

Programs for Better Beginnings

Executive Summary

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Epidemiological studies tell a grim tale about the mental health of Canadian children. These studies indicate that one child in five suffers from emotional problems serious enough to need mental health treatment. To provide effective treatment to all children who are in difficulty would overwhelm the resources that governments and charitable organizations have at their disposal. How can a problem of this magnitude be addressed? There is an increasing consensus that the solution lies within the area of primary prevention. The logic underlying primary prevention programs can be stated simply: it is easier, more effective, and more humane to prevent problems than it is to attempt to deal with them once they have occurred.

1.0 The Better Beginnings, Better Futures Model

The basic elements of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures model for primary prevention are: the need to be comprehensive; the need to span a range of ages and critical developmental periods; and the necessity for programs to be of high quality and to be designed to effect change at the community as well as the individual level. It was this last (community development) aspect of Better Beginnings that distinguished it from almost all other prevention projects in North America. The focus on community development, and the key role played by residents in each of the Better Beginnings communities, meant that each site could develop a set of programs suited to the needs and character of its community. While the programs from all sites would be designed to achieve the project's major goals, it was recognized that the individual programs and the mix of programs would differ from site to site.

2.0 Methodology

In order to document the process of project development and the program models at each of the sites, a qualitative or naturalistic research methodology was employed, organized within a multiple case-study framework (Yin, 1988). The major source of information was a set of field notes compiled at each of the seven Better Beginnings, Better Futures sites. These notes consisted of semi-verbatim accounts of what had transpired during meetings at each of the site's main decision-making groups, along with descriptions based on printed documents from the program. The field notes were supplemented by group and individual interviews conducted at each of the sites throughout the project's first seven years of operation.

3.0 Approaches to Prevention

To what extent did the seven Better Beginnings sites incorporate the original Better Beginnings model into the approach taken in their communities? Analysis of the qualitative information indicated that the following were the key elements of the approach taken at all the sites:

- Programs are community-driven.
- The BBBF approach is comprehensive, holistic and ecological in that it focuses not just on the child but on the "systems" (e.g., family, neighbourhood, school) in which that child lives.
- There is an emphasis on recognizing strengths, building skills and encouraging self-

reliance.

- While the Better Beginnings model encouraged projects to focus on children across a range of ages (0 to 4 or 4 to 8 years of age), a number of the project teams felt that programs had to address the needs of all children in the community, regardless of age, and sought additional funding to do this.
- Collaboration, integration and partnerships with other community organizations and agencies were considered crucial to project success.
- High quality of staff and programs are necessary to produce desired outcomes.

4.0 The Programs

Well over one hundred major programs operated at the different Better Beginnings sites; they can be broken down into those that focus on the child and family, the school, the parents, and the community.

4.1 Child- and Family-Focused Programs

Younger Cohort Sites. The core program for each of the four younger cohort sites is the home or Family Visitor program. Home or Family Visitors engage in a number of activities with the parents whom they visit, including talking with the parents about child growth and development, and discussing games and activities that the parent can engage in with the child. Other programs include playgroups for children when they reach the older portion of the age range, drop-ins, resource centres, and toy lending libraries.

Older Cohort Sites. Many of the programs for children and families in the older cohort sites parallel programs offered in the younger cohort communities. All three of the older cohort projects conduct home visits. The activities that occur in these home visits are similar to those in the younger cohort visits: visitors provide information about Better Beginnings and other community programs and services; they help families deal with problems and crises; they talk about the kinds of things the parents can do to ensure optimal growth and development of their children; they provide emotional support; and they advocate on behalf of the families. Other programs operating in the older cohort sites include toy lending libraries, parent and child drop-ins and other parent–child programs, and recreational programs for before and after school or for the summer.

4.2 School-Based Programs

In the older cohort communities, much of the focus in programming for children centres around the school. Each of the three older cohort projects has staff working with teachers and children in the school to enhance the kind of educational and social experience children have in school. Better Beginnings staff are involved in a wide range of activities, including assisting in the preparation of instructional materials and helping the children with reading and language activities. Other school-related programs include snack programs, programs and events related to the variety of cultures in their community (e.g., anti-racism events, community breakfasts featuring ethnic foods), and programs designed to support the parents' involvement in their children's school experience.

4.3 Parent-Focused Programs

In developing programs at the various Better Beginnings sites, there has been a recognition of the key role that parents play in the well-being of their children. Consequently, many of the projects have developed programs that focus primarily on parents. These include both prenatal and postnatal parent education, parenting discussion groups and workshops, and recreational programs designed to give parents a break from the demands of child rearing.

4.4 Community-Focused Programs

A wide array of community-related programs has been developed, including leadership groups, community gardens and kitchens, and food-buying cooperatives. Community development is also enhanced by the many celebrations and special events that Better Beginnings projects have sponsored and organized, including community barbecues and rummage sales, summer carnivals, and anti-racism events. Other programs included in this category are those designed to enhance residents' skills and to increase their access to community resources (e.g., cooking and sewing classes, vocational skills training).

4.5 Relationships Among Programs

Programs are not operated in isolation at the project sites, but are related to one another in a number of ways:

- They share staff and participants.
- They follow the development of the child.
- Staff connect participants to other programs.

