

Your Child's Early Years

A Special Edition for
Niagara Families

Tips, tools and
information to
support your
children brought
to you by the ECCDC
and its community
partners together
with The Standard



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The ECCDC team wants EVERY child to succeed

One of the goals of early learning and child care is to help prepare children for success when they enter school, so it's important that anyone involved in a young child's care understands which play experiences are most important for his or her development.

In a child care program, says Tammy Ferguson, executive director of the Early Childhood Community Development Centre, that goal is achieved by Early Childhood Educators understanding how children develop and creating a balanced mix of activities and experiences to meet each child's developmental needs so they have fun while growing and developing in a positive way.

Ferguson and her team do this by providing the information, resources, and training which help early learning and child care providers create optimal learning and development conditions. They keep up to date on methods and materials, and are happy to consult one on one with a home child care provider or in a group workshop with licensed day care or Early Years Centre staff.

"You're dealing with very specialized classroom equipment, with program plans and staff skills that need to be continually updated," Ferguson says. "You're also dealing with parents, who want to and should take an active role in their children's learning, but who look to their early learning and child care provider for suggestions and advice." Ferguson leads a caring and professional team.

Tammy McCormick Ferguson began her career as an Early Childhood Educator more than 20 years ago because she loved to watch little ones learn and grow. Her subsequent experiences made her realize how important it was to help others recognize the importance of those early years to a child's future, and to see just how vital the work of raising the next generation is. One of the founders of the ECCDC and at the helm since its inception, Ferguson brings broad, multi-faceted management, directorial, and teaching experience to the Centre. She has led its development, overseen its growth, and helped position the ECCDC as a national model for community service-directed child care resources, referrals, and support. She brings to the table a record of professional qualifications, volunteerism, mentoring, policy and organizational development, and humanitarian skills and has also co-authored more than half a dozen major professional development publications. "The link between early childhood education and a person's ability to be successful as an adult is vitally important," she says. "I think, as parents and as a society, we need to take children's mastery of basic skills such as literacy and math much more seriously. We need to teach children how to be good citizens and also resourceful employees or entrepreneurs. The trick is that we can't leave it until they start school. We need to begin the process much earlier. We need to make sure all early learning and child care programs and providers have the best equipment and tools for the job we're asking them to do. "And we really need to recognize the

vital contribution early learning and child care programs and providers make to families, communities, and our children's futures."

Judy Arnott Program Support Manager

Licensed child care centre staff and home child care providers have an immense base of support at the ECCDC. As program support manager, Judy Arnott's support helps providers assist each young child progress to his or her full potential with the skill sets and abilities needed for success in school. This is no small feat. Her support includes program and curriculum development, administration, environmental assessments, policy development and review, facility and financial management, and health and safety. She also helps with marketing and public relations and with parent relations, needs assessment, and parent surveys. In addition to all these responsibilities, Arnott also assists with child care centre boards of directors, helping them achieve their responsibilities to provide quality child care, and helps supervisors and managers improve their management, evaluation, and delivery of quality education and care programs.

With about 40 years in the early childhood education field, Arnott has plenty of experience to call on. She joined ECCDC in 1995 and became a vital support for the 151 licensed and other child care providers in Niagara. She takes the lead for the ECCDC in the development of Quiet Times, a quarterly newsletter for home-based child care providers. A major part of Arnott's responsibility lies with the Quality Child Care Niagara initiative, a standardized approach to training designed to enhance the quality of programs offered in Niagara's licensed centres. "The standardization gives early childhood educators a framework for making program decisions. It also identifies young children who may be at risk of developmental delays, allowing early intervention and referral to community resources," she says.

Cheryl McMillan Information Systems Manager

Cheryl McMillan joined the ECCDC 12 years ago. She is responsible for the overall management of ECCDC's financial, technological and information systems - a far cry from her initial job as a bookkeeper. She also coordinates the five-year-old Vacancy Management System, established in partnership with the Regional Municipality of Niagara.

"This system was developed as a way for regional subsidy workers to identify where there are vacancies and spaces for subsidized child placement in licensed child care programs in Niagara," she says. "With the use of technology child care wait lists have been significantly reduced as has the placement turn around time for families who are trying to access child care spaces available within Niagara's community." Setting up the centre's website, which she led, has proved to be a real help to parents, McMillan says. The general public can check into www.eccdc.org and under Child Care

Choices, can themselves locate licensed child care programs and home day care providers.

As well as supporting and maintaining the centre's database and website, McMillan provides internal support for software on each work station and provides technical support for licensed child care centres, supporting them on the importance of maintaining their virus software, general house-keeping items and on their vacancy status.

Lorrey Arial Bonilla Training and Resource Manager

Classroom and curriculum ideas, the latest information on health and nutrition, business and workplace success, language and communication, and community connections all spring from the pages of Esteem, a magazine Lorrey Arial Bonilla produces for the Early Childhood Community Development Centre. It's bursting with information on upcoming training seminars, ideas and tips for Niagara's early learning and child care providers. Arial Bonilla's job is just as full of ideas and action, and as colourful and informative as the programs themselves.

