

Steps

ECMap Newsletter

Early Child Development Mapping Project

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Strathcona County responds to EDI results with an innovative play-based program

The playroom looks like a young child's dream come true. A giant vacuum tubing system mounted on a wall sucks in and pops out brightly covered scarves and plush balls. An illuminated sand table awaits playful little hands. A miniature grocery store features a miniature truck loading dock and a simulated conveyor belt at the cashier checkout. A six-foot tall spaceship built of construction tubing appears just about ready to take off.

The playroom is part of a unique play-based, preschool program that opened at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex in January. The LovetoPlay program represents a \$350,000 investment by Strathcona County in response to Early Development Instrument (EDI) results that show one of out five young children in the area are experiencing difficulty in their emotional, social and communications skills and general knowledge development.

Strathcona County has partnered with the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta to study the effectiveness of the LovetoPlay program in promoting free play and positive early development. The program and related study are just one of many examples of how EDI results are impacting planning in communities across Alberta and sparking further research.

"The knowledge that the municipality has gained from the EDI data is shaping the preschool philosophy of the whole county, from the libraries to public health, FCSS (Family and Community Support Services), school boards and parks and recreation," says Erin Gallagher, a preschool recreation programmer for Recreation, Parks and Culture, Strathcona County.



Young children play with a giant vacuum tubing system at a new play-based program at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex in Strathcona County. *Photo supplied by Strathcona County.*

Her department used EDI local results, along with the municipality's own demographic data, to persuade Strathcona County to invest in an enriched play-based program for three to four year olds in Ardrossan. The recreation centre was scheduled to be rebuilt anyways and the need for additional preschool programming was obvious in the rapidly growing, young hamlet that has three elementary schools.

The county was already committed to free play as a guiding principle for early learning programming and care. A large body of research indicates that play enhances language development, social competence, creativity, imagination and thinking skills, and physical development in young children.

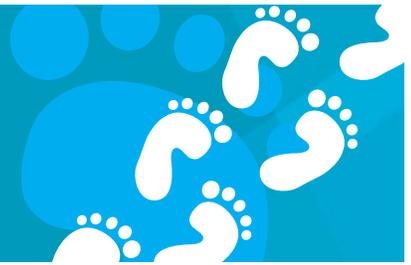
The U of A study should provide more answers. "This is a wonderful opportunity to explore the value of enriched play

environments and to document and assess how play behaviours are influenced within institutionalized settings," adds Laura Nieuwendyk, a project coordinator for the School of Public Health.

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Early childhood development



Playing outside in Mother Nature keeps our children and planet healthy

Outdoor play builds motor skills and strong bones, muscles, hearts and lungs. Children learn to problem solve and take appropriate risks. Their independence and self-confidence grows, and they sleep better. Research also shows that spending time in nature improves thinking skills and concentration and makes children happier and less stressed out.

Despite all the known benefits of outdoor physical activity and connecting with Mother Nature, children's outdoor play has dramatically declined over two generations. According to one U.S. study, unstructured outdoor play has dropped by 50 per cent since the 1970s. And an Ontario study estimates that children under age four are sedentary 73 to 84 per cent of waking hours. This trend has raised alarm bells about the impact on children's health and well-being.

"The reasons are complex and need to be more fully understood," says Dr. Candace Nykiforuk, a professor at the Centre for Health Promotion Studies, School of Public Health, University of Alberta.

Contributing factors include:

- an enormous increase in screen time in front of TVs, computers and gaming devices. Children typically begin watching TV at four months. By age four or five, nearly 25 per cent watch more than two hours of TV daily.
- driving everywhere and urban sprawl limit walking opportunities and physical activity,
- safety concerns. Some experts now say that children are overprotected.
- limited outdoor play in many child-care settings where the majority of children spend their days while parents work.

Canada was slow to adopt national guidelines for physical activity for young children,



Outdoor play is critical to children's early development and long-term physical and mental health.

introducing its first standards in 2012. Research findings show that by age six, only seven per cent of Canadian children are meeting recommended daily physical activity guidelines. Children who are physically active early on are more likely to remain active as they get older.



Nykiforuk

Turning things around will take a concerted effort by parents, planners and policy-makers, says Nykiforuk. A mother with two young children, she advises parents to begin with small, incremental changes to their daily routines. Like taking a five- to ten-minute walk down the street with a toddler after bringing them home from daycare, for example.

Policy changes are needed to develop the supports that are essential to healthy development, including high-quality child care and walkable neighbourhoods with ample green space and recreational opportunities, says

Nykiforuk. Outdoor play is not only fundamental to children's health and development, but to the preservation of the natural environment, she says. "Children who play outside and experience nature value the natural world and are more likely to grow into environmentally responsible adults."

Author Richard Louv, who coined the term nature-deficit disorder and sparked a back-to-nature movement with his best-seller, *Last Child in the Woods*, agrees. Louv makes an eloquent plea for renewing the broken bond between children and nature. The future of our planet may depend upon it.

