ORIENTATION:
The Best Start Possible
UEY NIAGARA REGION, ONTARIO

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Intended Outcomes of presentation

1. Enhance ability to generate ideas for engaging and mobilizing community.
2. Increase understanding of need to adapt project to community needs and changing conditions.
3. Identify and encourage development of creative strategies and solutions.
4. Inspire and motivate new UEY initiatives.

UEY Niagara Region Overview

The UEY Niagara Region initiative began in the fall of 2005 and is scheduled to sunset in September, 2008. It is working with a pre-established community coalition (Early Years Niagara Planning Council/EYNPC) and its research advisory group, along with two school boards enrolling approximately 3,050 SK students each year.

A significant Early Years Niagara accomplishment is the Niagara Children’s Charter of Rights. Since its development in 2002, the Charter has been endorsed by all twelve municipalities, the Regional Municipality of Niagara, all local school boards, and over 20 community organizations. By endorsing the Niagara Children’s Charter, the community has publicly pledged to contribute to improving the lives of children and families in the region.

Additionally, there are a wide variety of networks, committees, planning bodies, and agencies in place that serve families with young children. Much of the sector work focus has been on breaking down silos and partnering in order to best coordinate, integrate, and implement the local early years agenda.
There are **early years plans generated from various bodies**: Children’s Services (Child Care), Public Health, EYNPC (Best Start Integrated Community Plan), Aboriginal Planning Council, Francophone Best Start Network, Ontario Early Years Niagara Region, etc.

Service delivery priorities in the region currently include:

- poverty alleviation,
- literacy,
- infant health,
- parenting strategies,
- healthy lifestyle (nutrition and exercise),
- community hub development (integration of services, one stop shopping for early years, preferred location in schools and family resource programs, linked to Best Start),
- new income testing for subsidized child care spots, and
- developmentally-based, quality daycare programming and environments.

*You can see that the UEY Niagara Region initiative certainly began in a complex environment!*

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**How did UEY Niagara Region begin moving forward?**

Luckily, our sponsoring agency, the Early Childhood Community Development Centre ([www.eccdc.org](http://www.eccdc.org)):

- provides resources, materials, training, and supports to the early learning and care sector in the Region,
- has over 1,000 members,
- is involved in many committees, networks, and initiatives,
- has an extensive community email database,
- had prior experience (UEY Niagara Falls), and
- has a great organizational infrastructure.

Additional information on the ECCDC can be found in its Annual Report, which can be downloaded at: [www.eccdc.org/community/download.php](http://www.eccdc.org/community/download.php) by clicking on the Annual Report cover.

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**What about other community conditions in the Region of Niagara?**

Found in southern Ontario between two of North America’s Great Lakes (Ontario and Erie) the region is very diverse. Niagara, which covers 1896 sq. km (715 sq. miles), is made up of 12 unique and distinct local municipalities. Varying from...
What about other community conditions in the Region of Niagara? (continued)

the larger populated cities of St. Catharines and Niagara Falls, with their urban intensive features, to Wainfleet and West Lincoln with more rural or natural resources … they all add to Niagara’s economic and geographic diversity.  

(http://www.regional.niagara.on.ca/living/region/default.aspx, 2006 The Regional Municipality of Niagara)

![Distribution of Population in Niagara Region](image)

The UEY Niagara Region generated map above outlines the twelve municipalities in the region, as well as population distribution by DAs organized into local neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods were identified through a consultative “Neighbourhood Creation Project” undertaken by the local Ontario Early Years Data Analysis Coordinator. UEY Niagara Region partnered extensively, in order to ensure comparability of neighbourhood level results across community initiatives and over time.

Other local community conditions of note include:

- High rates of seasonal employment due to tourism and service industry cycles, particularly in Niagara Falls,
- Significant cuts to manufacturing sector in St. Catharines and Welland,
- High levels of agricultural employment in rural areas (west),
- Labour shortages in skilled trades and IT,
- Largest immigration point of entry in country (Fort Erie),
- Generally good access to services across Niagara, although somewhat under-utilized,
- Generally better socioeconomic conditions in western end of region, except for Niagara on the Lake,
- Pockets of poor socioeconomic conditions in many municipalities, and
- Planning efforts aimed at regional integration and smart planning.
Pre-data Strategies

While preparing coalition and data partners for the implementation phase, the approaches and strategies of other UEY sites were researched (past and present). This helped gain a broad sense of the possibilities for UEY Niagara Region and identified other communities in similar situations with strategies that could easily be adopted.

