

INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

Better Beginnings, Better Futures

AN EFFECTIVE AND AFFORDABLE PREVENTION PROJECT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

HIGHLIGHTS OF BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES
RESEARCH FINDINGS AT GRADE 9





INTRODUCTION

Better Beginnings, Better Futures

An effective and affordable prevention project for young children

IN THIS BOOKLET, WE ARE PRESENTING AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH GATHERED FROM AND ABOUT GRADE 9 STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES PROGRAMS WHEN THEY WERE IN JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH GRADE 2.

WHY “PREVENTION”?

Some of the kids and teens in our society do not have the same starting point as others. It is not surprising that challenges in the family and difficult conditions in the neighbourhood, not to mention lack of optimal government policies, can cause setbacks in their development and well-being. As a result, many young people, especially those in disadvantaged communities, are in need of support along the way to prevent them from having increased difficulties as they live, learn, and grow. Better Beginnings programs have attempted to combine the basic ingredients needed to provide such supports.

HOW IS DISADVANTAGE DEFINED?

Disadvantaged communities are characterized by:

- high economic vulnerability, as shown by relatively high unemployment rates and by the presence of families living in poverty, families on social assistance, and families in subsidized housing.
- very high risk for unhealthy child development, as shown by low birth rate, infant mortality, high number of single-parent households, teen pregnancy, low parent education and/or high school dropout rate, alcoholism, severe mental health problems, high crime rate, and children's poor school performance.

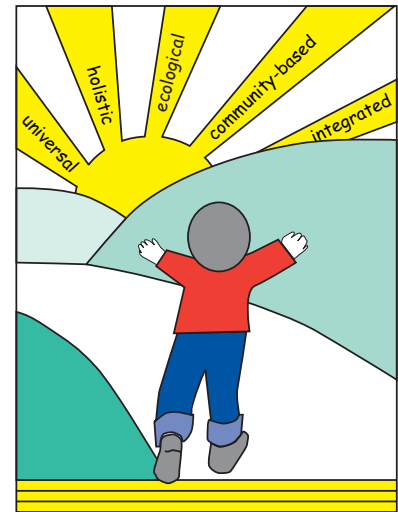
Ecological Theory

UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S LIVES

There are different levels of influence, potentially helpful or harmful, on a young person's development.

If you picture the young person at the centre, the levels of influence can be described as moving outwards, similar to nesting boxes that fit one inside the other. The outer layers consist of parent and family influences, community and neighbourhood influences, and broader influences from society. Researchers refer to this nesting pattern as ecological, because it pays attention to the whole environment surrounding the young person. This way of understanding child development is called ecological theory and was first described by the social scientist Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Ecological theory was very important to the planning of Better Beginnings, Better Futures and is the reason why its programs are intended to address many levels that influence young people's lives, including their own well-being and success at school, their parents' skills and relationships with their children, and the neighbourhood atmosphere and conditions.



IMPORTANT TERMS RELATED TO THE BETTER BEGINNINGS PROJECT BETTER BEGINNINGS IS...

Universal

Programs are made available to all children living in the community, not just those singled out as being most in need or at risk. An advantage of universality is that it avoids drawing unwanted attention to individual young people.

Holistic or Comprehensive

The programs aim to support all aspects of the young person's development and well-being (including relationships, feelings, skills, actions, and physical health), not just one or two aspects (such as physical health or IQ).

Ecological

The approach pays attention to the whole environment surrounding the young person.

Community-Based

Parents and volunteers in the neighbourhood are invited to participate in planning and evaluation of programs which meet the needs of their community. This ensures that the project is owned and operated by the community, not driven from the "top" by academics and bureaucrats which is typical of many other projects.

Integrated

Organizations and service agencies already working in the community are brought on board to cooperate with planning, so that Better Beginnings is offered in conjunction with existing programs. This characteristic is also referred to as "value added" and is in contrast to programs that are "standalone."

Communities wishing to establish programs similar to Better Beginnings would need to incorporate all of these qualities to ensure success.

1993

was the year that we started our research

1983

1 in 6 children had serious emotional or behavioural problems



HOW BETTER BEGINNINGS BEGAN

The Better Beginnings, Better Futures project came about through the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. The 1983 Ontario Child Health Study revealed that 1 in 6 children had serious emotional or behavioural problems. The report also showed that children living in families that received social assistance or who lived in subsidized housing were at greater risk for these problems.

Demonstration Sites

In 1989, the Better Beginnings, Better Futures proposal was accepted by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services as the approach to be taken for its prevention project, which included research activities. After gathering information from 55 communities in Ontario who wished to participate in the prevention project, the top 25 were visited in person by a review panel. Three Better Beginnings sites for children aged 4 to 8 in Sudbury, Cornwall, and Highfield/Etobicoke (and five sites for children aged 0 to 4 years) were announced in January 1991.

Comparison Sites

The three Better Beginnings sites were matched with two other sites in Ontario that were similar to them in terms of economic conditions, community characteristics, and other factors. These two sites, in Ottawa and Etobicoke, did

not have Better Beginnings programs and were used by researchers to compare outcomes in the demonstration sites.

GOALS GUIDING BETTER BEGINNINGS PROGRAMS

Goals for the Child

Prevention: to reduce emotional and behavioural problems in children (in other words, young people's negative feelings and actions).

Promotion: to promote social, emotional, behavioural, physical, and educational development in children (young people's relationships, feelings, actions, physical health, and skills).

Goals for the Parent

Parent Education and Support: to strengthen the abilities of parents and families to respond effectively to the needs of their children.

Goals for the Community

Comprehensive/Holistic Programs: to develop high-quality programs for children and their families that respond effectively to the local needs of the neighbourhood.

Resident Participation: to encourage neighbourhood parents and other citizens to participate as equal partners with service providers in the planning, designing and carrying out of programs for children and families, as well as other activities in the local community.

Integrated Programs: to establish partnerships with existing and new service providers and educational organizations and to coordinate program activities.

In a study of 17 early child development programs with general goals related to mental health, Better Beginnings was the only one to "explicitly include mental health within its major program goals, incorporated multiple features seen in effective (conduct disorder) prevention programs and demonstrated positive child mental health outcomes."

