

Niagara's Best Start Integrated Community Plan

- Executive Summary -

Introduction

Niagara's Best Start Plan represents the aspirations of parents, citizens, service agencies and public officials who care deeply about the well being of Niagara's children. It is our community's plan for better coordinating and integrating a variety of taxpayer-supported services aimed at enhancing children's development. While Niagara's Best Start Plan was originally conceived as a framework for the expansion of these services, its preparation was a valuable exercise in its own right. It has prompted new ways of thinking about the range of services we provide, and how we can make these services more easily accessible to families. It has also prompted us to formally engage the users, providers and funders of Niagara's child health, child development and early learning and care services in the process of revitalizing existing community plans, programs and facilities to better nurture and support Niagara's children.

Niagara's Best Start Network, and the newly formed Niagara Children's Planning Council that serves as its steering committee, will address a broad spectrum of issues facing families with young children, including health, education, child care and social support concerns. Niagara's Best Start Network recognizes that every child is unique and that every family has its own needs, preferences, values and culture. While Niagara's Best Start Network is committed to a universally inclusive approach to service delivery, it respects the fact that parents are the primary decision-makers for their children. Some parents may choose to access only a small portion of the services available; others may choose not to access them at all. Niagara's Best Start Network also values the diversity of the region, which has developed in part by its proximity to the Fort Erie Peace Bridge--Canada's busiest immigrant processing centre. Niagara's Best Start Network understands that the needs of the area's urban and rural populations are different, and that the success of Niagara's Best Start Plan depends upon taking an extraordinarily flexible and creative approach to service delivery. Niagara's Best Start Network believes that all families have the right to services that will help their children make a successful transition to school, and that these services must be evidenced based and of high quality, readily accessible, complementary to one another, and coordinated with the utmost integrity.

Niagara's Best Start Plan has been developed and will be implemented by the Best Start Network. Its steering committee, the Niagara Children's Planning Council, is currently comprised of representatives from:

- The Niagara Region Community Services Department-Children's Services (the Consolidated Municipal Services Manager, CMSM)
- The Boards of Education
- Postsecondary Education
- French Language Services
- Aboriginal Services
- Licensed Child Care Service Providers
- Parents/Caregivers
- Early Identification and Intervention
- Niagara Region Public Health Department
- Parenting Programs
- School Programs

- Health and Specialized Services
- Income and Security Programs
- Population Specific Services

The Niagara Best Start Network's Vision is simple and straightforward:

Children in Niagara region will experience a safe, healthy and nurturing childhood preparing them for an adulthood in which they are healthy, successful and responsible contributors to their community.

The Niagara Best Start Network's vision will continue to evolve through the implementation of an integrated community plan. Enhanced or new early child development, learning and care hubs will complement Niagara's existing network of four parent/child resource centres, four Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYC's) and affiliated satellite sites. Together, these new and existing facilities will comprise a coordinated system that provides services to children from birth through their transition to school. The development of Niagara's Best Start initiative will formalize and improve the capacity of each program in the system to refer families to other essential services and supports. It will also make it possible for each of the new facilities to be shaped by its own Community Neighborhood Network, or CNN, so that the families closest to them may be involved in recommending which services are most needed, and how these services should be delivered.

Services that will be included in the early learning and care hubs will include:

- Junior and senior kindergarten
- Licensed child care services
- Evidenced based parenting programs

The early learning and care hubs will also offer direct links to:

- Child protection services
- Children's mental health services
- Children's treatment services
- "E-parenting" resources to support working families
- Toy lending libraries
- Child development and parenting resource lending
- Nutrition programs
- Infant hearing screening
- Preschool speech services
- Child wellness drop-in clinics
- Immunization and flu shots
- Information and parent-friendly screening tools regarding healthy child growth and development
- Services aimed at building on children's strengths and facilitating their achievement of significant developmental milestones
- And others as recommended by the Community Neighbourhood Network.

