

**Our Journey from Better Beginnings to Better Futures:
The Personal Stories of Community Residents**

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Executive Summary

Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a 25-year primary prevention policy research demonstration project. Its major purpose is to assess the extent to which community-based programs can be effective in preventing emotional, behavioural, physical and cognitive problems in children from economically disadvantaged communities. An equally important goal of the project is to strengthen families and communities. At present, eight neighbourhoods across the province have Better Beginnings projects. Each project provides a range of programs and services to its community. These include programs such as home visiting and parent groups for the five communities whose project focus on families with children from birth to four years of age, and classroom enrichment and before- and after-school programs for the three communities whose projects focus on families with children from four to eight years of age.

One of the most important requirements that had to be met by those communities who received funding to become Better Beginnings sites was a significant involvement of community residents in the planning, development and implementation of programs that would be offered through the project. Consequently, residents have been involved not only as participants in Better Beginnings programs, but as program developers, committee members, volunteers, advocates for the project, and staff, among many other roles. Residents worked in partnership with service providers, non-resident staff, government officials and others to establish a wide range of prevention programs and activities at their sites.

The involvement of community residents as partners in program development, rather than merely recipients of programs, has produced a unique experience for all those who have been part of the project. In order to provide some feeling for this uniqueness, we attempted, in this report, to collect information in a different way. Rather than asking specific questions about specific aspects of the program, as we had in previous studies, we asked individuals who had been involved in Better Beginnings to tell us a story about their life in the project. We asked them to tell us what life was like before they became involved, and then to recount their involvement with the project from its earliest stages up to the present, describing their activities, feelings about the project, difficulties and challenges they encountered, and the impact the project had on their lives.

The Story-Tellers

A total of 81 individuals (mostly residents who currently reside, or formerly resided, in a Better Beginnings neighbourhood) who had had a meaningful involvement in the project as a program participant, staff member, or volunteer, and who had resided in the community for at least two years, told their stories to an interviewer. These individuals varied widely in terms of marital status, age, and cultural background. Approximately half had children who were part of the “focal cohort” of children who have been the prime recipients of the programs, and who are being regularly assessed to determine the impact of the project on their health and well-being.

What It Was Like Before Better Beginnings

For some individuals, life before their involvement in Better Beginnings “was fine”. For these individuals, Better Beginnings was just one more activity in an active life that included many other kinds of involvements with the community over an extended period. For most of our story-tellers, however, life had been hard. They reported feelings of isolation and a lack of purpose, language barriers that made it difficult to become actively involved in their communities, low self-esteem, and for some individuals, severe emotional distress. They described a similar situation for their children. They told how their children lacked constructive activities and opportunities to interact with other families and children, and how this lack of affordable activities led to problems in coping with the demands of child-rearing. They also talked about their communities, and how the high levels of crime and violence, and the negative perceptions of their communities, affected both themselves and their children.

First Contacts with the Project

Their first involvement with Better Beginnings occurred in a number of ways. They came into contact with the project

- through relatives, friends and neighbours who were themselves involved in the project
- through contact with a Better Beginnings staff member or volunteer
- through a referral by a service provider from a community agency
- through someone from their child’s school (e.g., a teacher, the principal)
- through their child’s involvement in the project
- through newsletters or flyers distributed by the project
- through notices or word of jobs with the project

Types of Involvement

Our story-tellers recounted many ways in which both they and their children had been active in the project. Their children had participated in a wide range of programs (e.g., before- and after-school programs, play group, snack programs). The respondents themselves had also participated in many different programs (e.g., community kitchen, received visits from a community visitor, attended a parents’ group). They also participated in other ways in the project – as front-line volunteers (e.g., at play groups and drop-ins, or making food for community celebrations), as volunteers in planning, fundraising, advocacy and project administration, and as paid staff (occasional, part- and full-time) for the project.

Challenges, Obstacles and Barriers

For the most part, our respondents were very positive about their Better Beginnings experiences. They did, however, encounter a number of obstacles and challenges:

-
- many individuals felt uncomfortable working with service providers from community agencies, particularly at the beginning of the project
 - there were ethnic tensions and conflicts within the projects
 - the long-standing, continuing problems and tensions in the community at times seemed too much for the project to overcome
 - drastic cuts to social services by the provincial government placed an additional stress on residents of Better Beginnings communities, and made it difficult to focus on prevention
 - community members who were hired as staff members were resented by community members who were unsuccessful in securing staff positions
 - volunteers had difficulty juggling responsibilities to their families and to the project, and at times experienced stress and burnout (particularly at the beginning of the project when there were fewer volunteers to share the work)
 - parents sometimes encountered negative parenting practices in other parents who attended Better Beginnings programs, and this made them uncomfortable and reluctant to attend future program sessions
 - male story-tellers often felt that too few males were participating in Better Beginnings, and that not enough was done to attract male participants and volunteers to the project
 - interviewees reported that there were insufficient resources, staffing or facilities to operate some of the programs at an adequate level of quality
 - there was little programming available for children outside of the targeted age range

Benefits for Residents

Despite these challenges and difficulties, those who told us their stories reported many benefits that they, their families and their communities had experienced as a result of their participation in Better Beginnings. In terms of their own experience, respondents reported

- a greater sense of confidence and control
- enhanced self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life
- satisfaction from helping others
- improved work skills that furthered their career and educational development
- greater knowledge about community resources
- more comfort and confidence in dealing with community agencies
- greater political awareness and empowerment
- more friendships and enhanced support networks
- greater emotional support during times of stress and crisis
- concrete support (in terms of food, clothing, transportation, etc.) during times of need