Charlotte Waddell and other authors, in an article called "Preventing mental disorders in children," published in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* in 2007.

HIGHFIELD, SUDBURY, AND CORNWALL DEMONSTRATION SITES

The Highfield Better Beginnings site, located in Etobicoke, a suburb of Toronto, focused on one elementary school with a very high concentration of recent immigrants. Over 40 languages were spoken in the homes of the children involved.

The Sudbury site consisted of two downtown neighbourhoods. There were three Anglophone schools and one Francophone school serving this area. The Sudbury project, unlike the other two sites, did not originate within the school system. Those who established it were very interested in community development, and came together through the Native Friendship Centre. Programs were developed to meet the needs of the francophone, Aboriginal, multicultural, and anglophone communities.

The Cornwall site consisted of two Francophone schools from the Public School Board and two Francophone schools from the Separate School Board which drew students from across the city.

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Ongoing Programs at the Sites

Having been awarded ongoing annual funding from the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services, programs at the three sites have continued using the same community development approach, although they may have evolved based on the changing needs of the communities.

Research Activities

This booklet reports on information gathered in 2004 from the participating young people when they were in Grade 9.

In November 2007, when the young people were 18 years old, another round of research and information gathering began.

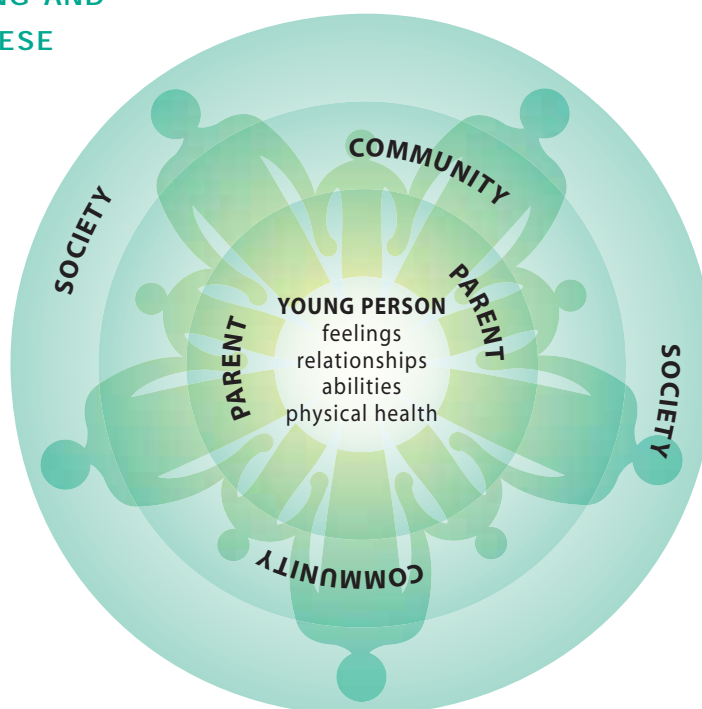
Funding is being sought for yet another round of research, to be undertaken when the participants are young adults. Outcomes at the ages of 21 to 24 are considered to be reliable indicators of the long-term life paths of youths. For this reason, research about Better Beginnings young people in this age range would be of great interest.

Future Plans: Project Replication

Given that our extensive research has demonstrated the effectiveness and affordability of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures approach, it is hoped that other communities will take what has been learned from our project to establish prevention programs for their own young people. In support of this aim, we are intending to develop documents to provide communities with the tools they need to plant the seeds of Better Beginnings.

THE YOUNG PERSON

THE YOUNG PERSON'S OWN FEELINGS, RELATIONSHIPS, ABILITIES, ACTIONS, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH ARE AT THE HEART OF THE BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES PROJECT. THE JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN TO GRADE 2 PROGRAMS OFFERED IN THE SCHOOLS, IN THE HOME, OR IN COMMUNITY CENTRES AIMED TO GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE THE CHANCE TO ACHIEVE THE GREATEST WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS IN ALL THESE ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES.



CHILD PROGRAMS

Child-focused programs were carried out before, during, or after school, and during holiday periods in each of the three Better Beginnings sites in Cornwall, Highfield, and Sudbury. Most programs were run by Better Beginnings staff and community volunteers. They were offered to children from 4 to 8 years of age, and at least some of them were available to children all year long.

SOCIAL SKILLS, ACADEMIC SKILLS, AND CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT

Although the array of child programs offered by Better Beginnings staff and volunteers differed across the three sites, all operated group programs that emphasized social skills and positive social interaction with peers and adults, problem-solving and learning experiences, and recreation programs.

In Cornwall, each of the four schools had a full-time “animator” hired by the Cornwall Better Beginnings site who helped the teachers provide language, cultural, and other educational activities for children from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2. The activities were designed to improve children’s thinking and learning skills, promote social skills and reduce behavioural problems, and build French-language skills and cultural identity.

In Highfield, the classroom enrichment workers provided individual and group support to children from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2. They lowered the adult-to-student ratio in the classroom to about 1:10 and provided assistance with language, self-help, and social skills. Highfield Junior School was different from the Cornwall and Sudbury sites in that its own teachers offered all primary school children a highly structured social skills program during regular school hours. For example, the Lion’s Quest social skills program was introduced in all the primary grades and the teachers were trained to deliver it.



The school-based programs in Sudbury came together through the Native Friendship Centre. The peaceful playground program was devoted to the prevention of bullying and aggressive behaviour and was run by part-time Better Beginnings staff members during school hours. After-school programming stressed social and academic skills.

HOME VISITS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

Home visits were a part of some programming, giving project staff and volunteers the chance to visit children and their families.

Other activities included meals and snacks, athletics and recreation, games, arts and crafts, drama, educational workshops, quiet reading, or homework help. Fields trips were also offered by some sites.

CULTURAL SUPPORTS

Each of the three sites supported the cultural identities of its young people.