Decisions about the location of new early learning and care hubs will be made by a panel of Niagara Best Start Network members with no financial or organizational interest in the outcome of such decisions. It is anticipated that Niagara's Francophone and Aboriginal communities will recommend to the Niagara Best Start Network the creation of their own early learning and care hubs.

The effectiveness of both the Niagara Best Start Network and its early learning and care hubs is optimized by Niagara's links to Expert Panels established by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Dr. R. Williams, Niagara's Medical Officer of Health chairs the 18 Month Well Baby Expert Panel. Kathy Thompson from the District School Board of Niagara serves on the Expert Panel responsible for developing an Early Learning Framework for preschool children.

History and Context

Niagara Region has long been acknowledged as a leader in the area of children's early child development, learning and care. The community offers a wide variety of services and supports for children and families. While many of these services and supports are the result of ongoing investments made by Niagara Region and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, high levels of community cooperation and cohesion mean few gaps or duplications of service. While the formal and informal networks that currently exist to refer families to the services and supports they need could be simplified and improved, most of these services are well used.

Part of the explanation for this record of success lies with the fact that Niagara was among the first communities in the country to adopt a Children's Charter, based upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Niagara Region has used the Charter to guide its community and social service investments since 2002.

Niagara was also one of the first communities in Canada to be selected to participate in the federal Understanding the Early Years initiative, or UEY. Niagara's ongoing collaboration with federal UEY researchers and involvement in other Provincial research projects has provided local leaders with access to a significant body of data related to children's readiness to learn and first-hand experience with the advantages of evidenced-based planning.

Needs Identification

Prior to the launch of Ontario's Best Start Strategy, much of the community planning related to children's early child development, learning and care was coordinated by the Early Years Action Group-Niagara Region. The Early Years Action Group-Niagara Region brought together Parents, Family and Children's Services (FACS), Boards of Education, Business, Police, Child Care Sector, Niagara Region Community Services (Children's Services) Department, Niagara Region Public Health, the Ontario Early Years Centres, and other community leaders to undertake various initiatives, including those related to parental attachment, child health and children's literacy. There is, however, more work to be done. Work that requires a greater level of integration between child care, public education and children's health services.

Niagara has a median income that is approximately 10% lower than that for Ontario as a whole. Approximately 9% of its children reside in families that are in receipt of Social Assistance. Additionally, some 17% of the children born between 2000 and 2003 were found to be in the "high risk" category when tested with the Parkyn postpartum screening tool. Other significant needs were identified during the community consultation process that was undertaken prior to the development of Niagara's Best Start Network structure.

This process included public focus groups in various towns and cities around the region, extensive discussions with the identified Aboriginal and Francophone populations, the solicitation of feedback from parents through the Niagara Region Public Health Department's central intake "*Parent Talk Line*", a parent survey about child care and formal meetings with representatives from the following sectors and organizations:

- The Niagara Child Care Sector
- Ontario Early Years Centres
- Early Intervention Services
- Libraries
- Special Needs Steering Committee
- Quality Child Care Niagara
- Niagara Region Public Health Department Healthy Babies/Healthy Children Program
- Healthy Babies/Healthy Children Family Home Visitors
- Niagara Region Public Health Nurses
- Fort Erie Newcomers Centre
- Resource Centres
- The Early Childhood Community Development Centre
- Adolescents' Family Support Services Niagara
- Francophone Community
- Aboriginal Agencies
- School Boards

Identified needs included:

- The need for licensed child care spaces, particularly infant and toddler spaces
- The need to shorten wait times for infant special needs services
- Additional Special Needs Resource Teachers to service area child care centres
- Plans to address fiscal imbalances between the provincially funded Ontario Early Years Centres and similar Parent Child Resource Centres funded through Niagara Region

Examples of factors that influence early child development

Level of education

Education levels of residents is a crucial part of a socio-economic environment where children are growing and developing.

Infants born at low birth-weight

Birth weight is an important predictor of maternal and infant health and a determinant of long-term health outcomes and learning difficulties.

Mobility

For children, where they live influences their sense of autonomy and sense of place in society.

