

**EVALUATING THE INNOVATIONS IN
EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE
INITIATIVE IN DUNDAS**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In November 2007, with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton released the report, *An Assessment of Child Care Needs in the Dundas Community*. The research was conducted in partnership with Today's Family and St. Mark's Co-operative Preschool, and was directed by a local advisory committee comprised of parents, caregivers and service providers.

The purpose of the research was to develop a better understanding of local child care needs from the perspectives of key stakeholders, and to identify innovative strategies that complement the existing child care system and meet current needs. Based on a synthesis of input from local parents and child care providers, the report established the following recommendations:

- 1) That an emergency back-up care system be designed and implemented in the Dundas community that considers the needs of local families, the perspectives of local employers and is integrated with the current child care system.*
- 2) That a system be designed in the Dundas community that promotes social networks among parents and provides an infrastructure for a local caregiver exchange.*
- 3) That a public education campaign be implemented that promotes the benefits of licensed home day care and that highlights the licensing and legislated standards.*
- 4) That a public education campaign be launched that focuses on the importance of early learning and child development, accessible and quality child care, and that local employers be targeted as an issue of corporate responsibility.*

In response to the findings and recommendations included in the report, Today's Family, in partnership with the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington, submitted a second successful proposal to the Ontario Trillium Foundation in March 2008. This proposal resulted in the implementation of the Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative between October 2008 and September 2009.

The Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative was designed to address aspects of each of the recommendations from the Dundas child care report. The consultants on the project worked with a local advisory to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To develop an emergency back-up care system for Dundas residents
- 2) To recruit and train 10 new licensed home child care providers with a focus on care for infants and toddlers
- 3) To develop and present a series of educational/professional development opportunities for parents, caregivers, ECE's and other professionals from the Dundas community

This short report provides an overview of the respective successes and challenges encountered while working toward each of these objectives. Following a basic profile of the Dundas community to provide context to the work undertaken, the report then provides a description of the methodology used in the evaluation with subsequent sections considering each objective individually.

In addition to a summary and set of conclusions, the report outlines a number of next steps. These next steps represent a commitment by Today's Family and community partners to continue to move forward on their objectives despite the end of project funding.

2.0 PROFILE OF THE DUNDAS COMMUNITY

As described in the SPRC's 2007 report, *An Assessment of Child Care Needs in the Dundas Community*, the Dundas community has distinctive characteristics as compared to the city of Hamilton as a whole. According to the 2006 census, of the 4,275 families with children living in Dundas, 77% were couple families and 23% were lone parent families. These families included 1,090 children aged 0 to 4 years; 1,335 children between 5 and 9 years; 1,640 between 10 and 14; and 1,695 between 15 and 19.

While all outward appearances would suggest that Dundas is an affluent community, it is important to appreciate that many local families struggle with income and affordability issues. Overall, Dundas families report higher average household incomes than the city of Hamilton as a whole; however, the community includes a range of household incomes. According to the 2001 census, 28% of households reported incomes of more than \$101,818, while 29% reported incomes less than \$51,868 and 13% less than \$32,226. Furthermore, 12% of families with children were surviving on incomes below the poverty line or Statistics Canada's low income cut-off (LICO), including 7% of couple families and 39% of lone parent families.

In terms of local child care service, Dundas is home to 10 licensed child care centres with an overall capacity of 423 spaces. These spaces, however, include none for infants and only 22 for toddlers. There are an additional 4 home day care providers registered with licensed agencies. Licensed home child care providers provide care in their home for up to 5 children.

Outside of the licensed programs operating in the Dundas community, there are also private home day care providers and nannies. Currently, there are no reliable inventories of these services, so capacity is unknown. What is known, however, is that unlicensed home day cares are not subject to the same level of standards and regulation as licensed home day cares, and are not accorded the same level of training and support.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary research methodology employed in this study was process evaluation. In this case, process evaluation involved consulting with those involved in implementing the initiative to understand better the processes used to achieve their objectives. Considering process in the context of challenges and outcomes, one can begin to understand how processes might be altered to achieve better results. Alternatively, it may help to identify or confirm a best practice.

The evaluation of the Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative relied heavily on consultations with the project consultants. Additional data related to specific objectives is included where available.

In terms of developing an emergency back-up care system, evaluation included interviews with the project consultants. The purpose of these interviews was to understand better the development process including successes and challenges.

In addition to evaluating the development process, input was gathered from caregivers who expressed interest in a caregivers' network. Input was gathered through short telephone surveys conducted by a project consultant.

With respect to recruiting new licensed child-care providers, the researcher again interviewed the consultant and an advisory committee member. In addition, feedback was collected from participants during orientation sessions to promote the benefits of licensed home child care.