In Cornwall, all four of the schools participating in the project were francophone; in-school “animators” were hired to conduct cultural activities in the classrooms. Highfield had a largely immigrant

600

families interviewed from
1993 to 2003 from three
Better Beginnings sites

359

families interviewed from
1993 to 2003 from the
two comparison sites

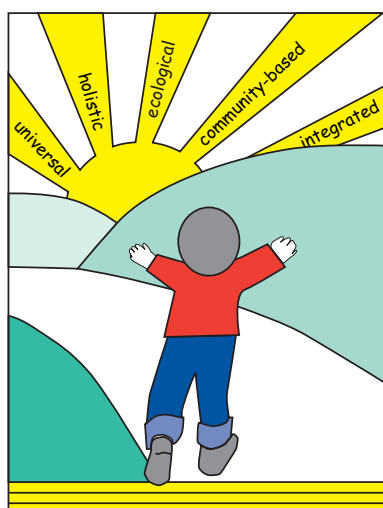


population and programs were sensitive to the multiculturalism of the community and included multicultural events open to the public and English-as-a-second-language supports for the children. Sudbury's programming was influenced by a broad spectrum of cultural communities, including Native, francophone, anglophone, and multicultural residents.

Thanks to the inventiveness of the planning by program staff and parents, fostering cultural diversity is a hallmark of the Better Beginnings approach.

IS IT ALL ABOUT THE PROGRAMS OR IS IT IN THE APPROACH?

It should be remembered that Better Beginnings was not designed to see which specific programs offered at each of the sites contributed to the success of Better Beginnings. Instead, Better Beginnings was designed to examine the sum total of the elements: universal, holistic, ecological, community-based, and integrated.



MEASURES: WHAT INFORMATION WE GATHERED

Information was gathered about the social functioning of the young people in Grade 9 who participated in Better Beginnings child-oriented programs when they were aged 4 to 8. Measures, or ways of evaluating social functioning, included the presence or absence of prosocial behaviours (how the young people got along with others), number of close friends and people important to them, behaviour of friends, conflict management skills, self-esteem, and victimization.

Parents, teachers, and the young people themselves were asked to report on any possible emotional and behavioural problems: feelings or actions that could be described as anxious, aggressive, hyperactive, delinquent, or intentionally self-harming. Number of police arrests was also recorded to highlight the potential, serious consequences of the more negative or troubling behaviours.

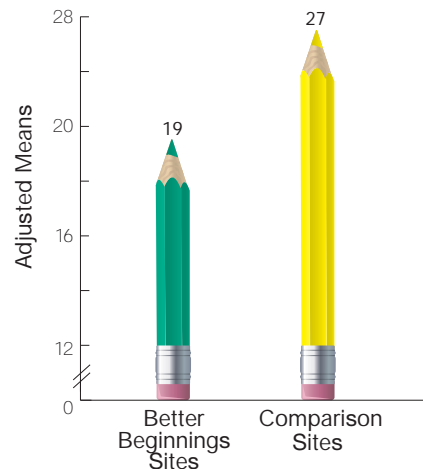
Functioning at school and attitudes towards school were reported by the Grade 9 youths and also by their teachers and parents. Academic achievement and use of special education resources were reported, as well as grade repetition.

RESULTS: WHAT WE FOUND OUT

Academic functioning and school behaviour

Teachers rated Better Beginnings young people as being better prepared for school, using fewer special education services, showing more adaptive functioning in school, and expected to go further in school than their peers from the comparison sites.

Teacher-Reported Percentage of Young People using Special Education/Services



Better Beginnings young people repeated fewer grades by Grade 9 than youths from the comparison sites, according to their parents.

These generally positive outcomes for school and academic performance were strongest in Grade 9 compared to previous findings for Grades 3 and 6.

Ability to get along with others

At Grade 9, Better Beginnings parents viewed their child's conflict resolution skills and number of people important to the child more positively than parents of children from the comparison sites.

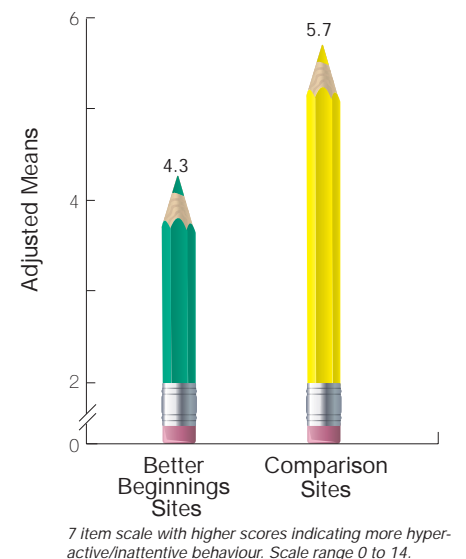
However, the youths saw themselves as getting along with their friends less easily than did youths from the comparison sites.

Behavioural and emotional problems

Teachers rated Better Beginnings young people as displaying fewer emotional problems and fewer hyperactive/inattentive behaviours in the classroom.

This lower level of hyperactivity/inattention was the strongest and most durable outcome seen at Grade 9.

Teacher-Reported Hyperactive/Inattentive Behaviour in Youths



However, Better Beginnings young people rated themselves in Grade 9 as having more emotional problems and lower self-esteem than did their counterparts in the comparison sites.

GRADE 9 STUDENTS REMEMBER BETTER BEGINNINGS

self-confidence: *I actually can tell them [family and friends] more things; like, before I wouldn't have anyone to talk to...but now that I join this [Better Beginnings], I can actually say everything to everyone instead of keeping it into me...*

hot meals: *I remember...Tuesday, macaroni and cheese, Wednesday, it would either be pizza or a sub with juice and cookie, and Thursday would be pasta. I remember that well.*

racial harmony and acceptance: *You should treat other people the way you want to be treated; like, people who are a different colour shouldn't be treated different... They [Better Beginnings] talked a lot about how everyone's the same on the inside and stuff like that, and I guess that had an influence on me.*