Lorrey has an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in child studies, a Bachelor of Education degree, and her Ontario Teacher's Certification from Brock University. She has worked with or on behalf of children for 18 years; ten of which have been spent at the ECCDC, within various portfolios.

Currently, as training and resource manager, Arial Bonilla coordinates a range of professional development training seminars (both community-wide and customized) for owners, administrators, supervisors, and front line staff of early learning and child care programs; kindergarten teachers; home child care providers; and all others involved in early learning and child care. The sessions increase their professional knowledge and help them deliver quality programs for young children in safe, healthy, and rich learning environment. Topics also include environmental design and personal development and well-being.

Special events, conferences, and participation in trade shows and speaking engagements are all in Bonilla's purview, as is the annual Early Childhood Educators' Awards of Excellence, hosted with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, Niagara Branch.

In the area of Resource Development, Bonilla ensures individual and group members have access to the ECCDC's specialized workshop and resource lending library. She leads the development and borrowing of learning kits that are fun and educational, developed in consultation with early learning and child care programs so they meet the needs of Niagara's young children. "The materials in the kits are adaptable for children of different ages and cover a variety of developmental areas, such as speech and language, social skills, cognitive abilities, and self-help skills". There are more than 3,000 kits, resource books, activities, and developmentally-appropriate toys and games that can be borrowed from the ECCDC. All are designed to meet a range of

ages and abilities and strengthen the many areas of child development.

Those who want information, need help with strategies for dealing with daily challenges, or want to learn more about community services, can get all this from the ECCDC.

Glory Ressler, Understanding the Early Years

The ECCDC team knows that in order for early learning and care providers and decision-makers to create optimal environments, they need good information on local needs and conditions. Glory, the newest member of the ECCDC management team, oversees the Understanding the Early Years (UEY) projects which seek to gather this knowledge and generally aim to:

- promote awareness and understanding concerning the importance of the early years,
- examine the relationship between community factors and early learning and development outcomes in Niagara,
- report on local and national findings, and
- support evidence-based decision making and planning in the community.

Since 2001, UEY has produced a variety of formal reports, research communiqués, articles, community updates and parent brochures. Presentations have been provided to a range of groups including government and school board officials, teachers, service clubs, early childhood educators and administrators, parents, and other interested community members.

The information has been used by Niagara's early learning organizations and area school boards to make decisions concerning professional development and program planning and purchasing. It has helped identify regional and neighbourhood needs, allocate resources, plan for service delivery, and motivate community action. The knowledge generated has also been cited in several successful project proposals and community plans. Finally, recognizing that it tells only one part of the larger story, the UEY projects have also supported a wide range of community partners in their knowledge gathering and sharing efforts.

Ressler has her B.A. in Political Science and Drama-in-Education from Brock University and Graduate Diploma from the Gestalt Institute of Toronto. She brings a strong personal commitment to her role as UEY Coordinator.

"I was a working single mom pursuing graduate studies and had no options or ideas about what to do concerning child care. I was very fortunate to obtain a subsidized spot in a very high quality centre - but that was only because I worked for the licensing agency! Many of my friends weren't so lucky. Neither I nor my daughter (who's now a local youth leader in child rights and volunteerism) would be where we are today without that incredible support during her early years."

To obtain additional information on UEY and local findings or to request a presentation, Glory can be contacted at 905-646-7311 or gessler@eccdc.org. ♦

Understanding the Early Years

Research Project Children's Readiness to Learn in the Niagara Region

The first five years are when the groundwork for future development and school success is laid and parents play the most important role in helping children develop and be ready for learning in school. Children are born ready to learn with their neurosystems pre-programmed to develop various skills and pathways, depending on the experiences they receive. The term

'readiness to learn in school' refers to the child's ability to meet the demands of school, such as being cooperative, sitting quietly and listening to the teacher, and generally being able to benefit from the educational activities that are provided. Understanding the Early Years or UEY is an initiative that identifies community factors that may influence children's readiness to

learn in school, their development, and family welfare. UEY is a response to the growing body of knowledge that has provided support about how a child's first five years of development significantly affect learning, behaviour, physical and emotional health across the lifespan. The Understanding the Early Years Initiative is funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada. For more information, visit www.hrsdc.gc.ca. UEY enables communities to better understand the needs of their young children and families so they can determine the best programs and services to meet them. Over 30 communities across Canada are involved in UEY research. Many more Canadian communities continue to join the UEY Initiative, and the Niagara Region and its twelve municipalities were fortunate to be apart of the initiative in 2006.

Understanding the needs of families with young children requires various sources of data to provide a complete picture of how communities are meeting the needs of families in Niagara. In early 2006, senior kindergarten teachers from across the Niagara Region and both school boards implemented the Early Development Instrument or EDI with their students.

