

## Niagara This Week December 6, 2006

### Majority of children in Niagara are ready for school: study

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NIAGARA FALLS -- About 75 per cent of the city's children are ready for school and are likely to adjust well and achieve academic success, according to the final report of the Understanding the Early Years study, a federally-funded initiative.

"The study found great news for a majority of Niagara Falls children, but we still have to be concerned about the other 25 per cent," said Donna Dalglish, coordinator of the city's Ontario Early Years Centres. "We want to make sure every child has the best possible start, so we have to meet the needs of those 25 per cent."

The study measured the children's readiness to learn at school, particularly their ability to ask questions, listen to the teacher, work with other children, remember and follow rules and benefit from educational activities.

Dalglish said the study found the city's children were weakest in the areas of communication and social skills development, and the centre has already begun to implement programs such as "Count Me In," which encourages children to work together with numeracy, to combat the problem.

"The ability to socialize is a lifelong skill, and the Early Years Centres encourage networking not only for the children, but also for their caregivers," said Dalglish.

The study also examined resources for parents in the community, and found challenges in geographical areas where the average household income was lower.

It found on average, children in the downtown area, for example, have multiple risk factors which may limit them from experiencing healthy developmental outcomes, as opposed to those growing up in Beavertown, which on average, scored significantly higher than the national average. Children who live in areas where the number of families who moved within the last year scored lower, as did those who are being raised by a single parent.

Dalglish said the maps of high risk areas contained in the report are useful in planning satellite locations, as well as where to send the mobile centres, which can be transported by truck and set up in any location.

"We want to be accessible to everyone, so we want to be in areas where transportation is an issue," she said. "Sometimes the primary caregiver isn't a parent - it's a grandparent, so we provide a welcoming environment for everyone."

Helen Bates frequents the centre's main site in Mary Ward Catholic School. She said the facility provides a place for her three-year-old granddaughter, Emma, to take part in activities she wouldn't normally be able to in her home.

"She loves playing in the sandbox and painting. She's occupied here more than she is in my home," she said.

Emma will start junior kindergarten next September, and Bates said the centre's "school-like" atmosphere will prepare her granddaughter for the transition.

Bates cares for Emma when her mother, Louise, is busy with shift work. She said the centre not only benefits Emma, but also her.

"It's a social thing. I meet mothers and talk while she plays. I also get ideas about activities she can do in my home," said Bates.

The proud grandmother said the main site is located within a 10-minute walk from her home, making it a convenient place to spend time, regardless of the weather.

Last year, about 13,000 families utilized the centre's services.

Early Years Centres are located in St. Patrick's Catholic School downtown, Sacred Heart Catholic School, MacBain Community Centre, in the Boys and Girls Club of Niagara

In addition to the Ontario Early Years Centres, the Region, the Niagara Catholic District School Board, and the District School Board of Niagara will benefit from the study's findings.

Copies of the report are available at the Early Childhood Community Development Centre in Henley Square Plaza, 395 Ontario St. in St. Catharines, and at the main site of the Ontario Early Years Centre, Mary Ward Catholic School, 2999 Dorchester Rd.

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Illustration:

- Helen Bates frequents the Ontario Early Centres' main site at Mary Ward Catholic School in Niagara Falls. She said the facility provides a place for her three-year-old granddaughter, Emma, to take part in activities she wouldn't normally be able to in her home.

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