers and parents. One coalition may be focused on early literacy, while another is making maternal and infant health a priority. The grants embody a truly grassroots response at the community level."

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Vicki Cooke (l) and Line Perron review final reports from early seed grant projects.

Early childhood development

Making smart choices about digital technology and young children

It's commonplace these days to see a four-year-old playing a game on a Smartphone or a toddler using an iPad in a restaurant.

Young children are growing up immersed in a rapidly changing world of digital technology. That presents remarkable possibilities but also new challenges for parents, caregivers and educators.

Former kindergarten teacher and U of A PhD student Suzanna Wong is excited about potential benefits for early learning. In her research, she is observing 11 children aged three to five in their homes in Canada and Australia. Her interim findings show young children are "very sophisticated" users of technology. Whether a Smartphone, tablet or the latest app, they're quick to incorporate it into their lives and their learning.

"They move with ease between physical, digital and print media," says Wong. She describes a five-year-old playing Lego, shifting between physical blocks, printed diagrams and a YouTube instruction video.

Wong says her subjects are learning the basic foundations of literacy: recognizing sight words like Go, Play and Download, for example, and understanding the basic left-to-right concept of print. Technology also gives children control, allowing them to pursue an idea, find information or create something new without waiting for adult help. "That sense of power is so important at this age. They're so proud to be independent."

Used properly, says Wong, interactive technology can be social, creative, intellectually challenging and educational. Like many researchers, she cautions parents and other adults to think critically about children's use of technology. "I always tell people there is no app to replace a parent or a teacher. As parents, educators and caregivers, we need to be informed and aware of how children are using technology so we can support them."



U of A PhD student Suzanna Wong's research shows that digital technology can benefit young children when used properly.

- **Choose learning over winning:** Look for games that encourage learning and collaboration over winning. Focus on internal rewards (mastering a skill) rather than scoring points or other external rewards.
- **Stay real:** Don't let screens take the place of "face time" and verbal interaction with adults, which is essential to children's healthy development.
- **Be part of the picture:** Talk to children about what they're doing, ask questions, encourage them to explore new ways to use the technology.
- **Screen the screens:** Make sure the game, app, e-book or website is appropriate for the child's age and stage of development.
- **Beware of "educational" claims:** Many educational claims on children's apps and computer games are not backed up by research, says Wong. Look for independent, reputable advice.
- **Encourage independent play:** Children don't need to be entertained all the time. Independent play develops problem solving, imagination and creative thinking.
- **Set limits:** Decide what type of device, what type of activity, when and for how long. These are the first steps in learning responsible use of media and technology.

Here are some tips:

- **No screen time under age two:** This is recommended by the Canadian and American pediatric societies.
- **Take a balanced approach:** Children need "real world" time playing with toys, creative materials and other children. Balance digital activities with physical, social and independent play.
- **Go for the interactive:** The best technology allows children to create something new, use their imaginations and make choices.

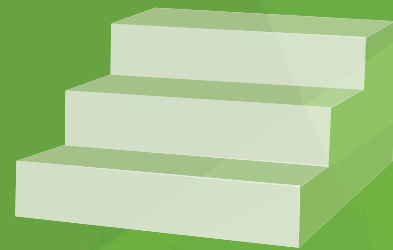
For further information

Screen Smart: Helping Families Manage Media <http://www.screensmart.ca/home>

Media Smarts, Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy <http://mediasmarts.ca/>

The 2Learning.ca Education Society: Early Learners in a Digital World <http://www.2learn.ca/2el/>

Community coalitions



Coalitions buttonhole policy-makers

“...policy is not created in a vacuum. Every local solution, successful research project, or advocacy effort has the potential to influence the thinking of decision-makers about what best supports young children and their families. As parents, teachers, community leaders or concerned citizens, we can all impact on robust and effective policy formation.”

Policies for Early Childhood Development, UNICEF http://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_40752.html

Coalitions are approaching key decision-makers in the hopes of changing policies to better support young children and families.

In Lloydminster, the coalition decided to get the mayor and council onside early on.

“We felt that it was important that our community decision-makers be informed about our work and the ECD Mapping Initiative,” says Sherri Husch Foote, chair of the Lloydminster and Area Early Child Development Community Coalition. “But we knew that we had to raise their awareness about early development first.”

Coalition members found a number of strategies to be effective in engaging their local movers and shakers.

- Make sure people understand the importance of the early years.
- Get to know your city council and administration (or the leaders and organizations that you are trying to reach). Find out how they work. Are there committees involved? If so, what do they do? Who are the key decision-makers? What are their interests and styles of leadership?
- Frame your information in a way that's relevant, compelling and easy to understand. Present it in different ways and chunks, according to your audience.

The coalition had a clear idea about the kind of relationship it wanted to establish with city officials. “We didn't want to be slotted into a



Nicki Dublenko (l) and Gloria Chalmers discuss strategies to approach policy-makers in the Edmonton area.

council agenda, present our information and then be shown the door,” says Husch Foote. “We wanted to have an ongoing conversation and work in partnership to move things forward.”