The EDI is an objective outcome measure of children's early development at the population, rather than individual, level. It measures children's readiness to learn in the school environment in five general domains: Physical Health and Well-being, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language and Cognitive Development, and Communication Skills and General Knowledge in relation to developmental benchmarks rather than curriculum-based ones. The instrument provides information for groups of children in order to: 1) report on areas of strength and need for populations of children, 2) monitor populations of children over time, and 3) predict how children will do in elementary school.

Preliminary analyses of the 2006 EDI data show us that:

Children in the Niagara Region scored statistically significantly higher than the national averages on all five of the school readiness to learn domains!

Large proportions (77%) of children in the Niagara Region are ready or on track for school across the five domains!

Overall, children in the Niagara Region are exceeding many of their peers across Canada in the five readiness to learn domains. However, there are 23% of senior kindergarten children who were considered to be not on track for being ready for making the transition to school. This means that there is the potential for these children to have challenges that may impede their success in school. Parents can play a large role in preparing their children for their transition to school by providing them successful experiences in the five EDI domains early on that are important for being ready for school. Times when your child may not be successful are opportunities for your child to learn and to praise them for their efforts.

Human Resources and Social Development Canada has found that there is mounting evidence that strong, supportive communities help nurture healthy child development. Examination of children's development in combination with community conditions may assist in determining some protective and risk factors related to children's development. The wide variety of community supports available to families with young children in the Niagara Region will be mapped to identify where they are located throughout the region. Some of the invaluable resources that will be mapped include the Ontario Early Years Centres that are strategically situated for easy access throughout the region to provide free support to families with young children, the libraries that have free public access to reading/educational materials or programs, the numerous sports and recreation facilities, such as the YMCA's, and the abundant programs provided to the community through The Regional Municipality of Niagara's Public Health and Children Services. Accessing these resources can go a long way in assisting families in supporting a child's development across the five domains for being on track for learning in school. In addition, UEY is in the process of mapping Census 2001,

This chart shows the areas of strength of children who are on track for school across the five domains.

Developmental Domains	Children On Track Areas of Strength
Language and Cognitive (Thinking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic literacy skills (knowing how to handle a book, identifying some letters, attaching sounds to some letters, showing awareness of rhyming, knowing the directionality of writing, ability to write their own names) Showing interest in books/reading, numbers/math, skill at remembering things Displaying at least half of the advanced literacy skills (reading simple/complex words or sentences, writing simple words or sentences voluntarily) Basic numeracy skills (counting to 20, recognizing shapes/numbers, classifying and sorting, comparing numbers, using one-to-one matching, understanding simple time concepts)
Communication and General Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicating easily and effectively Ability to participate in storytelling or imaginative play Ability to articulate clearly Showing adequate general knowledge and proficiency in their native languages
Social Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting along/playing with various children Demonstrating respect for others and property (following rules, taking care of their materials, accepting responsibility, showing self-control) Working neatly and independently, solving problems and following instructions, class routines, adjusting well to change Curiosity about their environments and eagerness to explore new activities
Emotional Maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being helpful to others who were hurt, sick, or upset, inviting bystanders to join in Being happy and able to enjoy school and comfortable being left at school by their caregivers Rarely or never displaying aggressive behaviours (fighting, not having temper tantrums) and being kind to others Ability to concentrate, settle into activities, waiting their turn and thinking before acting
Physical Health and Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coming to school well rested, energetic and appropriately dressed for school activities, and rarely arriving late or hungry Displaying independence, an established hand preference, good coordination, less likely to suck thumb/finger Good performance on activities using gross (running, walking) and fine motor (holding a pencil) skills



Statistics Canada data (e.g. Average Household Income, Residential Stability, Employment rates) for all the municipalities to provide a picture of the environments that families with young children are living in. Mapping economic conditions and resources in the Niagara Region assists communities in recognizing their strengths, challenges, and potential gaps in services/programs that may enhance or potentially impede children's healthy development in the Niagara Region.

Information about families is a crucial part of the various sources of data for understanding the needs of families with young children. Currently, UEY is supporting Malatest & Associates Ltd. as they interview parents and conduct direct assessments of children in the Region. These efforts would not be possible without the continuing hard work of the District School Board of Niagara and the Niagara Catholic District School Board who are outstanding partners in their distribution and collection of consent forms for this source of community data. A community study that includes this information will be written by Doug Wilms and is anticipated in the fall of 2007.

The various sources of UEY data talked about throughout this article will be compiled together in reports for each municipality and its neighbourhoods and made available in late fall of 2007.

The UEY research is sponsored by the Early Childhood Community Development Centre and receives encouragement and insight from the Early Years Niagara Research Advisory Group. Community collaborations and community partnerships are essential for developing plans for families and their young children in Niagara. If you would like to learn more about the UEY research, or wish to arrange a presentation, please contact the Early Childhood Community Development Centre at 905.646.7311, or email eccdc@eccdc.org.

Prepared by Marion Trent-Kratz, UEY Researcher