Canadian physical activity guidelines

- *Infants: several daily sessions of interactive, floor-based tummy time, pushing, pulling, grasping and crawling*
- *Aged 1 to 4: at least 180 minutes of physical activity at any level daily*
- *Aged 5: at least 60 minutes of energetic play every day*

Community coalitions



Workplaces lack family friendly policies, Calgary survey finds

Two-thirds of working parents who participated in a recent Calgary survey of families with young children said that their workplaces are not family friendly. Forty-six per cent said that they are not able to take time off work when their child is ill.

Dariel Bateman, one of the authors of the United Way of Calgary study, calls the results “surprising.” Also unexpected is the fact that this issue cuts across all income brackets, she says.

“Clearly, this is something that we want to work on,” says Bateman, co-chair of United Way of Calgary’s UpStart Initiative Family Action Team, which prepared the report. “Calgary is in great need of family-friendly employment policies.”

As the report, *What Calgary and Area Families Want and Need*, notes, the workplace has an enormous impact on the well-being of young children and families. Family-friendly work environments can make it possible for more parents, especially women, to work outside the home and reduce poverty, as well as decreasing parental stress and improving overall family health.

The survey of close to 600 Calgary parents also found that:

- while most rate their neighbourhoods as safe, only 40 per cent have neighbours that they can turn to for help,
- many experience loneliness and isolation,
- many want more information about early child development and child rearing, particularly behaviour issues, and
- the importance of play in early development is generally not well understood.

United Way undertook the study after Early Development Instrument (EDI) results were released in Calgary. “It became obvious that in order to move the child development agenda forward and make positive changes,



Dariel Bateman co-authored a United Way of Calgary report on what parents with young children in the city want and need.

we needed to know more about what was happening with families and young children in the Calgary area,” says Bateman. “There was very little data available.”

Members of the Family Action Committee, which represents major family and child service agencies in the city, drew up a list of questions that would gather information they felt was important and lacking about families. The questionnaires were distributed by the various agencies and the ten early childhood development (ECD) community coalitions.

Bateman points out that the survey is not a scientific research study. There are gaps. For example, none of the 19 questions deal with child care, a significant issue given the fact that 70 per cent of Calgary mothers work outside the home. The survey did reach a broad demographic base, however. More than a third of respondents were immigrants and five per cent were First



Blythe Butler

Nations (higher than the two per cent that make up Calgary’s population).

The results have been much welcomed by the First 2000 Days Network, an umbrella group for early childhood development (ECD) coalitions, professionals, service providers and agencies, including the United Way, which has been one of the driving forces behind it.

“We are still in the learning phase,” says Blythe Butler, a “weaver” with the First 2000 Days Network. “The survey results will help inform the work of the network.”

The network is currently developing its organizational structure and is about to launch its new website.

Profile

Following the strollers in South Calgary

“Go where the strollers are,” is Juliana Ramirez’s guiding motto.

Ramirez, coordinator of the Calgary Deep South Coalition, sets up her display table stacked with pamphlets, newsletters and handouts wherever young families are likely to congregate. It could be the local library, the recreation centre, or a community league used clothing and toy sale.

Ramirez feels good about the solid core membership that makes up the coalition, but the group is now aiming to extend its community outreach.

“Our EDI (Early Development Instrument) data showed great differences in results,” she says. “We decided that we needed more input in order to better understand what’s going on and to plan our next steps.”

The rapidly growing South Calgary community is home to about 110,000 residents, many of whom — nearly 20 per cent — are recent immigrants. The community is relatively well off with a socio-economic status that ranges from medium to high.

EDI results vary a great deal, however, among the ten subcommunities. In one subcommunity, for example, 38 per cent of young children are experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development, while in a nearby subcommunity, only 15 per cent of



Juliana Ramirez is the coordinator of the Calgary Deep South coalition and can be reached at deepsouthcoalition@gmail.com

the young children are similarly struggling. Ramirez would like to find out why.

As a researcher, she has always been interested in community-based research and putting a human face on data. While working on her MA thesis in political science at the

University of Calgary, she returned to her native Colombia in order to research the role played by community organizations in brokering peace in a country shattered by 50 years of bloody civil war.

Her interests led her into social work and she took a position as research coordinator in the Faculty of Social Work at the U of C, before taking a break to spend more time with her two young daughters, now two and four.

She first became involved with the coalition as a volunteer, after becoming intrigued by EMap’s dual research and community development focus. While working to ‘grow’ the coalition, she discovered the importance of developing strategies to engage parents and community members.

Ramirez began putting out catchy, informative, quick-read newsletters and organizing monthly play dates at the Shawnessy Library, each one focusing on a particular area of early development. The play dates have been so successful that they are being organized at other venues in the community and used as a model by other Calgary coalitions.

“It’s not enough to just give out information,” Ramirez says. “You have to build relationships around it. You have to get people talking together and building the kind of community they want to live in and raise their children in.”

FYI

What makes coalitions successful?

A summary of a literature review of more than 100 academic articles, case studies, guides and web content published about coalitions is now available. *Harvesting the wisdom of coalitions: Review highlights* outlines findings of the review, which looks at how coalitions develop and work. It’s part of a study undertaken by Alberta Culture, Alberta Education and EMap.

<https://www.ecmap.ca/ECMap%20FactSheets/HarvestingtheWisdom-InfoSheet-ECMap-20140107.pdf>

Contact us

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Mapping a bright future for Alberta’s young children