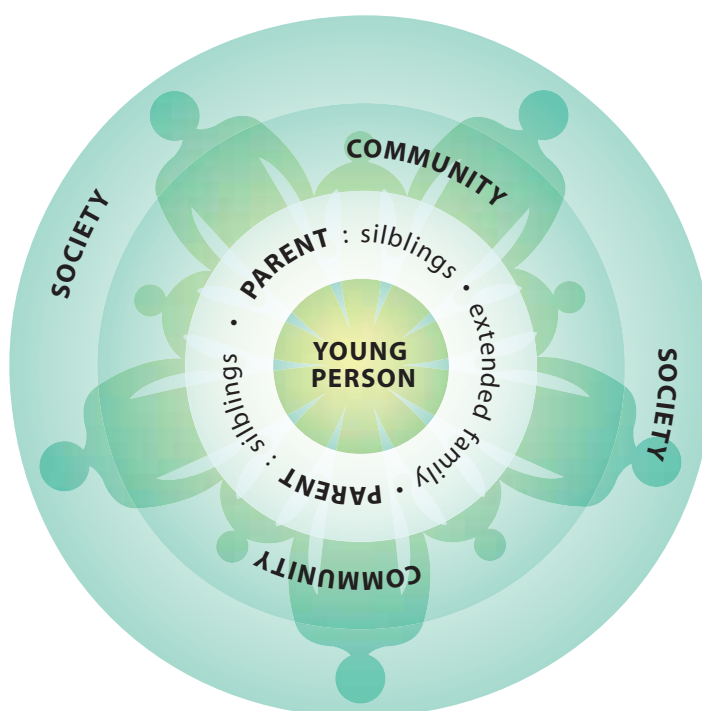
empowerment: *Normally I don't participate... Since those [Better Beginnings] programs, I more participate in other stuff. Nowadays, like in [school], I'm in science club, math contest club, I tutor for my community hours and I'm, like, into stuff. I participate.*

THE PARENT

SOME PROGRAMS WERE CREATED TO SUPPORT THE PARENTS IN THE BETTER BEGINNINGS COMMUNITIES WITH THE INTENTION OF INFLUENCING THE FUTURE SUCCESS AND DEVELOPMENT OF EVERYONE, INCLUDING THE CHILDREN, THE PARENTS THEMSELVES, AND THE LARGER COMMUNITY.

[Better Beginnings has] given me a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I think it's the reason I'm still alive ... It's made me a better person. It has certainly given me a lot of respect in the community and a lot of trust in my community, which I value ... It's made me an overall better person and I in turn have been able to do that for other people.

A Parent



PARENT PROGRAMS

Here is a brief summary of the kinds of programs offered to parents by the three sites (*not all of these were offered by each site*):

- home visits
- parent instruction (in how to be a better parent and how to improve understanding of young people and ability to get along with them)
- homework support
- family vacation camps during March break and in the summer
- family literacy activities and language tapes
- help in obtaining local child care and babysitting
- social activities
- toy libraries
- community kitchens and gardens
- help with transportation
- distribution of information on nutrition

DIFFERENT SITES, DIFFERENT IDEAS

At one site, home visits were provided to parents prior to a child's entry into Kindergarten to make sure it went smoothly. At another site, the roles of educational assistant and family visitor were merged into the child and family enrichment worker.



PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

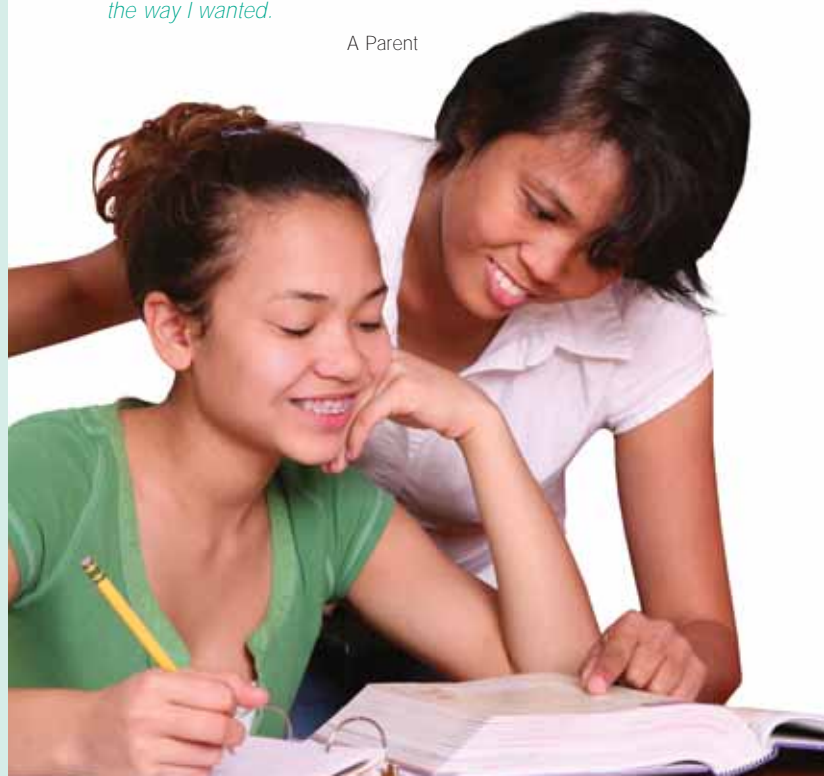
Parents were also encouraged to participate in planning and management committees, in some cases receiving relevant skills training, as volunteers or sometimes as paid employees.

CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

All sites engaged in their own way with the cultural identities of their families and offered programs that supported a community spirit of cooperation between families of the same culture and among families of different cultural backgrounds.

Basically, I think that the most important thing [Better Beginnings] has given me ... it gave me the opportunity to give, and to remake my life the way I wanted.

A Parent



75%

of families from the three Better Beginnings sites are still involved in research

65%

of families from the two Comparison sites are still involved in research



MEASURES: WHAT INFORMATION WE GATHERED

A number of measures were used to find out whether parents appeared to be influenced in a positive way following their involvement in the sites' programs. Information was gathered about how much social support and community involvement parents had and overall family functioning, stress in the family, effective parenting, children's relationships with parents, abuse, and about parents' feelings of depression and marital satisfaction. Parent overall health, including weight, was also recorded, as was whether the parent(s) or other family members smoked.