Benefits for Children

They also reported many benefits that their children derived from participating in the project:

- the opportunity to be involved in activities (e.g. trips, plays, creative arts) that they would have been unlikely to experience without the project
- opportunities to play and interact with other children
- emotional and other forms of support from Better Beginnings staff members
- referrals for health problems
- improvements in behaviour and social skills
- greater confidence and independence
- improved language skills and cognitive development
- enhanced feelings of cultural pride and awareness

The respondents indicated that many of the benefits that they derived from the project also benefited their children. They reported

- greater knowledge about child-rearing and improved parenting skills
- emotional support and respite from the demands of child-rearing
- being better role models for their children
- experiencing improvements in their own self-esteem and satisfaction which they felt was transmitted to their children.

Benefits for Communities

Those who told their stories also described how their communities had benefited from the project. They described communities in which

- community members had a better understanding of other cultures
- there were decreased levels of racism and racial conflict
- there was greater safety and security for community residents
- there was a greater sense of connection among community residents
- the physical appearance, in terms of cleanliness and attractiveness, had improved

A Better Future

The stories people shared with us told us that Better Beginnings had worked in the way it was supposed to. People spoke about how the project had changed their lives, their children's lives, and their communities, and how they had played an active role in the change process. Despite the many stones (and the occasional boulder) on the path from Better Beginnings to Better Futures, it seems that most of our story-tellers had reached their destination.

Preface

A story is a unique means of communication. It weaves words, experiences and emotions into something that brings the reader or listener into the world of the story-teller. Telling one's own story is an act of courage; it exposes the story-teller's life to judgement, evaluation, and possible censure or ridicule. It is also an act of great intimacy, for it is an invitation to share in the most powerful and meaningful events in one's life. People who have suffered hardship and adversity, and people who have experienced redemption and great joy, seem to have a powerful need to tell their stories. The stories help them to make sense of their experiences, to give those experiences meaning and significance, and to gain insight into who they are and what is important to them. Stories also help to build a bridge of understanding between the story-teller and the listener. Not surprisingly, stories are a powerful way to teach important lessons, and have been used by great teachers throughout history.

For this report, we asked those community residents who have been a part of Better Beginnings, Better Futures to tell their stories. Rather than asking them specific questions about particular aspects of their involvement, we invited them to start at the beginning, telling us about their lives before their association with the project, and then to take us along with them as they experienced all the different dimensions of the project. Our report travels with them on their collective journey from Better Beginnings to Better Futures; we begin by describing people's lives before they were introduced to the project, and then we move through the different phases of their involvement, discussing the milestones, events and obstacles that they encountered along the way. Much of this report will look similar to past reports; of necessity, we have taken brief quotes and excerpts from people's stories to highlight various themes. In order to convey the true power of a story, however, it is necessary to tell it in its entirety. For this reason, we include in the report a brief version of one person's story from each of the Better Beginnings projects. By sharing these few stories, we wish to honour all the stories of all the individuals who live in Better Beginnings communities. Each has a tale to tell, and a lesson to teach us.

I came to Canada from China four years ago. My husband works in a factory, and we have two children. When I arrived I couldn't understand any English at all, and my husband understood just a little. I was so scared to go outside and I'd rather stay home all day long. We didn't have a family doctor because we didn't know how to find one. I tried to go to ESL class to learn English when my husband was at work, but sitting in a big class, I was too nervous to talk and embarrassed to ask questions. Most of the time I just sat there quietly until the class ended.

Once I became pregnant with my first child, there was even more stress in my life. I worried not only about myself but also about my child's future. I wanted to learn how to provide good care for my child, how to cope with problems in the prenatal

and postnatal care, but I didn't know where to obtain the necessary knowledge and whom to ask for advice. I was anxious about being a new mother. When my husband went to work and left me alone, I felt even lonelier and more hopeless. There was nobody to talk to or share my feelings with.

After I had been in Canada about one year, a Family Visitor took the initiative to come to my house for visits. She migrated to Canada three years earlier than I did, and spoke the same language and came from the same country as I did, so we freely shared our feelings and experiences together. Not long after, we became good friends. My life changed after the home visitor began to visit me regularly. She brought me news regarding our neighbourhood, shared information which I wanted to know about, translated many flyers and materials into Chinese to let me learn, and introduced me to the neighbours... It really opened up my mind and got me out of the isolated life. She helped me in many ways and was easily contacted and asked for. I started to feel that the world around me wasn't so strange and fearful, and I was concerned about and taken care of by many people. I didn't feel lonely anymore.

I joined an ESL class through Better Beginnings. Because the class was informal and the teachers were friendly, I felt so relaxed and comfortable to talk. I've learned many everyday English words and conversations. I actively joined the group activities and had made so many friends, not only people who speak Chinese, but also people who speak English. I helped make food for the party to celebrate Chinese New Year to introduce and share our culture with the people who have different cultural backgrounds.

Better Beginnings has helped my family with so many things. My Family Visitor helped me find a Chinese-speaking doctor in town, and she served as an interpreter when necessary. My Visitor showed me how to use many services and resources in the city, and I know where and whom I should go to ask for help. Better Beginnings helped get my oldest daughter into a special needs program, and I can see big changes in my daughter's social behaviour and language development. I deeply know that my family's life couldn't have such big change without the support and help of the people from the project and the friends from the neighbourhood.

