

# Understanding the Early Years Research in Niagara Falls



Community Update, Fall / Winter 2001

Niagara Falls is fortunate to be one of 12 communities nationwide taking part in this study.

Research in Niagara Falls is sponsored by the Early Years Action Group—Niagara Region and administered by the Early Childhood Community Development Centre.

UEY is funded by Human Resources Development Canada

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Niagara Nurtures



The Early Years Action Group-Niagara Region

Early Childhood  
COMMUNITY  
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## What is Understanding the Early Years?

UEY is a community research initiative involving teachers, parents, guardians, community agencies and the Government of Canada.

UEY helps communities understand how their children are doing and how best to respond to their needs by looking at the whole picture: how neighbourhoods, children's programs, services, families, schools and child care facilities influence early childhood development.

With this information, communities will put in place action plans to help their children, both before and after they enter school, reach their full potential in life.

We need to know how our children are doing now before we know how to help them do better in the future. UEY is providing answers to

this question so that communities and governments can develop programs, services and policies that best promote the well-being of our children.

Improving our understanding of the factors that help or hinder child development and increasing community tracking of how well children are developing, is crucial to ensuring the best possible start for Canada's children.

UEY has three main research components:

**The Early Development Instrument (EDI)** assesses how ready children are to learn as they enter school by asking questions about their development .

**The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)** looks at health and well-being; collecting information about how a child's family, friends, school and community influence their development.

**The Community Mapping Study (CMS)** looks at the environments in which children live and the local resources available to them and their families. By producing a series of detailed maps, communities can indicate the location and variety of programs and services available in relation to the physical and social characteristics of a community. This information can help determine whether existing resources actually meet the needs of families and children they have been designed to support.

## Why is UEY so important?

The information collected will not only tell us more about what is working and what is not, but it will also give us an indication as to why services and neighbourhood supports work the way they do. This information will be invaluable because it will

help us to look backward and forward at the same time. Looking back, we will learn more about the nature of the social environments that young children and their parents live in. Looking forward, researchers have learned that a child's readiness to

learn in senior kindergarten predicts later school success. With the results of this research, we can respond by providing extra support for children who need it.

## EDI - Talking to Teachers

The EDI is a teacher checklist that collects information on senior kindergarten children. It measures children's **readiness to learn at school**. This refers to a child's ability to meet the task demands of school, such as being cooperative, sitting quietly and listening to the teacher. In short, it measures their ability to benefit from the educational activities provided in school.

Teachers answer the following types of questions on the EDI about each child in the class.

- How often is the child too tired to do school work?
- Is the child well coordinated?
- Does the child appear upset when left by a caregiver; have temper tantrums; appear worried; cry a lot?

Teachers are also asked to comment on the child's use of language, interest in books, abilities related to reading and writing, communication skills and general knowledge.

The EDI is a group measure. It does not provide results for individual children and is not a diagnostic tool. Instead, it provides a picture of the community to help assess supports for young children and families and to assist in monitoring changes.

In February 2001, kindergarten teachers in Niagara Falls completed the EDI for over 920 children in the Niagara Catholic District School Board and the District School Board of Niagara.

The EDI was developed by Drs. Janus and Offord at the Canadian Centre for Studies of Children at Risk, McMaster University. It focuses on five areas of child development:

- ♦ Physical health and well-being
- ♦ Social competence
- ♦ Emotional maturity
- ♦ Language & cognitive development
- ♦ Communication skills and general knowledge

## NLSCY - Talking to Parents

The NLSCY is conducted in partnership by Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada.

It is a comprehensive survey that looks at child development in a holistic way, examining a variety of factors that influence child growth and development. Questions are designed to gather information about interactions that occur throughout a child's development and socialization, such

as the impact of family, friends, socio-economics and the environment.

An enhanced version of the NLSCY was developed for UEY, looking specifically at early childhood.

Parents and guardians of senior kindergarten children in Niagara Falls were randomly selected to take part in a telephone interview with Statistics Canada.

Participation was voluntary.

Children of parents who took part also participated in an in-school assessment where they were asked to identify pictures and reproduce simple shapes.



The NLSCY component of UEY was conducted in Niagara Falls in April 2001.

## CMS - Community Mapping

The Community Mapping Study (CMS) is currently underway in Niagara Falls. The purpose of this study is to gather information and report on:

- The physical and socio-economic characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which children live;
- The kinds of programs and services available to young children and their parents;

- The location of programs and services in relation to where children live.

The information gathered will be provided to the community so that they can plan, prioritize and allocate efforts to provide the most effective resources for early childhood development.

Programs and services for young

children and their families are currently being surveyed in Niagara Falls.

A neighbourhood environment scale is also being conducted. This will look at factors such as the amount of green space, adequate street lighting and the condition of parks and play areas.

# EDI Initial Results in Niagara

EDI Scales	Average score		Standard deviation		Average score for the lowest 10 <sup>th</sup> %	
	Cohort 1999/00	Niagara Falls 2001	Cohort 1999/00	Niagara Falls 2001	Cohort 1999/00	Niagara Falls 2001
Physical health and well-being	8.61	8.78	1.12	1.05	7.12	7.31
Social Competence	7.70	8.14	1.54	1.74	5.58	5.58
Emotional Maturity	7.92	7.72	1.52	1.61	5.83	5.54
Language and Cognitive Development	8.07	8.29	1.92	1.77	5.39	5.77
Communication and general knowledge	7.33	7.78	2.11	1.88	4.25	5.28

Age range: 4.5 to 6.7 years; children with special needs excluded

The EDI was completed for over 900 senior kindergarten students in Niagara Falls, including two boards of education (NCDSB and DSNB), in the 2000/2001 school year.