RESULTS: WHAT WE FOUND OUT

Emotional and Family Functioning

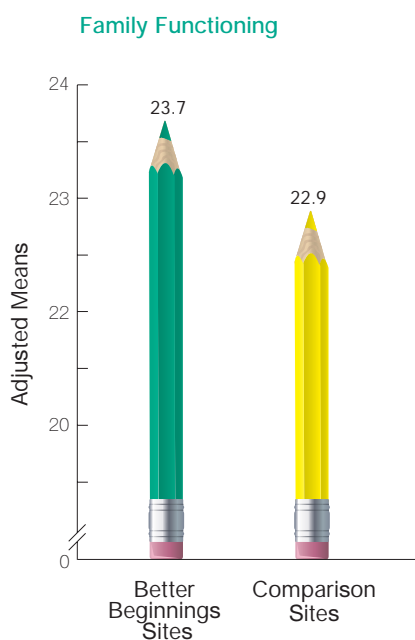
Parents from the Better Beginnings neighbourhoods were more satisfied with their marital relationships and reported more positive family functioning and social support than those from the comparison communities.

The strong expectation for parent participation in Better Beginnings and the many socially-oriented activities and programs offered by the sites brought parents into contact with other community members, thus potentially creating several different avenues for increased social support.

Parent-Child Relationships

There was little indication of positive outcomes in measures of parent-child interactions.

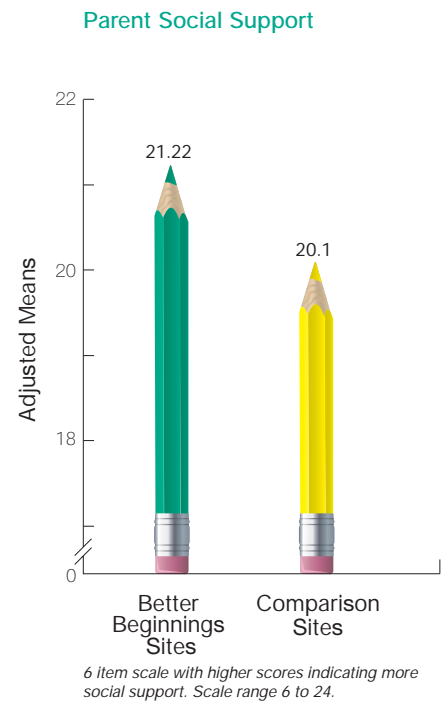
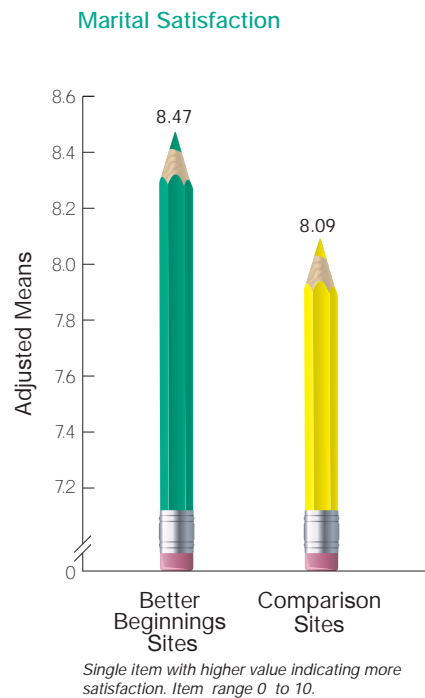
Given that no positive impacts on parenting were observed, comprehensive community initiatives could adopt and tailor more well-established parenting programs to suit their particular contexts.



7 item scale with higher scores indicating better family functioning. Scale range 7 to 28.

One of the ideas behind prevention programs like Better Beginnings is that for parents to be effective at improving their children's chances for success, they must be functioning well themselves.

Geoffrey Nelson and co-authors, in a paper describing parent, family, and community outcomes in Better Beginnings children at Grades 6 and 9



BETTER BEGINNINGS PARENTS

[before Better Beginnings]... I was very unhappy, shy and rarely spoke to anyone. My self worth was at its lowest and I didn't feel I was doing worthwhile things. Deep down, I knew that the "real me" was different. I was lacking the courage to change....until I got involved with Better Beginnings. After I began working with Better Beginnings, I went back to school. Support is the key that encouraged the changes. I have changed the way I live and what I am teaching my children. I may not be perfect, and I do make mistakes; however, I am striving for success and Better Beginnings is helping me achieve all that I set out to do. Thanks Better Beginnings for being a friend!

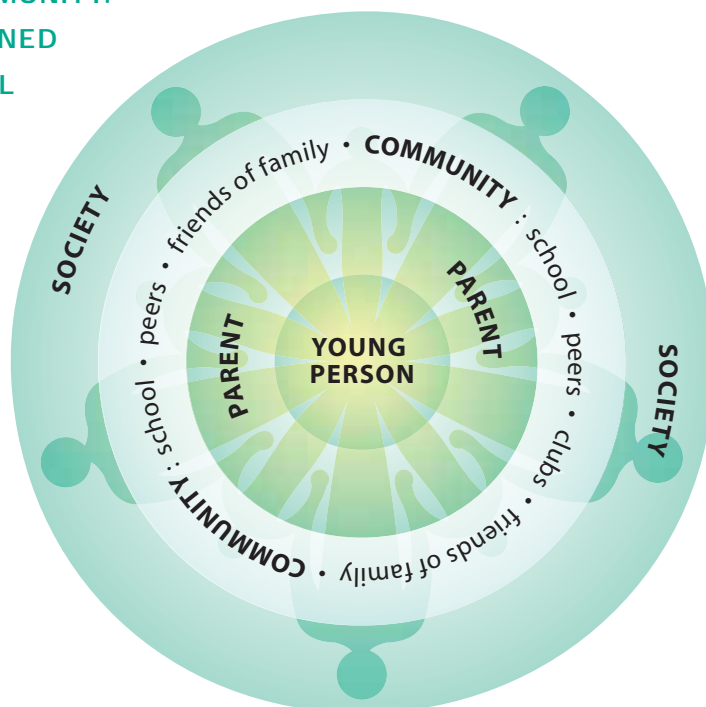
The [Better Beginnings] project has given me enough confidence in myself to come out of my loneliness and say: "OK, I've had enough. And now, I can do it." ... It's more self confidence, I think, and feeling good about myself. Because I've learned a lot, and I know I'm able to do things. I'm not the dregs of society, as people say. No, I don't feel like that at all. I feel I'm just as good as anyone else ... Me, personally, I feel good about myself, and so my children feel good. That's what Better Beginnings has given me.