Prologue: The Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project

Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a 25-year primary prevention policy research demonstration project. Its major purpose is to assess the extent to which community-based programs can be effective in preventing emotional, behavioural, physical and cognitive problems in children from economically disadvantaged communities. More specifically, the goals of the project are:

- To reduce the incidence of preventable serious, long-term emotional and behavioural problems in children;
- To promote the optimal emotional, behavioural, social, physical and cognitive development in children at highest risk for such problems;
- To strengthen the ability of communities to respond effectively to the social and economic needs of children and their families.

At present, there are projects operating in eight communities around the province, one of which is on a native reserve. Since 1997, these sites have received funding from the provincial government on an annualized basis. Each project provides a range of programs and services to its community. These include programs such as home visiting and parenting groups for the five communities whose projects focus on families with children from birth to four years of age, and before-and-after school programs and classroom enrichment for the three communities whose projects focus on families with children from four to eight years of age. Each site is managed by a project director or coordinator, who is responsible to a board or committee comprised largely of community residents. Programs are provided by paid staff members, many of whom are community residents, and a large number community volunteers.

One of the most important requirements that had to be met by those communities seeking funding as a Better Beginnings site was a significant and meaningful involvement of community residents in the planning, development and implementation of programs. The document which outlined the major themes and principles underlying the initiative (MCSS, 1989) stated that:

it is important that members of the community have key responsibilities for decision-making about the design, implementation and evaluation in community-based primary prevention programs (p. 70).

Consequently, residents associated with Better Beginnings are involved not just as participants in programs; they also develop, implement and administer programs, sit on committees, do outreach to other community members, make presentations on behalf of the project, work as

staff members and volunteers, and a host of other things. The stories that form the basis of this report, then, are stories of individuals who have had a wide range of different experiences with the project.

My ex-wife and I first got involved with Better Beginnings in the summer of 1994. My son David was not born yet. He was about to be. My wife was having complications with her pregnancy, and the Public Health Nurse told us about Better Beginnings. In the winter of '95, I split up with my wife, and I had custody of David. I went to a Family Committee Concerns meeting, and I felt comfortable there. I used to be a shy person who would sit back, but with Better Beginnings I have become more outspoken. I soon became involved with the child care committee, special events committee, the Action Group, Nobody's Perfect, and a couple of housing project committees.

There were a lot of groups for moms. I really felt that there should be something for the dads, cause the dads have questions and concerns just like moms. But they feel more comfortable in a group of dads, and just talking, and sometimes even just getting together with 6-7 dads and play a game of pool or something. I arranged to coordinate a dad's group with another dad, and we meet twice a month in my house. The group is run by all the dads, not by the coordinators. It has helped me in raising my child, and I know it has helped the others, too. We all gain by learning about each other's experiences.

Being involved with Better Beginnings has allowed me to take a few courses such as first aid, CPR, and leadership. Just this morning my son spilled a cup of hot coffee over his chest and neck. David was really burned, and he was screaming in pain. But I calmed him down, and I knew how to treat his burn. And two years ago my son had an asthma attack at 3:30 in the morning. I gave him CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation because he stopped breathing. If it wasn't for Better Beginnings sponsoring those two courses, I don't know what would have happened to David. I would have panicked and I wouldn't have known how to help him.

David started going to the child-care program when he was three months old. He is now two years old, and he is really advanced for his age, he is able to do things that four year-olds are doing. I feel if David wasn't mixed in with the older children, (up to four years of age) he wouldn't be as far as he is. When David was four months old, he started going to story time. The child-care workers would sit the infants on their laps and the older children would sit on mats, and they would read stories. The younger ones would see the older kids, how they were sitting,

and how they were playing, and that showed them that it can be done, that they can do it too. So I really think a lot of the child-care.

Better Beginnings isn't just there for the children. It is also there for the parents. It shows us a better way, shows us that there are things we can do with our children, that there is a better way of living.

The Story-Tellers and How Their Stories Were Told

Whose Stories?: Selection of Interviewees

We decided that three broad criteria would be used for selecting interviewees who would tell us their stories:

- the interviewee would have to have had meaningful involvement in the project, either as a participant, staff member, or volunteer;
- she/he would have to have been a long-term resident of the community;
- for half of those interviewed at each site, the person was to have been a member of the “focal cohort” (meaning that their children were being assessed each year to determine what kind of impact the project had had on them).

In addition, the research committee at each site was to decide on additional criteria it might use in selecting interviewees for that site. Included in the list of criteria the committees considered were gender, age (including age of the children), language, culture, and current resident status.

A total of 81 individuals were interviewed across 7 of the eight sites (the seven urban Better Beginnings sites participated in this research; the non-urban reserve site did not). Of these, the large majority (87%) were women. In two interviews the male and female members of a couple were interviewed together; in the rest of the interviews the respondents were interviewed alone. The number of interviews conducted at each site ranged from 7 to 16, with most sites conducting a dozen or so interviews. All of those interviewed met the criteria established for selection, in that they had either volunteered, served as paid staff on the project, or participated in the project's programs. Many had both volunteered and worked as staff on the project. All respondents had lived in the community for at least 2 years, with some having lived in the community as long as 25 years. Most had lived in their communities for four to ten years. Participants varied widely in terms of marital status, age (their own and their children's), and cultural background. Respondents came from a wide range of cultures and parts of the world, including south North and Central America, Europe, Asia, the far East, Africa and South America.