For more information on these and other key indicators, please visit: www.earlyyearsniagara.org or www.regional.niagara.on.ca/living/health_wellness/parenting/

- Plans to address historic issues of under-funding that have affected Niagara Region's delivery of services for families and children since the Local Services Realignment transfer
- Mechanisms to ensure that Niagara's Aboriginal and Francophone populations receive a share of the Best Start allocation, so they may develop plans to achieve their unique child development aspirations
- Engagement of Niagara's physicians and primary health care providers in the implementation of a robust 18-month strategy to monitor healthy child development and link families with community resources
- Greater access to evidence-based parent education programs
- Expanded preschool and school aged speech services, particularly for school aged Francophone children attending the Francophone public school system
- More access to mental health services for both children and adults
- Mobile programming or some other means of addressing the lack of public transportation that prevents many low-income families from accessing services that could benefit them

The federal UEY study and the Niagara Early Years Community Resource Inventory Summary from January of 2005 echo some of the issues noted during the public consultation process. Other recent federal, provincial and municipal research efforts, including those related to literacy, have produced similar findings. A recurring theme in both the consultation process and Niagara's existing knowledge base is that while better service coordination, extended hours and more supports and interventions for children aged 0 to 6 are needed, these measures must be balanced with transition-to-school programs and school-aged programs.

How the Early Child Development, Learning and Care Hubs Can Help

Given the current public investment in resources and services to support children's early learning and care, one of the most valuable functions of Niagara's Best Start Network is to ensure that together, these investments form a comprehensive service and support network that meets the needs of all Niagara families. Niagara's Best Start Network will also promote services as being readily accessible, and identify or create formal processes to refer children from one component of the service system to another as needed.

The development of Niagara's Best Start Plan ensures that services are available within local communities across Niagara, and that these services are convenient for families to use. The adoption of a hub model and the creation of new hubs alleviates the significant barriers that access to transportation and the cost of transportation pose to many families. The proposed hub model also removes some of the barriers related to the time constraints posed by parents' work schedules and need to coordinate care for children of various ages. Some of the psychological barriers posed by having to go to unfamiliar environments for service may also be addressed.

Linking early child development learning and care programs, parenting centres, and high quality child care for infants through to Junior Kindergarten to schools would allow these services to become part of the continuum of elementary education. This model would build on already established high quality before and after school programs, convenient

location in neighborhoods across Niagara, accessibility by local transit services and familiarity to families. Niagara's Best Start Plan assumes that both before and after a child's transition to school, the school will be a source of service to and support for the entire family. It would also provide families with multiple access points into an integrated community network of programs, resources and supports. Certain consistent elements would be available in all areas, but there would be some variation from community to community within Niagara, based on local needs. Formal linkages between workplace child care facilities and schools would ensure that all children had access to the new continuum of elementary education as well as the integrated network of programs, resources and supports. Niagara recognizes that a "Schools First" policy may be challenging in some circumstances and will strive to build on strengths of existing multi-service agencies such as Ontario Early Years Centres and Parent Child Resource Centres.

One Child, One Plan

It is anticipated that families using licensed child care services and public schools in any given neighborhood will also access the services and supports available at the neighbourhood early child development, learning and care hub. This will be especially valuable for families who have children with special needs, in that it will allow greater integration of specialized services and supports with the child care and education services the families use. A common child and family service plan format is currently being considered by all service providers to ensure that families face the least amount of bureaucracy when accessing services, supports and child care for their children. One of the key goals of Niagara's Best Start initiative is delivering on the promise of "one child, one plan." Another is easing the transition from child care to school.

For the 2005 to 2008 funding period, Niagara's most pressing need is for licensed child care. Looking toward 2010, the goal of Niagara's Best Start Network will be to create new neighbourhood early child development, learning and care hubs to complement the four parent/child resource centres, four Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYC's) and multiple OEYC- affiliated satellite sites that already exist. Near-term plans for the creation of new licensed child care spaces in Niagara will be made in the context of the long-term goal of coordinating these services with those available at the neighbourhood early learning and care hubs.