This knowledge, in conjunction with an understanding of the community’s needs, allowed the project to begin creatively moving forward. In terms of an environmental scan of the local situation, identifying the following information has been very useful:

- **Current trends and needs** in the community service, public health, early learning and care, and education sectors,
- Potential community partners; those having an interest in early development, learning or care, and/or other aspects of the information you’ll be gathering (i.e. services related to EDI domains, socioeconomic conditions and community resources, and evidence-based or data-driven planning),
- **Planning needs and cycles of community**, with regard to the early years, and
- **Other early years knowledge, or related information**, being collected (local, provincial, and national).

UEY Niagara Region also found that it was important to begin networking and participating in community meetings and relevant committees in order to promote and position UEY and an understanding of the importance of the early years generally. The various types of individuals, committees, and meetings UEY Niagara Region participated in included:

- Local parent, teacher, and early childhood educator events and conferences,
- Early years program, child care and related public health managers, and related networks and/or committees,
- **Individuals, committees, and meetings** recommended by the sponsoring agency, coalition, and its members, and
- Active social justice, poverty, and children’s issues groups in the local community.
The information and contacts gained from these types of activities allowed the UEY Niagara Region initiative to anticipate changes and adapt and integrate its project workplans with current community needs and conditions. For example, when learning about a delay on the release of 2005 EDI data that was collected through the Ontario Best Start initiative in the region, UEY was able to adjust its workplans and timelines in order to better coordinate knowledge release to the community (i.e. adjust release date and content of UEY’s 2006 EDI data). As a result, UEY now partners extensively with Ontario Early Years Niagara Region and its Centres, and the Region of Niagara’s Public Health Department which administers the Best Start initiative locally.

In response to local concerns about the use of the EDI data, UEY Niagara Region met to discuss and subsequently partnered to develop the statement found below.

The EDI is a population and not a diagnostic measure, and the results are one source of data only. For the purposes of planning and decision-making, it is best to also utilize other reliable and relevant information, such as is found on the Regional Municipality of Niagara’s website: http://www.regional.niagara.on.ca/living/health_wellness/reports/default.aspx

The statement has been viewed as a success in that it addresses the fundamental local concern, builds capacity for robust evidence-based planning, and allows UEY to use the Region’s and Public Health Department logos on all EDI community reports and communiqués; which has significantly promoted the credibility of UEY Niagara Region, and the knowledge it has gathered, in the community.

Examples of Pre-data Activities and Products

The various types of activities UEY Niagara Region undertook, and products it developed in the pre-data stage included:

- **Introductory presentations and communiciqués** (i.e. on UEY, early childhood development, EDI, and related local knowledge),
- **Developing local community resource and early years research inventories,**
- **Gathering feedback on UEY knowledge dissemination, data-driven dialogue, and planning activities** at coalition and other community partner meetings,
- **Developing local community resource and early years research inventories,**
- **Providing displays and/or workshops** at community events and conferences,
- **Partnering** on relevant community events and conferences,
- **Participating** on UEY Coordinator Conference calls and email exchanges,
- **Supporting knowledge gathering efforts** of the coalition and other community partners,
- **Dissemination of joint communication products** (ex. New Parent Tips brochure, Back To School calendar, newspaper supplement), and
- **Working on communications and workplans** (i.e. developing, revising, etc.).
Post-data Strategies

The pre-data activities were intended to help piece together the puzzle that constitutes the local situation and community planning needs and begin developing the partnerships that would maximize knowledge dissemination and use. This has allowed UEY Niagara Region, once results were available, to:

- Target, and then customize, its communications products and presentations for key community partners,
- Gather support and begin plans for community events/forums,
- Develop joint articles, initiatives, and communiqués, and
- Respond to evidence-based planning and knowledge gathering requests and anticipated needs.

In the UEY Niagara Region experience to-date, the key has been sharing relevant information, in a variety of forms, with community partners as soon as possible. In the complex environment UEY Niagara Region operates in, the best approach has been something like, ‘servant leadership’, in that the project attempts to serve the needs and priorities of the local community while also achieving its own mandate.