The Story Interview

This report was based on stories told by community residents at each of the Better Beginnings sites. We used an interview guide to help our respondents organize their stories, but the purpose of the guide was to allow the person being interviewed to tell her or his story in a comfortable and complete manner. Prior to each interview, the interviewee was sent a letter stating the following:

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed about your experiences with Better Beginnings. Our purpose in doing this interview is to have you tell your story about being part of Better Beginnings and what your involvement has meant to you. In telling your story, we'd like you to think about the following:

1. What was it like before you got involved with Better Beginnings?
2. How did you first get involved with Better Beginnings?
3. What was it like when you first got involved?
4. What kinds of things did you do?
5. What kinds of things have been particularly satisfying, meaningful or rewarding for you?
6. What kinds of things have been difficult or challenging?
7. What difference has Better Beginnings made in your life?

For the interview, itself, the interviewer began by saying:

As we said before when we talked about the interview, we wanted to give you a chance to tell your story about being a part of Better Beginnings and what it's meant to you. Why don't you just start wherever you'd like and tell me your story.

The questions that were sent earlier to prepare the person for the interview were then used when required as prompts during the interview proper. The interviews were open-ended and the interviewer frequently asked additional questions to obtain more information about the interviewee's experiences. Prior to being interviewed, the interviewer explained the purpose of the research, and had the respondent complete a form indicating consent to participate in the research. The interviewers were usually the site researcher and/or assistant site researcher, but occasionally other individuals associated with the research team conducted the interviews. The great majority of the interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 1997.

Analysis of the Interviews

The first step in the analysis process was to transcribe each interview. A brief (3 or 4 page) summary was then written for each interview, and the summary was given to the

interviewee for his/her review. A “grounded theory” approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used in analyzing the data from the interview transcripts. In a grounded theory approach, the major themes and constructs that are used to organize the interview information come from the interviews themselves, rather than being conceived by the researchers before reviewing the interview transcripts. The site researcher read through each transcript, identifying the major themes, topics, issues and ideas contained in that transcript. Each theme or issue was assigned a code which was then used to identify all instances in which that theme came up, either in the same interview, or in interviews with other residents. For example, the code “parenting skills” was used to identify portions of interviews in which respondents commented on how their participation in Better Beginnings helped them become better parents. The research team at each site then made a list of all the codes or themes that appeared in the interviews at that site. Each code was accompanied by notes indicating where on the interview transcripts quotes relating to that code could be found. The site researchers from the seven sites then forwarded the brief summaries of their interviews, the interview transcripts, their list of themes or codes, and any analytic comments to the program development/model group, which organized the codes from all sites into a master list. This list formed the basis of the cross-site report.

When my twin boys were first born, they were very pale, but I didn't notice it as much because I kind of blinded myself to it. And my Family Visitor noticed straight away how pale they were. And I would take them to Better Beginnings, like the rest of the parents would. I had taken them to the doctor's, and she had told me she wanted some tests done on them two weeks from that day. That morning, I took them to Better Beginnings, and the Community Nurse looked at them, and she took me straight to (pediatric hospital) because she noticed how pale they were, and that their feet were swollen. So we got there, and they had severe anemia, and low protein. The Community Nurse stayed with me all the time throughout the emergency.

One day when the Community Nurse came to the house for a visit, my son was gasping for air. The Nurse told me to phone the doctor, and the doctor wanted us to wait two days for an appointment! The Community Nurse got on to the phone and insisted that the doctor see us right away. But when we got to the doctor's office, all she was going to do was put them on Ventolin. The Community Nurse wouldn't accept that, and she said we had to go to the hospital. A few weeks later, they still had breathing problems, they still had a cough, they weren't gaining weight like normal children would. When they were diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis, the Community Nurse was the first person I called to tell, even before my husband. So I phoned her, because she was the one person I knew I could talk to. I knew I could break down with her and I didn't want to do that to my husband. And she was there for me.

The Community Nurse visited me at the hospital. She took me back and forth to the hospital a lot, and Better Beginnings gave me bus tickets so I didn't always have to depend on others for rides... They gave me a big package with stuff for the kids and for us. The people at Better Beginnings were there for me. I needed that support. I don't think I could have gotten through it without support from the Community Nurse, my Family Visitor, and the other people I talked to there. I would have found it a lot harder.

My older son had a really good time at Playgroup. He made a really good friend there, it was the first child that he really started to play with. Better Beginnings made my son learn to mix with other kids, and learn to share, you know, the normal things that kids need to learn. Now that we live out of the area, there are no groups around here where they can go. I fear them mixing with other kids in case they catch something and they end up in the hospital. But if there was a place like Better Beginnings for them to go, I'm sure I could overcome that fear. The twins are behind in their development, and I wonder if they would be so far behind if they were going somewhere like Better Beginnings. I think about it, a group like that would really go well around here. I miss it. And I think the kids would have a lot of fun there playing. My son used to just have a ball when he went to Playgroup, there was just so much to do.

My kids are alive! If it wasn't for the Community Nurse acting when she did, especially when my son was having the breathing problems, I wouldn't have them now.

The Tale Unfolds

Before the Beginning: What It Was Like Before Better Beginnings

1. Life was fine

For some Better Beginnings participants, **life was fine** before their involvement in the project, and the project was just something interesting to be involved in:

..my life personally was fine. I had lots of things in my life to do. I wasn't working, I was on disability so I had channeled my energies into other avenues.

A number of those who were interviewed were already **active in their communities**, volunteering with community agencies or in their local schools:

I was involved with the Community Information Directory, and I was involved with the Family Service Association and on their West Committee ... A chair of [community association], people would come to me at my office to get things signed and so on, so it was really very much a volunteer job.