THE COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES WERE UNDERTAKEN BY THE BETTER BEGINNINGS SITES FOR THEIR OWN SAKE, BUT ALSO AS AN APPROACH THAT ENGAGES RESIDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS, BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY, COALITIONS, AND PARTNERSHIPS, AND IMPROVING NEIGHBOURHOOD CONDITIONS AND RESIDENTS' SENSE OF COMMUNITY.

IT IS HOPED THAT A STRENGTHENED COMMUNITY CONNECTION WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE PARENT AND ULTIMATELY COME FULL CIRCLE TO THE BENEFIT OF THE YOUNG PERSON.



COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

COMMUNITY MEMBER INVOLVEMENT

One of the key aspects of the Better Beginnings project that benefitted the participating communities was the invitation to parents and community residents to become involved in the planning and management of the programs at their site, taking the form of a Community Action Group, a Community Advisory Committee, or similar organized group. This provided opportunities for building a sense of community cooperation and ownership, for learning new skills, and, in some cases, for obtaining paid employment. A cultural dimension was an attribute of the programs at all three sites. As a result, the cultural backgrounds of all participants in the community were reflected in the different aspects of the programs – from the children to the planners.

Community social outreach and socializing included welcome baskets to foster new neighbours' involvement, cultural events, language training, social and fitness activities, community gardens, community kitchens, environmental programs, and project promotions and fundraising.

Other programs fostered concrete community actions to improve the neighbourhood, such as committees on neighbourhood safety.

SERVICE PROVIDER INVOLVEMENT

In the Better Beginnings neighbourhoods, the focus has been on building partnerships among service providing organizations.

The creation of partnerships has resulted in significant new resources and programming being created in each Better Beginnings community, resources and programming that would not exist without these collaborations. This has come about through joint programming, identification of new



sources of funding, and encouragement of agencies to locate in the neighbourhoods, and by mutual enrichment of programming between Better Beginnings, Better Futures and partner agencies. There is agreement that Better Beginnings, Better Futures has been successful in bringing many new prevention programs into communities and in initiating a wide variety of well-received linkages and partnerships between service organizations. These positive changes would not have taken place without Better Beginnings, Better Futures.



40% of research parents born outside of Canada

26% of research parents were single



MEASURES: WHAT INFORMATION WE GATHERED

The number of local activities in which youths were involved was counted, and these included: sports with a coach; organized dance, gymnastics, or karate groups; organized music, drama, or arts groups or clubs; Scouts and Guides; physical activities without a coach; hobbies and crafts; volunteerism; or activities involving special responsibilities.

The number of neighbourhood activities available to parents was recorded and parents' degree of participation in neighbourhood activities was also recorded.

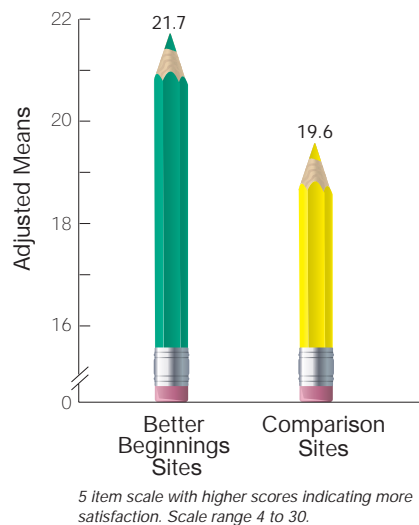
More general questions were asked to get an impression of parents' sense of community involvement and their neighbourhood satisfaction. Neighbourhood satisfaction was defined by parents' perceptions of the condition of buildings, streets, neighbours, safety and crime, as well as conduciveness to raising children.

Apart from the work of Better Beginnings, Better Futures, there has been considerably less research that examines community outcomes of community-driven approaches to prevention.

RESULTS: WHAT WE FOUND OUT

Parents from the Better Beginnings neighbourhoods were more satisfied with their local neighbourhood as a place to live.

Neighbourhood Satisfaction



These positive effects on Better Beginnings parents' neighbourhood satisfaction reflect the broad range of Better Beginnings programs that were developed out of the ecological model, programs that provided many adult social and neighbourhood activities.

The best integration starts with the community. The Better Beginnings, Better Futures project is based on two key principles: community involvement and service provider integration. It is clear from the experiences in this project that realizing these two principles has started with meaningful community involvement. Deliberate decisions were made early in the project to prioritize the involvement of neighbourhood residents. With this priority has come the discovery that effective service provider involvement has been maximized, rather than diminished.

A Local Service Provider

WHAT OUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAD TO SAY

Neighbours started helping each other out... We started seeing neighbours watching out for other children.

There's definitely been lots of changes here [Better Beginnings]. It's a lot quieter, people are talking to their next door neighbours no matter what race they are... They never would have before... People are getting really connected.

...it's connecting people with people. It's easier to connect neighbours with neighbours, so they can go do groceries together or help out with each others' kids.

I really think before this [Better Beginnings] was in place it was pockets of people... I think the neighbourhood is now starting to think of itself as a community and I don't think it was doing that before.

I think people feel safer too with Better Beginnings here. I guess the more the people get to know each other the more they feel safe too.

.....many positive changes. Big changes in the community... we are proud of our community. We like living here, people don't want to move out, in fact people who had moved out, have moved back now.

WHAT OUR SERVICE PROVIDERS HAD TO SAY

... it is important to note that the people from the various agencies likely make the biggest difference. There is no doubt that the personal qualities of the people involved are quite important. The relationship building that has occurred between service providers and community residents, between the service providers themselves and between staff and service providers and community residents has been a cornerstone of the success of the project, thus far.

It takes a long time for agencies to establish new ways of working together, because it requires taking some risks and losses, for the benefit of the community. It takes time for service providers and residents to learn to work together on an equal footing.

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

THE OUTERMOST LEVEL THAT AFFECTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR CHILDREN IS SOCIETY. SOCIETY IS REFLECTED IN OUR VALUES AND CULTURES AND IN OUR SOCIAL POLICY. SOCIAL POLICY IS EMBODIED BY OUR TAX AND BENEFITS SYSTEMS AND IMPACTS ON THE OVERALL ECONOMY. AS A RESULT, IT IS RELEVANT TO EXAMINE THE BETTER BEGINNINGS PROJECT IN RELATION TO COSTS TO GOVERNMENT.