Valid results were obtained for 889 children. (sections with more than 25% of items left blank or answered "don't know" were considered invalid as were surveys with more than two invalid sections)



The cohort used for comparison consisted of all sites across Canada in 1999/2000 in which the EDI was completed – valid results for this group totaled 34,500.

Initial results show that in general, compared with the five-scale averages for senior kindergarten children in the 1999/2000 cohort, children in Niagara Falls are doing either as well as or slightly better than children in last year's cohort, except for in the area of emotional maturity, where they did not do quite as well.

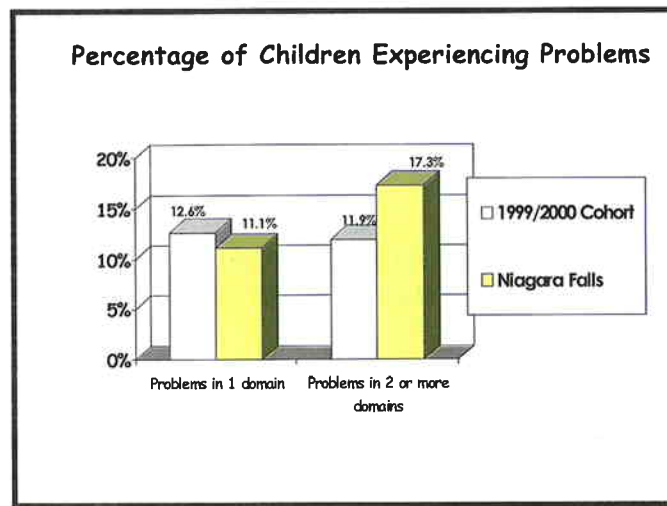
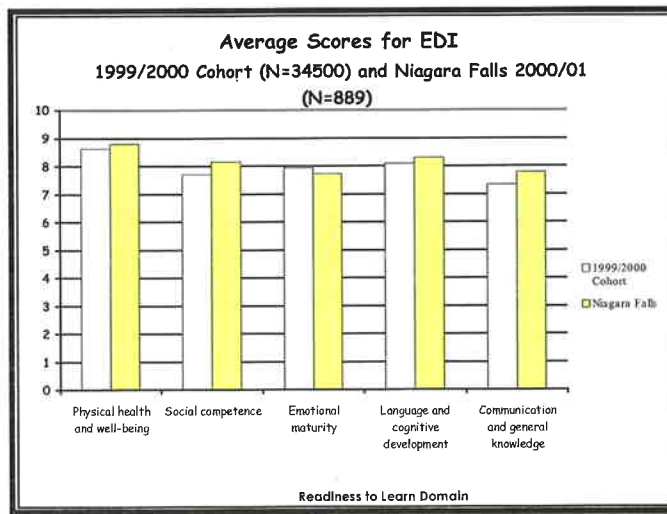
While looking at data on this broad level helps to put the EDI into perspective, a great deal of information can be disguised by such global comparisons. It will be necessary to break results down to the neighbourhood level to learn more about our community specifically. That work is currently underway in the Community Mapping component of our study.

We do know that 11.1% of Niagara Falls children showed problems in at least one readiness to learn domain while 17.3% showed problems in two or more domains (comparable averages for last year's cohort were 12.6% and 11.9% respectively).

This may appear confusing. How can children in Niagara Falls be doing as well as or better than the cohort yet have a higher percentage of problems?

A problem is defined as a score that falls within the lowest 10th percentile. Each community has a different 10<sup>th</sup> percentile boundary relative to their own results. For three out of five development areas, the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile average for Niagara Falls is a higher score than that of the cohort. This brings our overall average up. However, looking at the overall average masks the fact that within our community we have a greater percentage of children who are lagging behind their peers. In a normal distribution we could expect 10% of our children to fall within the 10th percentile category. In Niagara Falls, 28.4% of our children fall within this category which means that they are exhibiting problems relative to other children their age in Niagara Falls (the comparable percentage for last year's entire cohort is 24.5%).

Looking at results in a neighbourhood context will allow us to study the EDI information more closely and examine associated factors by exploring the characteristics of neighbourhoods in which children live. This work is an essential part of the UEY Project.





## UEY Project Partners

The UEY Project in Niagara Falls is grateful for the hard work and dedication of its many partners including:

- Early Years Action Group—Niagara Region
- District School Board of Niagara
- Niagara Catholic District School Board
- Regional Municipality of Niagara Community Services and Public Health Departments
- Early Childhood Community Development Centre
- Human Resources Development Canada



## Next Steps

The next steps in our study will be to:

- Study the EDI data by neighbourhood. It is the differences between neighbourhoods within our larger community that will turn the results into a community mobilization tool.
- Gather all of our data and combine the EDI results with information gathered through the NLSCY and Community Mapping for a more complete picture of our community. We will then analyze and interpret our results and share what we learn with the community. Community EDI and Mapping reports are anticipated by spring 2002 as well as an integrated report, combining all components, which will be produced by HRDC.
- Build community understanding & support.
- Work with the community to develop an action plan to improve supports for early child development and families in Niagara Falls.



**There is increasing evidence to support the importance of investing in the early years of children's development.**

**New research shows that these formative years are critical. The kind of nurturing and stimulation that children receive in their early years can have a major impact on the rest of their lives .**

**In Niagara Falls, the UEY Project partners have taken up the challenge to better understand how children in our community are developing and how to better focus resources to support the early years so that all of our children have the opportunity to live up to their full potential.**

*Niagara Nurtures  
A Good Life  
Needs a Good  
Start*

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