2. Life was hard

For the majority of respondents, however, life was less than fine. Many of these individuals spoke about feelings of **isolation, boredom and a lack of purpose** in their lives:

I didn't know anybody, didn't go out at all ... I usually wasn't home. I used to go to my mom's and just come home to sleep ... I didn't know the community at all. I just knew how to get to my building and that was it ... I didn't have anybody. I was here by myself. When I moved in here I didn't have anything. No furniture, nothing. It was just a rocking chair and a television and a little table, and with a little baby, she was three months. I didn't know much about babies.

I don't have any language barriers or anything like that, but being home alone I felt very bored, very isolated, nothing to do; watched a lot of TV.

I wasn't depressed. I'm a very home type person. I would go to , I was a single parent. I would go to work, I had to be to work for 7:30 in the morning and I worked until 6 o'clock at night. So I dropped my kids off at day care, I worked all day and at quarter to 6, I picked my kids up at day care because the day care closed at 6 and I would go home and its like they had been gone all day, like we'd been apart all day and like I'm too tired to do anything. Here's your supper, here's your bath, come on guys, I'm tired, and we'd just go to bed. We were just existing....We didn't do a lot of fun things in life

After I was pregnant with my first child, there was more stress in my life. I worried not only about myself but also about my child's future. I wanted to learn how to provide good care for my child, how to cope with problems he prenatal and postnatal care, but I didn't know where to obtain the necessary knowledge and whom to ask for advice. I was anxious about being a new mother. When my husband went to work and left me alone, I felt even lonelier and more hopeless. There was nobody to talk to or share my feeling with.

Right at the beginning, let's say I was alone, more or less isolated, with three young children. I worked part time for a while. After that, I stopped altogether. So I was completely isolated.

For some, the isolation they experienced was due to their having recently moved to Canada, with little knowledge of what was available in the community, and **language barriers** that made it difficult for them to connect more with their surroundings:

At the time my husband could only understand a little English and I couldn't understand any at all. I was so scared to go outside and I'd rather stay home all day long. We didn't have a family doctor because we didn't know where and how to find one.

When I came [to Canada and the Better Beginnings community] I didn't have any parents, no relatives ... I wanted to spend my whole time in the school so I can learn more English and I can enjoy life.

A number of respondents described having **low self-esteem**, relating to their lack of meaningful work or their status as a "low income" individual:

because I come from upper middle class I've always felt really guilty being on Mother's Allowance...I still have that conflict of my bringing and kind of fallen into this abusive relationship that it took me almost 10 years to get away from my husband. To get the confidence to get away from him. And then accidentally having 3 children that kind of made me feel really cruddy.

Other residents reported feeling more **severe emotional distress**, from depression to thoughts of suicide:

Last year, I was withdrawn, unhappy, sad, angry, hurt, full of fears and so much more. I was filled with a darkness that also surrounded me. I constantly fought with the memories from my past. I lost all hope and faith that my life would get any better and I just wanted to give up. I began to have suicidal thoughts because dying would end the pain. I was rejected from programs in the past and so I was not willing to reach out for help because I felt no one cared and no one wanted to take time, or the energy to help me. Last year, I was ready to act on my suicidal thoughts. I tried so hard to be a good parent to my child but I was overwhelmed with my own issues. That day, I found it within me to reach out for help because my child's father had died several months before. I didn't want to leave my child without a mother as well.

I became really depressed... I would get up in the morning, send my kids to school, and go back to bed and sleep the entire day, I just wasn't functioning, doing absolutely nothing

3. Our Children

In addition to their own sense of isolation and lack of involvement in the community, many parents also reported a **lack of constructive activities for children** in the community, as well. Those activities that were available were often beyond the means of low income parents:

There were a very large number of children and when they came from school on the other side of [street name], they were not allowed out again because of the danger of crossing the road. There were not services for them on the East side of [street name].

We had very little money and we hardly ever went outside only to our school for after school sometimes.

From a financial point of view, we didn't have that much money, so we were pretty limited in the things we could do.

The lack of affordable activities for their children, combined with the sense of isolation that many parents felt, often led parents to experience considerable **difficulty in coping with the demands of child-rearing:**

Well, before [Better Beginnings] happened, it was like hell. It was just like this situation with me and my kids, it was just all down-hill, you know, because with the three older ones it was hard, you know, brother and sister fighting and not knowing how to play with each other but it's not like it is now.

Before I didn't know [how to talk to] my own kids. Now I know how to talk with them. Before I get upset. Now, no, no, they are hyper you have to be cool. Then you can handle these kind of children. In the beginning, I didn't know that kind of thing.

I talked to the pediatrician who just told me that some children are more aggressive, boys tend to be more aggressive, to wait and see, by the time he's three it should stop. And I went back at three, still having problems, so he says go to a psychologist and talk to them. This person told me to be more consistent, and I was just ripping my hair out. I wasn't getting anywhere so I was calling different agencies. I didn't know who they were or anything just using the phone book and then I thought, I can't do this anymore, I'm exhausted, they're destroying the house...I decided I was going to call Family and Children's Services to see about getting them placed in a foster home.

4. Life In Our Communities

A number of respondents talked about what the neighbourhoods and communities in which they lived were like before Better Beginnings. They reported **high levels of crime and violence** in their communities, which added further to their sense of isolation:

There were some really rough addresses in there, specific houses with drugs and violence and the whole bit and these people rule the roost kind of thing.