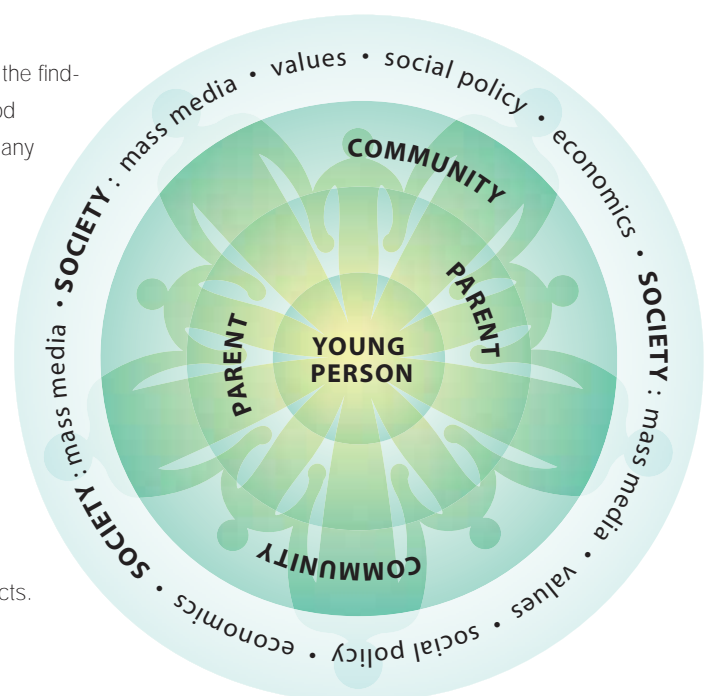
THE REALITY

Whether we are parents, teachers, principals, policy-makers, nurses, doctors, or other concerned members of society working to improve young people's lives, we would like to spend whatever it takes to improve their chances for optimal well-being and success.

It would be ideal if there were infinite resources (in a word, money) to offer a vast mix of programs, conduct unlimited research, and supply endless streams of dissemination documents, not to mention additional money to study how much money was spent!

In the real world, however, every step of the way comes with a price tag. Economic analysis is not always undertaken and

funded and, when it is, the findings are not always good news. It is one of the many areas that distinguishes the Better Beginnings project from others: not only are economic data rigorously gathered and analyzed, the findings are very favourable, reflecting a much lower cost-per-child investment than other comparable projects.



PROGRAM FUNDING

WHERE HAS IT COME FROM?

The average annual budget from 1993 to 1997 was approximately \$580,000 per site which covered the programs at the Better Beginnings older-child sites (children aged 4 to 8 years). Funding to cover this budget was provided by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Education and Training.

WHAT HAS IT COVERED?

Based on the ecological theory of young people's well-being and development, spending was divided between three levels of programming – those that were child-oriented and those oriented towards parents and the neighbourhoods – but in differing proportions as decided by the community through the sites' planning and management committees.

One site initially allocated more than half of their budget to child-based programs, but the allocation towards community development increased over the four-year period. Another site divided the resources equally between the three levels of programming. At still another, more than 60% was allocated to extra-curricular child-oriented activities (before-/after-school and holiday programs) and only 8% was spent on in-school programming.

The components of the programs needing funding included staff salaries and benefits, materials for educational and recreational activities, and food for snacks and small meals.

The proven successes of the Better Beginnings programs in improving outcomes, for example reduction of behavioural problems reported by teachers, and in extremely positive community uptake resulted in the three older-child sites being awarded annual funding from 1997 to the present from the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services to continue these programs.

DIRECT COST PER CHILD

The direct cost per child for participation from 1993 to 1997 was calculated by dividing the overall cost of the programs by the number of children aged 4 to 8 years who participated over the four years. Therefore, $\$580,000 \times 3$ sites divided by 1,549 children (529 in Cornwall, 517 in Highfield, 503 Sudbury) is \$1,123 per child per year. Better Beginnings programs were offered to each child in Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2 at the Better Beginnings sites for a total of four years. Over the course of the project, many of the children had to move away from the sites before they received all 48 months of programs.



Therefore, in order to capture the actual costs associated with each child's exposure to the program, we determined the number of months he or she had lived in the Better Beginnings site, and then calculated program costs for each child by multiplying the length of residence in the site (up to 48 months or Grade 2) with the Better Beginnings reported monthly average cost per child. The figure \$2,964 represents the average government allocation per child over the four years of program exposure.

This cost has been reduced by savings made in other areas where young people required fewer contacts with other government services and agents, such as police officers, as described at the end of this section.

\$2964 **\$3902**

direct cost per child for up to four years of Better Beginnings programming

Less in costs for publicly funded services per child in Better Beginnings than comparison sites



\$938

Better Beginnings net savings per child up to Grade 9

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSES: LOOKING AT BENEFITS OF PROGRAMS IN RELATION TO THEIR COST

Governments and researchers are always developing new programs to improve the lives of children, their families, or their communities. Childhood prevention programs like Better Beginnings, Better Futures are just one of many programs that can be offered.

In cost-benefit analyses of different public programs, financial benefits can be gained by three different groups or categories of people:

program participants: financial benefits can be gained by people participating in a program (for example, if people participate in a program to improve their education, this could cause an increase in their income)

non-program participants: financial benefits can be gained by people without directly participating in a program (for example, costs felt by victims of crime could be lowered through the existence of a crime reduction program which engages adults or young people at risk for criminal activity)

government/taxpayers: financial benefits can be gained by government and, by extension, taxpayers through various programs (for example, decreased education costs or decreased costs to the justice system)

Of 19 childhood programs analyzed in terms of cost-benefits by Steve Aos and other authors, 10 resulted in long-term financial benefits that offset initial program costs. Of these 10, however, only three yielded economic benefits to government/taxpayers, and the value of these benefits relative to program costs was very small.

Many of the outcomes that produce significant economic benefits do not begin to occur until children are in their mid- to late teens. That is why an economic analysis of Better Beginnings is now relevant as the results discussed in this publication are based on information gathered from the project's participants while they were in Grade 9.

