

READY OR NOT

Emotional Maturity and School Readiness

by Lori Walker, UEY Coordinator, Niagara Falls

A child's first years at school are very important. A good start in school increases the likelihood that children will feel good about themselves, complete high school, find and retain employment, and become caring, contributing members of society.



Recently, school readiness has been the topic of much research. Studies have shown that readiness to learn at age six can

predict a child's ability to benefit from the opportunities school has to offer, both academically and socially. On the other hand, lack of readiness may make it difficult for children to adjust to school; to succeed academically; and to be accepted by their peers.

School readiness is often thought of in terms of chronological age and the possession of certain academic skills (the ability to identify numbers and letters) and cognitive skills (the ability to memorize and retain information). However, understanding the transition-to-school process and children's early experiences in school requires moving beyond traditional academic and cognitive definitions of readiness to include components of child development that are less obviously related to academic success. One of these components is emotional maturity.

The Understanding the Early Years (UEY) Federal research initiative has been studying readiness to learn in Niagara Falls since 2001, using the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The EDI is a population-based measure in the form of a teacher-completed checklist implemented at the Senior Kindergarten level. The EDI takes a broad, developmental approach to readiness, placing the importance of emotional maturity on par with academic and cognitive abilities.

Important factors for emotional maturity in terms of school readiness include:

- the ability to defer instant gratification;
- persistence in repetitive but necessary tasks; and
- the ability to cope with small failures and upsets without tears or anger that might affect continued concentration and prevent children from learning from their mistakes.

The 2003 EDI results in Niagara Falls showed that:

- 23% of Senior Kindergarten children were not emotionally ready for school;

- 17% lacked pro-social or helping behaviours; and
- 13% showed signs of hyperactivity and inattention including: restlessness; difficulty settling at activities; and distractible, impulsive, and fidgeting behaviours.

While it should be noted that these figures are the result of teacher assessment and are not diagnostic, teachers reported similarly low scores in emotional maturity when the EDI was implemented in 2001. Furthermore, results of the 2001 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) Community Study showed that parental reports on children's hyperactive behaviour in Niagara Falls was one and half times the national norm.

Roots of Empathy program fosters emotional maturity

A successful example of an emotional development program currently running in the Niagara Region is Roots of Empathy (ROE). ROE is an innovative, classroom-based parenting program that fosters empathy and emotional literacy in children from ages 3 to 14. ROE was piloted in Niagara in September 2000 in 10 elementary school classrooms. Currently, the ROE program is operating in 49 classrooms across the Niagara Region, 13 of which are in JK/SK settings and use a specialized curriculum that is developmentally appropriate to kindergarten.

At the University of British Columbia, Dr. Clyde Hertzman and Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl have been studying the effectiveness of the ROE program. Their findings showed significant improvements in first, second, and third grade ROE children, relative to comparison children, in the areas of:

- emotional knowledge;
- social understanding; and
- pro-social behaviours with peers.

There are currently 44 certified instructors delivering the Roots of Empathy program in Niagara, with plans to increase this number by 20 in Fall 2004. For information on the ROE program, please visit www.rootsofempathy.org/research.html.



So what does this mean for our children? While these results, in and of themselves should not be cause for alarm, they should also not be ignored. Children who are ready for school emotionally have self-confidence and a positive approach to new experiences. Emotionally mature children can, for the most part, balance a curiosity about the world and an eagerness to try new experiences, with an age appropriate ability to reflect before acting. In contrast, children who are not emotionally ready may lack self-confidence and spend time and energy dealing with the fear of failure, leaving them reluctant to try new activities and missing out on learning opportunities. On the other hand, children who are too impulsive may fail to perceive all aspects of a task, and as a result, not fully understand what is required of them.

● Educators and professionals who work with children can foster emotional development by modelling and teaching children how to understand and manage their feelings, self-regulation skills, empathy, and pro-social behaviour. Further information about children's early emotional development, along with a list of resources to support emotional development in the early years, is available at the ECCDC.

Understanding the Early Years (UEY) in Niagara Falls is sponsored by the ECCDC and the Early Years Action Group - Niagara Region.

Transition to School

by Kathy Bell R.N., BScN, Manager,
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The transition to kindergarten can be a challenging time for both parent and child. For this reason a pilot project was held in January 2002 to help the transition to school be as smooth and comfortable as possible. In January 2003, ten events were held across the Niagara Region to inform parents of "3 to Get Ready...Then Off to School" which included:

- the kindergarten registration process;
- what it is like to be in kindergarten;
- school readiness;

Conference Connects Emotional Immaturity to Bullying

The UEY Project recently partnered with the ECCDC and the InterProfessional Committee on Child Abuse (IPC) to present "The Community's Role in Restorative Strategies for Bullying Prevention", a conference held last fall at the Sheraton Fallsview Hotel and Conference Centre. On the agenda were Lori Walker, UEY Coordinator for Niagara Falls, who presented the results of an Early Development Instrument (EDI) study she conducted, and Dr. Zopito Marini, from Brock University's Department of Children and Youth Studies, who spoke about the dynamics of bullying.

Ms. Walker began with an overview of the 2001 and 2003 EDI results for Niagara Falls, pointing out the prevalence of hyperactive behaviours and a low incidence of pro-social or helping behaviours that contributed to children's poor scores on the Emotional Maturity domain. Both of these characteristics can affect peer relations and play a role in social maladjustment-two key factors in bullying and victimization. She then offered suggestions to help children develop effective social and emotional skills to guide their behavioural responses to social and environmental stimuli. Dr. Marini explained some of the complexities of bullying behaviours and offered suggestions for sustainable and effective intervention and prevention.

The ECCDC thanks both speakers for helping make research meaningful for everyone involved in children's education and early learning and care.

- local community services (recreational, educational and health); and
- exploring fun learning activities for preschoolers.



Watch for this annual event every January. For more information, please contact Kathy Bell, Manager, Healthy Babies/Parent Child at 905-688-3762.