I didn't know anything about welfare until I experienced it in my life. So here I was, single in public housing raising two kids on my own. I felt isolated and I didn't drink, I didn't do drugs, I didn't like violence, I didn't like guns, war toys, but I was put in a situation where that was really common occurrences. In public housing you can't choose who your neighbours are and because of my financial situation I had no choice in making that decision on whether or not to go into public housing. I just isolated myself and my kids and tried to bring them up with my values. It was very hard, so I had to do a lot of self-isolating, just so they wouldn't see that or experience that type of life. A lot of kids are being abused, a lot of violence, a lot of scary things, but, that housing community was my life. That was where I lived, that was where I woke up every morning.

One of my earliest recollections of moving to the community was the police going to residents, on the street I lived on, on an average of about 5 days a week. Sometimes twice in one day. On the weekends it was not uncommon to see them at two residences. Every time I saw them for about the first month, I thought they were coming to my home to notify me that my ex-husband was spotted in the area and sent word that he would get us.

Residents were aware that their **community was perceived negatively by those outside of their neighbourhood**, and they felt the stigma of these perceptions quite keenly:

Our community has been sort of black marked ... [people think of us as] scum of the earth and welfare bums.

I moved to the neighbourhood approximately 10 years ago with my three boys, then aged 6, 5, and 3. Before my move, I had spent several years in protective custody and this was going to be my first time of completely venturing out on my own. My ex-husband was considered "dangerous" and I had just spent 4 years looking over my shoulder where ever I went.

There was a lot of violence in the neighbourhood. I have seen stabbings, shoot outs, women beaten in their own driveways, S.W.A.T. teams in my yard and neighbours' yards, on the day of the Santa Claus Parade trying to get an armed man out of his house. He was holding his daughter and wife as hostage

I became involved the day a young boy was hit by a car of a drunken neighbour's boyfriend, right in my driveway. I had witnessed the whole thing along with about 8 other people, and no one else was willing to call the police. I began helping out kids from troubled families by welcoming them into my home and having them join my family until things at home were sorted out.

When I started with Better Beginnings, I didn't have a clue how to handle certain situations. For years, I had just been operating on pure instinct when it came to my own street and back yard. My experience came from my own shitty background. When you grow up around alcoholics, beatings, rape, molestings, drugs, prostitution and many, many secrets....well, it becomes your playground. Your instincts become sharp, and so must your memory if you are going to survive. It doesn't mean those skills you obtain are right, though, and this is where my uneasiness came in. I was scared that I would screw up. But there was always someone to catch me during my first months with Better Beginnings.

There was a "Club House" where neighbours would go and socialize. It was pretty much the only place for the children to go and hang out, but it was also a breeding ground for anger. We started running programs right out of the Club House. Soon some residents were getting involved with the office and volunteering there and then getting placements. This was about the time there was a considerable change in the area. Neighbours started helping each other out. Eventually there were only a few occasions every six months or so that I would have an extra child in my house to care for and the police seemed to be coming around less and less. We started seeing neighbours watching out for other children. There are still some of the same people that have a difficult time. They focus on the negative and have a hard time seeing the positive side to life, but there are many others who can't help but feel the effects of the ones who bring positive outlooks. It can be contagious.

We are in a different community now but we haven't changed the way we live in a community. We get back plenty of love and friendship from this way of life. Now I depend on some of the very people I used to help. A few years ago I was diagnosed with a disease that disables me to a point. I have days when I can't get out of bed, can't do my grocery shopping, or drive myself to my doctor

appointments. The tables can turn in one fell swoop, and you can find yourself on the receiving line instead of the giving line.

The staff phone me about once a day and sometimes one of them comes over to spend the day with me or an evening. I manage to see some of the children from the neighbourhood. I am so fortunate to have the people around me that I do. They help make my life comfortable and dignified. I am a proud person and my lesson in the last few years has been to learn how to accept help. This has been such a hard lesson for me. It still is difficult. This has allowed me to see the other side of Better Beginnings: a better view of what it can really do for those in need. (City Name) has become a richer city because of Better Beginnings. I don't mean monetarily, I mean in the hearts of the people. This can't help but run over into other areas, other communities in the city. People move away and they take experience and knowledge with them. We are contagious! We spread love, caring and understanding.

The Beginning: First Contacts with the Project

How did people first set upon the path from Better Beginnings to Better Futures? How did they make their first contacts with the program? Many of those who were interviewed made their first contacts with the project **through relatives, friends and neighbours who were themselves involved in the project:**

I've lived in this neighbourhood for over 25 years. I first started getting involved with Better Beginnings probably when it started, when it first got going because my Mom had went and applied for a job and got it, and she started telling me all about it and I thought, 'Oh good, they have this, they have that, I am going to go check it out.'

When I left [my ex-husband] I ended up in the shelter and there was nothing to do at the shelter, it was really bad. They didn't have any activities, I didn't own a TV, there was nothing. So my sister invited me to Better Beginnings (Community House). I knew about it because of what she told me, she went every single day.

I met up with this guy [at a local park] who had a very large family and it ended up being someone very involved in the community. His wife told me about this place and it took me about a month or two before I went to visit.

I moved to this neighbourhood in 1994. When I came here, I was a single parent with one child who was two and a half years old and I didn't have anybody to help me. Neighbours knew about Better Beginnings and gave me their phone number.

Well, I got involved in Better Beginnings about 7 years ago. A friend of mine was currently going to the [Better Beginnings] Group every second Wednesday, and I was a single parent with two kids...and debating whether to stay in [the city] or move back to [my home province] and she said come to an [Better Beginnings] Group with me...I said, no, I'm not coming, I'm not interested...And she said, well, there is free child care and you'll get supper. So I said, OK, I'm going.