Evaluating the series of educational and professional development opportunities provided through the course of the initiative used both qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, we know the number of workshops and meetings held during the project period as well as the participation rates.

Interviews with the project consultants helped the researcher to understand the process of determining appropriate topics for education and training as well as for advertising and recruitment. Evaluations were also completed by participants at the end of each educational/professional development session.

4.0 DEVELOPING AN EMERGENCY BACK-UP CARE SYSTEM IN DUNDAS

As a first step to developing an emergency back-up care system in the Dundas community, the consultant and advisory committee focused on bringing existing caregivers together to form a local network. The purpose of establishing such a network is to give a caregiver who is unable to care for a child or children due to illness or other extenuating circumstances the support of other local caregivers within the network.

Formal outreach to caregivers included advertisements in the local newspaper, brochures and flyers distributed through local recreation centres and public libraries, and an ad with a Home Child Care Providers magazine, *Quiet Times*.

A tour of local licensed child care centres was also organized during the course of the initiative. This gave local child care providers the opportunity to develop or strengthen existing relationships. It also gave caregivers a chance to see other local child care facilities firsthand and to share information. This relationship-building in itself will help to establish a referral network.

Turnout at the initial caregiver network meeting was limited. The low turnout was in part a result of a professional development day at the local public Board of Education. Despite the low turnout, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is interest in developing a caregiver network in the Dundas community. Some caregivers explained that smaller informal networks already exist, where caregivers who have already developed relationships regularly support or refer to each other. Appreciating the benefits of these arrangements, caregivers expressed an interest in expanding these networks. A follow-up meeting has been scheduled for October with the intent that the caregivers themselves lead this group.

As a supplement to a network or formalized system of back up care, a brochure entitled *Early Learning and Child Care Opportunities* in Dundas was produced. This brochure contains a comprehensive listing of early childhood development resources in Dundas, as well as all licensed early learning and child care programs operating locally. The brochure also provides information on the benefits of licensed home child care.

5.0 RECRUITING NEW LICENSED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

As described in section 2.0 of this report, there are currently only 4 home day care providers registered with licensed agencies. Licensed home child care providers offer care in their homes for up to 5 children. Outside of the licensed programs operating in the Dundas community, there are also private home daycare providers and nannies. Currently, there are no reliable inventories of these services, so capacity is unknown.

A second objective of the Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative was to recruit 10 new licensed home child care providers. Formal outreach to existing or to potential caregivers included advertisements in the local newspaper, brochures and flyers distributed through local recreation centres and the public library.

Orientation sessions were held with small numbers of local caregivers and parents. While numbers were low, feedback from participants suggests that the sessions were very informative in terms of clarifying the difference between licensed and unlicensed home child care.

By the end of the initiative, one new licensed home care operation was established, creating up to five new child care spaces in Dundas. In terms of challenges, the consultants again identified time as a factor. They explained that in Dundas the number of unlicensed home child care operations far exceeds the number of those that are licensed. While information sessions and the newly created brochure will help to educate the public on the benefits of licensed home child care, it will require an ongoing social marketing campaign to achieve the cultural shift needed. It is important to note that this is the first new licensed home child care operation established in four years.

6.0 PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Over the course of the initiative, a total of 24 workshops or community meetings were held in the Dundas community (Table 1). Participation at these sessions has averaged between five and 10 participants, with a maximum number of 75 participants.

In an effort to determine the topics in which parents and caregivers were most interested, a short survey was conducted. Of the 68 parents and caregivers surveyed, 44 were affiliated with a local licensed child care facilities. An additional 24 surveys were conducted with parents at the Dundas Driving Park and at the Metro grocery store on Governors Road.

Of the parents surveyed, the most relevant topics identified were “behaviour guidance” (identified 43 times among 68 parents), “school readiness” (identified 33 times among 68 parents), and “stress management” (identified 28 times among 68 parents). In response to this input, the consultant and advisory committee arranged for Canadian author Ann Douglas to present on September 23rd, 2009.

Douglas, the author of twenty-eight books on pregnancy and parenting, presented on “The Dirt on Discipline and Other Secrets to Successful Parenting.” Consistent with the most often identified topics of interest, the event drew a crowd of more than 75 parents, caregivers and professionals.

Feedback forms were completed by participants at the end of each educational/professional development session provided through the course of the project. While the evaluation of individual sessions is beyond the scope of this project, there were some common themes among the feedback. Overall, participants were pleased with the information provided through the sessions, as well as the documents they could take away.

Additional themes that emerged from participant feedback included appreciation that workshops were local and free of charge. There was also an appreciation of the opportunity to meet and network with other parents in the Dundas community.