Does prevention pay? Can an ounce of prevention avoid (at least) an ounce of cure? More specifically for public policy purposes, is there credible scientific evidence that for each dollar a legislature spends on "research-based" prevention or early intervention programs for youth, more than a dollar's worth of benefits will be generated? If so, what are the policy options that offer taxpayers the best return on their dollar?

Steve Aos and other authors, in their book *Benefits and Costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth*, published by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 2004



THE COST-SAVINGS ANALYSIS OF BETTER BEGINNINGS

Contact with Public Agencies

The Better Beginnings Research Coordination Unit gathered information annually from the young people from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 9 about contact with 12 publicly-funded medical, educational, social, legal, and enforcement agencies. Each time a person comes into contact with one of these services, it costs the government a specific amount of money. This amount was multiplied by the number of times the young people had contact with each service to establish a cost amount for the young people in the Better Beginnings sites compared to those from the comparison sites.

The results showed that fewer Better Beginnings young people repeated a grade, required special education classes, and faced police arrest, but showed no help in reducing costs to urgent medical services (in fact, the Better Beginnings young people showed higher use of these medical services than peers from the comparison sites).

Better Beginnings direct program costs vs. overall reduced costs to government

The overall cost per child for the 12 services was \$3,902 less for the Better Beginnings young people than it was for youths from the comparison sites. Therefore, the savings gained in the 12 public/government agencies more than covers the \$2,964 cost per child amount for Better Beginnings programs. To date, Better Beginnings is saving the government approximately \$938 per child.

To obtain such a significant cost-benefit result as early as Grade 9 is exciting news, as most prevention programs do not show cost savings until kids are older, for instance, in access to higher education/higher income and in terms of fewer arrests.

Types of Services Tracked	Did Better Beginnings result in cost savings to the government in these areas?
Health Care and Social Services	
Visit to a family physician	Yes
Emergency room use	No
Number of serious injuries	No
Number of overnight stays in hospital	No
Visit to a nurse practitioner	No
Encounter with Children's Aid Society	No
Education System	
Grade repetition	Yes
Use of special education services	Yes
Criminal Justice System	
Arrests	Yes
Court appearances	No
Welfare/Disability Programs	
Social Welfare Assistance	Yes
Ontario Disability Support Program	Yes



CONCLUSIONS

THE STRONGEST POSITIVE OUTCOMES SHOWN IN GRADE 9 OCCURRED IN SCHOOL.

THE SIGNIFICANT COST-BENEFIT RESULT AS EARLY AS GRADE 9 IS EXCITING NEWS, AS MOST PREVENTION PROGRAMS DO NOT SHOW COST-SAVINGS UNTIL KIDS ARE OLDER.

I think one of the things that is evident almost immediately is the recognition that this is our home. We, as members of the community, live here ... this is our home. Respect for the physical community, the fact we've planted gardens, flowers and that we've been able to renovate [the local park] by putting in walkways, trees and that kind of thing is the first evidence that people feel at home...People have gotten together and raised issues... to preserve green space in the community ...

A Community Member

CONCLUSIONS

OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The strongest positive outcomes shown in Grade 9 in the young people who had participated in Better Beginnings programs from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2 occurred in school.

Teachers rated youths from Better Beginnings sites as better prepared for school, using fewer special education services, showing more adaptive functioning in school, fewer problems with hyperactivity/inattention and emotional problems, and likely to go further in school than comparison children. Better Beginnings parents reported that their children had repeated fewer grades by Grade 9 than comparison parents. These generally positive outcomes for school-related outcomes were strongest in Grade 9.

Overall, these positive school outcomes are consistent with the fact that the Better Beginnings programs in the three project sites placed heavy emphasis on in-school or before-/after-school programs.

If these positive school and academic outcomes continue, this bodes well for more high school graduation and the overall economic effectiveness of the Better Beginnings project.



Better Beginnings parents viewed their child's conflict resolution skills and confiding in others to discuss their problems more positively.

While teachers and parents viewed youths from the Better Beginnings sites more favourably on a number of outcomes, youths saw themselves in a more negative light. Better Beginnings youths indicated more emotional-anxiety problems, lower self-esteem, and getting along with friends less easily. It is possible that the Better Beginnings programs may have increased children's critical evaluation of themselves despite better school outcomes.

OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Parents from the Better Beginnings neighbourhoods felt more social support from others, were more satisfied with their marital relationships, and reported more positive family functioning than those from the comparison communities. Better Beginnings parents were also more satisfied with their local neighbourhood as a place to live. These positive effects on Better Beginnings parents' social, emotional and family functioning, as well as neighbourhood satisfaction, reflect the broad range of Better Beginnings programs that were developed out of the ecological model, programs that provided many adult social and neighbourhood activities.

...many positive changes. Big changes in the community... we are proud of our community. We like living here, people don't want to move out, in fact people who had moved out, have moved back now.

A Community Member

18-19 700

age of young people
when our current
data collection began
in fall 2007

youths and their families
will be interviewed fall
2007 to fall 2008



COST-SAVING ANALYSES

The overall cost per child for the 12 services was \$3,902 less for the Better Beginnings young people than it was for youths from the comparison sites. Therefore, the savings gained in the 12 public/government agencies more than covers the \$2,964 cost per child amount for Better Beginnings programs. To date, Better Beginnings is saving the government approximately \$938 per child.

To obtain such a significant cost-saving results as early as grade 9 is exciting news, as most prevention programs do not show cost savings until kids are older; for instance, in access to higher education, higher income and in terms of fewer arrests.

NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH

Our research team was awarded a three-year grant from Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre which will allow us to collect important data relating to young people in their high-school years. This is when we expect the Better Beginnings prevention programs experienced in early primary school to have had a positive, long-term impact on delinquency outcomes and other indicators of social and emotional development. Results will be ready in the spring of 2010.

[This project] affirms my belief that often the process is the product; that setting up a drop-in or a home visiting program or parent relief or whatever is not as important as getting people together to figure out what is needed and how to do it. That process is the real product... That has been as valuable to the community and the individuals as the actual services and programs.

A Local Service Provider



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We also extend our gratitude to the research families and youth, and teachers who have participated in the research over the past 10 years

Better Beginnings, Better Futures