Examples of Post-data Activities and Products To-date

At this time, UEY Niagara Region is in the process of generating additional EDI reports and its Community Mapping Study. To-date the project has undertaken various types of activities and products in its efforts to serve the local community and meet its deliverables. These have included:

- Sending press releases and giving interviews with local media,
Developing and disseminating **joint articles and workshops** (ex. Designing Gender Advantaged Environments, Quiet Times and OEYC newsletters, and Poverty and Child/Family Outcomes Report),

- Distributing **UEY Research Communiqués** (targeted to ECEs and other frontline professionals)

- Delivering **customized knowledge presentations** to target audiences,
- Disseminating preliminary EDI results and/or mapped data in custom briefs and updates,

- Regularly gathering input on who else might be interested in/able to use UEY knowledge,

- Developing and delivering related workshops that include some local knowledge (ex. Science of Early Childhood Development, Data-driven Planning),

- Providing available UEY knowledge (aggregate, customized) for presentations and workshops by community partners,

- Providing available UEY information (customized) for planning purposes (ex. School Board, Speech Services Niagara),
• Holding **community meetings and forums** (ex. Power Breakfast, Lunch and Learn, Community Dinner),

• Providing **other research projects** available URE information (aggregate, customized),

• Generally **supporting knowledge gathering efforts of the coalition and other community partners**, and

• Developing **UEY Niagara Region website** and uploading presentations and communiqués ([www.uey.eccdc.org](http://www.uey.eccdc.org)).
# Top 10 Lessons Learned

*by Brenda Ives and Glory Ressler*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEN</th>
<th>There’s never enough time. Let it go … do as much as you can, when you can, and keep moving (unless you’re sleeping … that would just be dangerous). 😊</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NINE</td>
<td>Timelines associated with workplans shift, usually due to reasons beyond the control of the messenger. It’s tempting to unleash. Let it go … prioritize and strategize as best you can and don’t worry - your neck and stomach will thank you!</td>
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<td>EIGHT</td>
<td>Planning is essential and we can become attached. Let it go … learning to adapt serves the project, along with your sanity.</td>
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<td>SEVEN</td>
<td>Change is chaotic and often unpredictable - even when you’re aware of trends. Let it go … in order to avoid the unpleasant side-effect of bitterness, try to see the opportunities hidden in the hassles. Don’t be afraid to ask for help in gaining perspective, if required.</td>
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<td>SIX</td>
<td>There’s never enough data at the right time and both ‘enough’ and ‘time’ are relative constructs. Let them go … get as much accurate knowledge as you can, when you can, and share it. Voila! Observe how the community embraces UEY!</td>
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<td>FIVE</td>
<td>UEY is one piece of the community puzzle and you may never get the box top with the complete picture on it. Let it go … gather your community pieces and then find your community niches – these connections make the work easier.</td>
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<td>FOUR</td>
<td>The hardest part about engaging the community is the relationships. You won’t necessarily like everyone. Let it go … stay out of personality conflicts and focus on solutions or risk enabling a ‘dysfunctional community dynamic’ or ‘intervention’. Yikes!</td>
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<td>THREE</td>
<td>Leadership through service to the community is effective but some people don’t want to be served. Let it go … use your charm and sell the benefits to the other but when all else fails remember that ‘if a door closes, a window opens’ or at least have a cocktail (after work, of course).</td>
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<tr>
<td>TWO</td>
<td>Problems will arise and they’re irritating. Finding solutions together helps but identifying blame doesn’t. Let it go! Look for a work-around, bust through, burrow under, and give-a-little/get-a-little opportunities. You’ll feel better and people will like you more 😊</td>
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<td>ONE</td>
<td>Only you can maintain the integrity of your project, in relation to funder requirements, changes, and local community conditions and needs. You don’t need to be like other sites. Let it go … you do need to produce agreed upon deliverables and required reports. Do NOT let these go … they may even help you review, reflect, and creatively adapt!</td>
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## Discussion

Are there any comments, questions, or items you’d like to discuss?
The views expressed in this document are the authors’ and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Human Resources and Social Development Canada or of the Federal Government.

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Thank you for your time and attention!

~ Glory