Table 1: Workshops and Meetings Held Through the Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative

Workshop Theme	Date
Quality Early Learning and Child Care: A Parent's Guide	February 12 th
Caregiver Orientation at Knox Presbyterian Church	March 10 th
EDI study group – Primer on Early Child Development	March 31 st
Service Providers Network Meeting	April 1 st
Mother Goose	April 7 th – June 9 th
Mother Goose Step 2	April 9 th – June 18 th
EDI study group – Early Child Development Measurement – the EDI	April 16 th
“Check It Out” Clinic	April 28 th
What do we know already about early child development? EDI group	April 28 th
Early Literacy & Infant Brain Development	May 5 th
Caregiver Orientation May	May 13 th
2002-2008 Hamilton EDI results	May 19 th
Infant Massage	May 21 st – June 18 th
Behaviour Guidance	June 2 nd
Quality Early Learning and Child Care: A Parent's Guide	June 11 th
Early Bird Literacy	July 7 th – August 4 th
Family Math	Aug. 11 th – Sept. 15 th
Early Literacy and Infant Brain Development	September 17 th
Caregiver Orientation	September 18 th
The Dirt on Discipline and Other Secrets to Successful Parenting	September 23 rd
Quality Early Learning and Child Care: A Parent's Guide	September 24 th
Children's Author Andrew Larsen – Reading of <i>Imaginary Garden</i>	September 24 th
Caregiver Network	September 25 th
Feeding Young Children	September 28 th

7.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of the Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative, a number of successes were realized and challenges identified. Through marketing and outreach, a local caregivers' network has begun to form. Given that unlicensed home child care providers work independently of any umbrella organization, one would expect a slow take up among this group. Despite the slow growth, anecdotal evidence suggests that smaller informal networks do currently exist, and that local caregivers are interested in broadening these networks.

A strong caregivers' network organized at the community level will form the foundation for an emergency back-up care system in Dundas. How this system looks at the end of the day will represent the interests of participating caregivers. Caregivers may choose to maintain an informal network for support and referral, for example. Alternatively, caregivers may opt for a more formalized system with a central hub.

While the target of recruiting ten new licensed home child care providers may have been optimistic, the initiative was able to establish one new caregiver who will provide up to five new child care spaces in the Dundas community. Encouraging existing or potential caregivers to open a licensed rather than an unlicensed home child care operation requires public education and a 'cultural shift' within the local child care community. Print materials developed as part of this initiative will help to continue the process of public information.

In terms of public education and professional development, the series of workshops and meetings organized as part of the initiative were successful in attracting hundreds of local parents and caregivers. In addition to conveying information that was well received by participants, these opportunities provided further occasion to network with other parents and caregivers.

In closing, it is important to recognize that all activities conducted through the course of the initiative were aimed at or resulted in building relationships between and among child care providers and parents in the Dundas community. The power and impact of these relationships should not be underestimated in terms of strengthening and integrating the existing child care service sector in the Dundas community.

8.0 NEXT STEPS

The following 'next steps' outline the commitment of Today's Family and community partners to continue to move forward the objectives of the Innovations in Early Learning and Child Care Initiative. These commitments are as follows:

1. Continued Support of the Dundas Caregiver Network

Operated and led by the caregivers themselves, supports will be provided to develop an organizational structure including a designated chairperson. Space will be offered at the Today's Family Early Learning and Child Care – Dundas free of charge with refreshments available. Today's Family is also willing to assist in photocopying needs or any other support in the future.

2. Continued Recruitment of New Licensed Caregivers

The recruitment of new licensed caregivers will continue through Wee Watch and Today's Family. This effort will benefit from the momentum of all the advertising that has gone out to the community.

3. Continued Education of Families on the Benefits of Licensed Care

This one-hour workshop employs a train-the-trainer model. A training will be provided in late fall for all Service Providers. The Service Providers can then facilitate this workshop at Open Houses, Advisory Committees, and at the Ontario Early Years Centres.

4. Continued Education on Child Care Options in Dundas

Posters and brochures will continue to be available at local child care centres in the Dundas community and Today's Family will track how families are finding out about the different service providers. Brochures will further disseminated through realtors, Welcome Wagon, doctors & dentists, elementary schools, Public Health, SISO, Dundas Valley School of Art, and Child Care Subsidy offices.

5. Continued Networking and Relationship Development Among Service Providers

Make the tour of Dundas child care centres an annual event in which supervisors and front-line staff can participate. Early Childhood Educators can exchange visits with other centres to review practices, environments and programming.

9.0 REFERENCES

Fraser, Mark (2007). *An Assessment of Child Care Needs in the Dundas Community*.
Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.