4.6 Differences Between Programs

While all seven urban Better Beginnings projects provided a mix of child and family, parent-focused, school and community programs, there appeared to be some differences in emphasis between the projects. Among the four younger cohort sites, Ottawa and Guelph seemed to focus more on child and family programs and community programs, with somewhat lesser emphasis on programs for parents alone. Guelph, in particular, and Ottawa, to some extent, provided programs to children in a wider range of ages, beyond those in the focal cohort. Toronto and Kingston included more in the way of parent-focused programs in their mix of programs. Of the four younger cohort sites, Guelph provided the most in the way of community-focused programs.

The older cohort sites differed to some extent, as well, in the mix of programs provided. While all three sites provided about the same number of child and family-focused programs, Etobicoke put somewhat more emphasis on school-related programs, with several project staff and volunteers working with teachers and children in the school to enhance academic performance and social development. In terms of numbers of programs, Cornwall appeared to place somewhat less emphasis on community development than did Sudbury or Etobicoke.

4.7 Origins of Programs

The ideas or designs for Better Beginnings came from a number of different sources, including:

- the original Better Beginnings, Better Futures document
- other Better Beginnings projects
- other similar programs
- program resource materials
- program staff and project service providers
- parents and community members

As the project teams became more experienced, and as residents became more confident and skillful at expressing their needs, the great majority of programs were developed and conceptualized by program staff and residents working in partnership, and were based on needs expressed by community members.

4.8 Changes in Programs and Activities over Time

While many programs and activities remained essentially the same over the first years of the project, several changes occurred: some programs were discontinued, others were introduced, and many were changed in fundamental ways. At a broader level, other changes were evident:

- Community development was occurring at a broader level.
- There was a greater emphasis on outreach and activism.
- Some sites tried to refocus on their mandated age group, feeling their activities were becoming too diffuse.
- Some sites provided more parenting and playgroups, in response to increased parental demand.
- A number of sites established programs and activities for children and youth beyond their mandated age range, mostly by securing additional funding.
- Projects provided more programs for culturally diverse groups in the community.
- Several programs were discontinued due to lack of demand, lack of success, or lack of sufficient resources.

5.0 Challenges in Developing Programs

Better Beginnings, Better Futures has been a complex and ambitious undertaking from the outset. It aimed to meld community members and local service providers into an integrated team that would engage the entire community in a process to better the lives of children and families living in those communities. Understandably, a number of challenges were encountered in achieving this aim:

- limited time, space, and resources
- learning how to work with people from different cultural backgrounds; this required consideration of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of project staff, the language in which programs were provided and meetings were held, the extent to which programs helped promote cultural identity, and ways to use programming to promote positive cultural relations

- residents' lack of familiarity with committees and program planning, and social service professionals' lack of familiarity with residents' concerns
- political issues such as the anticipated end to Better Beginnings funding, dramatic cuts to social assistance, and the teachers' strike
- coordination with other programs serving functions similar to those of Better Beginnings
- maintaining a connection with individuals who were dealing with the stresses associated with low income
- balancing the community development aspect of the projects, which required working with community members of all age groups (while maintaining the focus on the mandated age group)
- dealing with government-project disagreements over programs for children outside mandated age group, the provision of primary health care services, the pace of hiring, and other issues

6.0 Lessons Learned

In attempting to meet the considerable challenges to the development and implementation of high quality prevention programs for their communities, project teams learned a number of lessons about strategies that were helpful in enabling them to develop the kinds of programs their communities needed:

Programming

- Programs must be accessible, well-promoted and visible in the community.
- Programs that are offered free of charge, and without the requirement of any formal commitments from parents or children, result in a more spontaneous, active and pleasurable participation.
- Families prefer environments that are cosy and home-like to ones that are more "agency"-like.
- Tangible markers of change, such as the building of a park or playground, provide project participants with a visible symbol of the changes that can be made in their communities.
- By incorporating principles of self-help and adult learning into prevention programs, the residents are encouraged to become self-reliant.
- Prevention efforts should focus on the family rather than on specific high-risk individuals. This approach avoids the stigmatization of individuals and strengthens the family unit while supporting the parents.
- Constant community outreach is essential in order to reach isolated families and maintain participation levels.

Connections with other service providers and agencies

- By working collaboratively with other agencies in the community, Better Beginnings can gain access to physical and human resources that would not be available to the project on its own.
- Ongoing communication with government representatives is necessary in order to build a supportive relationship with government and to convey to them the needs of the project.

- Paying attention to the political context and advocacy is also important to the making of long-term changes in the community. However, this process can be time-consuming and controversial because some people feel that it diverts a lot of energy that could be devoted to other programs for the community.

Staffing issues

- Community workers are an important link between community residents and the project.
- Staff who are familiar with cultural groups in the community and can speak their language are needed in order to provide programs that are sensitive to the needs of those groups.
- Staff retreats and the use of external consultants have been effective strategies for team-building and for problem solving regarding programming issues.
- Consistency of program staff, schedules and location is important in maintaining high rates of participation. This enables participants to form a connection with the staff and the program.

Funding issues

- Limits to funding require that projects prioritize which programs are most crucial and needed by the community, and acknowledge that not all of the community's needs can be emphasized at all times.
- Secure funding is necessary to the planning and implementation of high quality prevention programs.