The mayor's proclamation of National Child Day last November was a major achievement for the coalition and a public recognition of its mandate. “It acknowledges our community's commitment to children,” says Husch Foote. “The next step is to make policy changes.”

Moving from symbolic gesture to concrete policy can be a big step, says Gloria Chalmers, chair of the Edmonton Southeast ECD Community Coalition. “Edmonton has observed National Child Day for years. The challenge that we face is to act collectively to impact policy while we continue to work locally to improve development. We won't see sustained changes in our communities without support at the policy level.”

The seven coalitions in Edmonton have decided that they can make a bigger impact if they work together to catch the ear of policy-makers. The coalitions drafted a letter to local MLAs, city council and senior administrators, and the heads of public health, community and family service agencies. The letter expressed concern that nearly one third of kindergarten-aged children in Edmonton are experiencing developmental difficulties. It pointed to the public policy implications this has for employment, health, education, social services, libraries, transportation, recreation and public safety.

A number of recipients, including two cabinet ministers, have responded so far and agreed to meet. Nicki Dublenko, of the South West Edmonton Early Years Coalition, sees this as a positive sign. “We need to harness energy at all levels to create fundamental, long-term change.”

Profiles

Community 'herder' finds her niche

Enola Nygren's passion for bringing people together has earned her a reputation as a "herder."

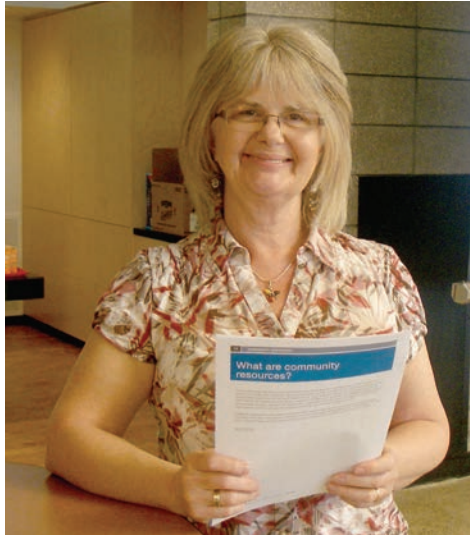
Nygren, who co-chairs the Innisfail coalition, is a strong believer in the power of relationships, whether it's connecting families with the right day home or bringing community groups together in a common effort.

"If I can see a way to do something as a group, or see programs that might work together in a project, I call them up and ask if they want to be involved," says Nygren, coordinator of the Innisfail Family Day Home Society and co-chair of Envision Children First Innisfail.

"I think of myself as a catalyst. I like to see people come together and share their different strengths. That's how things get done, how we can make change."

Nygren helped to bring together different service providers to organize events for families and young children during National Child Day last November, for example.

Strong relationships and good communication have been central to the successes Envision Children First Innisfail has seen so far, says Nygren. Many of the players involved in the coalition, including the town, had worked together on projects before. Those relationships "made it natural" to come together to support early development.



Enola Nygren co-chairs the Envision Children First Innisfail coalition.

As a result of these strong connections, word quickly gets around whenever a need or idea comes up. When the coalition floated the idea of a family centre, for example, the town responded with free space, a part-time coordinator and other important supports. The Innisfail Family Centre, which opened last April in the town's historic Dr. George Kemp house, is building even more relationships. Its two playrooms have become an active

social hub where families meet other families with similar-age children, parents mentor each other and families learn about child development and local programs and services.

"The centre helps families to really feel part of the community," says Nygren. "It's a very nurturing and supportive place."

Nygren began working for the Innisfail Day Home Society nearly 28 years ago, after running a day home herself when her three sons were young. She became coordinator of the Day Home Society and has served on the executive of the Central Alberta Day Home Association for more than 20 years. She has also been involved provincially with the Alberta Child Care Association and the Alberta Family Child Care Association.

She and her staff now arrange care "for the children of the children we cared for years ago." Nygren is happy to have found her niche. She finds working with children and families tremendously rewarding.

"You're helping families and providers come together in supportive relationships that give the best results for the child. You might start with a one-year-old child and you get to see them grow and develop and achieve success. That's exactly what we're all about — helping children to become successful and shrinking the number, the 25 per cent, who are struggling."

FYI

Australia's EDI results improve

Australia's newly released Early Development Instrument (EDI) results show an improvement in early development. Find out more <http://www.rch.org.au/aedi/>

Canada lags in child well-being

Canada ranks 17th out of 29 developed countries in children's well-being, according to a just released UNICEF report. http://www.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/imce_uploads/ DISCOVER/OUR%20WORK/ADVOCACY/ DOMESTIC/POLICY%20ADVOCACY/ DOCS/unicefreportcard10-eng.pdf

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