Licensed Child Care in Schools the First Priority

Niagara's immediate need for licensed child care demands a coordinated strategy that encompasses both the larger goal of integrating child care into the overall network of early child development, learning and care hubs, and the immediate goals of enhancing the stability and quality of the area's existing child care programs, encouraging the expansion of workplace child care, forming collaborative partnerships between government agencies and other organizations, and improving existing business processes to achieve cost savings. In response to the Provincial launch of Best Start in 2005, Niagara Region Children's Services, the CMSM for the area, succeeded in the overachievement of the target number of new child care spaces by 59 spaces. Similar successes are anticipated in the coming years. Meetings with Niagara's four school boards have resulted in the identification of significant space availability in all boards. Infrastructure Work Plans for 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 are

pending, and will be developed based on the site selection criteria established by the CMSM in consultation with the Niagara Best Start Network.

Earlier Identification and Shorter Wait Times

The proposed early child development, learning and care hub model provides all local neighbourhoods with greater access to preschool screening services and increases community awareness of these services. This increased access and awareness enhances the opportunity for the early identification and assessment of potential barriers to healthy child development and learning. The Population Health Division of the Niagara Region Public Health Department currently delivers services that are aimed at improving the health and well being of the entire population of Niagara. The Healthy Babies Healthy Children/Parent Child Health (HBHC/PCH) program schedule outlines screening and assessment, postpartum home visiting and service provider targets. Speech Services Niagara (SSN), the preschool speech and language initiative, is currently identifying over 12% of children under five as being at risk for speech and language delays--significantly higher than the provincial target of 10%.

Recent restoration funding for HBHC and SSN does not allow for the expansion of service targets, however, services for both programs could be re-aligned to provide some support to the proposed early learning and care hubs. Other divisions of the Niagara Region Public Health Department that deliver services that touch families and children are similarly committed to such collaborative efforts. Both HBHC and SSN deliver services that are universal as well as inclusive of special needs populations and that are focused on creating a first tier of excellence to promote healthy development in all children. Ultimately, this decreases the number of children that will require specialized intervention. Currently, however, the delivery of a comprehensive range of resources and support for families in the early child development, learning and care hubs requires further investment in HBHC/PCH programming, particularly if universal coverage is provided.

Additional investments in HBHC/PCH are also required to support the ongoing data collection and analysis activities that ensure all such programming is evidence-based. In order to achieve the MCYS directive for preschool speech initiatives to extend their services through to entry into grade one, additional funding will also be required. Additional funding to sustain the infrastructure of the program is outlined in the larger plan.

A further directive for preschool speech is to expand the universal component of promoting healthy speech and language in all preschoolers to include promoting literacy skills. This will ensure that the community receives comprehensive, developmental information regarding language and literacy for children aged six and under. In collaboration with their partners at Niagara Child and Youth Services and the Regional Dental Program Together, the HBHC and SSN programs are committed to expanding the concept of the existing Drop-In Wellness Clinics, which educate, screen and connect families to services in need. The Wellness Clinics are managed jointly through the Joint Implementation and Planning Committee.

Communication & Inclusiveness That Optimizes Investment

The Niagara Best Start Network fills a significant void in Niagara's ability to offer highly responsive services and supports for children and their families. It is a mechanism through which parents and the community as a whole can see how all of the services and supports for families offered by various levels and departments of government work together to enhance our children's health, development and learning.

Robust internal and external communications strategies are essential to the success of the Best Start Network's approach. These strategies will allow the Niagara Best Start Network to make a meaningful contribution to the planning processes undertaken by such organizations as the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, which oversees all Ministry-funded children's agencies in Niagara; Contact Niagara, which coordinates services for children with special needs; and Regional Niagara Children's Services, whose recent three-year plan will continue to guide significant public investments in vital services such as licensed child care.

The Niagara Best Start Network's family and community first model must not only be inclusive, however, it must be both efficient and effective. Our goal is to refine it to the extent that it may ultimately inspire similar locally coordinated approaches to other policy areas. After all, a community fit for children, is a community fit for everyone.