One of the key strategies for bringing people into the Better Beginnings fold was to maintain an active presence in the community. Staff members, volunteers and other individuals associated with the project, for the most part, were residents of the community themselves, and used their familiarity with the community to reach out to those in the community:

The process was slow as we had to earn the trust from residents. We earned their trust by becoming visible in the community, walking the streets, talking to people, knocking on doors and handing out flyers. We had an open door policy at the [Better Beginnings community] House with someone always there to chat and have a coffee with. Word spread quickly about who we were, where we were and what good work we did.

The success of this strategy was obvious from the accounts of the interviewees, a large number of whom had first become acquainted with Better Beginnings **through contact with a Better Beginnings staff member or volunteer:**

She [community visitor] had friends in the same school with my kids. Sometimes she was there – she told me ‘I’m working for [Better Beginnings]’, gave me information, and said we’d talk again. ‘I can go to your house and get information’. After that, she became my community visitor.

I’m walking around the park and I see [Community Visitor] and she says to me, ‘I didn’t know you had a baby!’ ... I said that I adopted him ... And then she was telling me about how next Monday morning she’s going to start working at Better Beginnings.

I have a child. My son, he has ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder, and he is a handful. Beyond a handful! I used to take my son to catch his bus in the afternoon in Kindergarten. And I guess they heard me yelling or whatever because I do have a big mouth and I don’t let him walk over me. Well anyway, the Community Visitor Coordinator and the Administrative Assistant came out, and the Community Visitor Coordinator started coming out every day; she came in for a coffee and said to come to the community centre. I wasn’t interested, but she never gave up, the woman never gave up. So finally I said, ‘Fine, to get you off my back, I’ll go to the community centre and have a coffee.’ So I went over there and had my tea and other women were there and then I got to speak to a woman. She became my Community Visitor.

I was never getting out of the house and it was really really depressing. I didn’t know anybody around here. And then, one day, this woman who lives across the court, she is a Community Visitor, she came by with pamphlets and she said, ‘Hi, we are here, there’s a playgroup right there, the house is over there’ and she gave me these pamphlets. But I had also been given the pamphlets by [city name] Housing on Better Beginnings, in their kit that they give you when you move in. But I didn’t really look at it much, so when she came over and gave me the same thing, my first thought was, ‘Oh, there’s a playgroup, I can get out of the house.’ I just had nowhere to go with them.

Someone who worked for Better Beginnings contacted me. When the woman realized that I couldn't communicate with her, she called a Somali woman to help.

Well, I was a single mom and raising two kids. We had to leave our apartment and go into a shelter before we got into housing, so it was pretty rotten. So we finally got here into housing and we were here almost a year and [Better Beginnings staff person] used to walk by coming to the program collecting kids for the kids group she was running. So my kids used to go. My daughter wasn't quite old enough to get in with the rest of them, used to sneak in behind her sister and they ended up in these classes. ... I had a hip replacement, so I was kind of sitting around the house doing nothing, and I guess it was [Better Beginnings staff person] called me and asked me if I wanted the job, you know, working on the front desk for four hours a week.

[the home visitor] took the initiative to come to my house for visits. She migrated to Canada three years earlier than I did, and spoke the same language and came from the same country as I did, so we freely shared our feelings and experiences together. Not long after, we became good friends.

Several of the individuals who participated in the stories interviews indicated that they first heard about Better Beginnings **through a referral by a service provider from a community agency** with which they were already involved:

[New mother who was having problems breast-feeding:]. She [public health nurse] found out that I lived in the Better Beginnings area [and she told me] you can go down to Better Beginnings and if the breast pump is available you can get it for free. The staff at Better Beginnings made me feel so comfortable that I asked for a parent visitor.

I was provided with a social worker who asked me if there was anything outside the home she could do for me or provide for me . . . I needed to get out and push myself to be with other parents and talk about my feelings and this sort of thing because as I say I was really getting too enclosed. So I wanted to get out so the social worker came back a couple of weeks later and said, I found this project right in your neighbourhood called [name], and she gave me a phone number and a name and a time too.

For families from the older cohort sites, it was often **someone from their child's school (a teacher, the principal)** who encouraged the parent to get involved in Better Beginnings:

[The principal spoke with me while I was doing volunteer work at the local elementary school, and]...“asked me if I wanted to be part of it, [Better Beginnings], and she knew there was a position open, you know, for a part-time secretary and that's what I used to do before, so I applied for the job, and I started working.

Mrs. _____ who was the principal of the school at the time...invited me to a meeting, and I came and sat, and I listened, and I observed.

For a number of those we interviewed, their involvement with Better Beginnings came about **through their children's involvement in the project:**

From the beginning, having four children, I had two of them that took part. That's how I found out about Better Beginnings is that two of my oldest children took part in the after-school program at [school] and for the first year I just heard how happy they were playing with their friends. Then the following year I promised them that I would take part in it and go and help out. Because when I would go pick them up I was asked by the staff if I would help out.

It was through the school system originally, I think. Myself and the two kids participated in something that was going on at one of the activities that [Better Beginnings] was providing for the children. And we went and I thought it was a really good idea.

All of the Better Beginnings sites distributed flyers, newsletters, and other materials which were designed to inform residents of project programs and activities. These were often in a number of different languages, to attract individuals whose first language was not English. Several interviewees indicated that they became aware of Better Beginnings **through newsletters or flyers distributed by the project:**

I had lived in the neighbourhood for four, five months before I got hired, so I was trying to get to know the neighbourhood and things like that. One day this newsletter was delivered to our door. It was published by Better Beginnings, Better Futures. I read through it and two things caught my eye: one was that there was assistance available for pregnant moms and moms with small children, so I thought, it might be something that my wife could take advantage of. And then at the end of the newsletter I saw that they were looking for Community Visitors, who were from the neighbourhoods. And I said, 'Community visitors, Community visitors?' So I called, that was the first time I came to know the name of the Community Visitor Coordinator.

A flyer came into our mail box saying that they had different programs for children. That was how I found out about it.

I was reading one of the flyers hanging ... Oh, come to this! Oh, okay I'll go and try it out and then I got hooked on it because they did such a good job so I decided to you know to help out and then I just started working

For a few individuals, it was **the prospect of getting paid employment with the project** that led them to look into Better Beginnings:

Well I was told about the ad in the paper and the whole project, and then I applied for the position of child care assistant, and then was hired.

When I first got involved with Better Beginnings, I was a stay-at-home mom with two young children – my youngest was just a baby. Being home alone I felt very bored, very isolated, nothing to do. I just sat around and watched a lot of TV. I first heard about Better Beginnings from one of the parents I knew from the school. She also told me “Oh there’s this program going on.” She went on and on about it – the Better Beginnings drop in – and so I started coming. Really liking it. Just sitting around with parents and letting the kids play and meeting people. And then I joined the parents group.

Then one of the people from the parents group asked me to come to a meeting. I said “well, I can’t come to this meeting, I have my children.” And she said it wasn’t a problem – that they would babysit – for free! The first meeting was in this empty portable at the school and we sat around and talked about what we thought the community needs, what we would like to see in the school, what we thought the kids needed. From there it just grew. The very first committee after that meeting was either the nutrition committee or in-school committee. Then I was doing outreach with the community development worker as well. Even before the committees I was asked to sit on the hiring committee – to help hire the project coordinator!

The first few months with the project felt amazing – very exciting. Very empowering, which was a word I didn’t know back then, but I do now. It felt very important, that this community was of some worth to people. I was told over and over again “you live in this community, you have children; those things are important and you have a valuable voice into what we’d like to see happen here”. I was constantly being told that it’s okay to speak up and that people are going to value what you say.

It's unbelievable to think that we started off in a little portable. The parent who'd started the parent group kept saying "it's going to grow", but I couldn't see it. I'm thinking "no, we're going to meeting after meeting after meeting and planning all these things and hiring all these people and nothing is happening". Then December hit and all these people were hired and the government was putting so much pressure on us to have everything up and running in January. I remember going to this Christmas function and everyone was so drained from having so much to do and feeling so much pressure from the government to get everything going. It was very stressful.

I was exhausted but I loved it – I still do. Breaking the isolation was a big factor for me. It changed my personality drastically. I never really pictured myself as a shy person but I think when I came out around other people I was kind of shy and laid back, and unless you spoke to me first, I wouldn't speak to you first. Just being able to talk to other parents made a difference – coming out and talking to other parents, and getting involved and getting your ideas on paper. Having what I had to say in the Newsletter was a big to do for me. Being accessible to the principal and to the teachers, being known by the vice-principal. Being known and feeling important that way has been really good.

I've learned a lot of skills, too. The coordinator encouraged me to take an assertiveness training course, and that impacted my life a lot. The learning, the skills, being able to say no, being able to balance your time. I also got some training on how to run a committee. That was helpful not only with committee work, but on a personal level. Being able to balance time and what's important and what's not important, being able to communicate. The workshops helped a lot, too – the parenting workshops with the Children's Aid Society, for example.

How has it affected my kids? In the early years, to be honest, they hated it. "Oh, mom's going to another meeting, oh, mom's going to another workshop, oh, we've got to stay with the babysitter". But I try to say to them, you're getting free trips, we're getting bussed to Ontario Place, to Pleasure Valley, we wouldn't be doing any of those things because I don't have access to a person with a car who could take us. And now I have a job with the project and I have this extra income so that we'll have a better quality of life. They were young and they may not have understood that, but now that they're getting older they appreciate it.

It's taught me so many things. To appreciate people. To appreciate foods, smells. I never really smelled curry before I came here. I never took offense to it, but I never really smelled it before. It was a lack of knowledge, but now it's like "well,

that's what they cook". If you're living in a community where there's lots of different cooking smells, Indian cooking, Caribbean cooking, those are the things that you're going to have to get used to. Learning to cook it, and eating it, and having an appreciation for it. So the project has helped me immensely just by appreciating people and honouring their differences.

About three years ago, my husband and I separated, and I became a single parent. The kids were so young and they were so upset and withdrawn and quiet for a while. The project helped. Some of my friends in the project came up to me shortly after the separation and said "you need to get away from the kids, we're going for this Christmas celebration. We've put together \$50 and it will pay everything, you have to come". That kind of thing goes on all the time. I went to each of my kid's teachers, who I knew because they were both very involved with Better Beginnings – I was teary-eyed and choked up – and I said my husband and I separated and this is what's happening in the house, so if my kids seem dazed or upset, this is why. One of the teachers started to cry and gave me a big hug, and said "I know it's really hard right now, but you will be a different person because of this". I think if it hadn't been for the project, going to people and saying "this is what I think, give me some advice, tell me what to do", if I hadn't had those close relationships, I wouldn't have said anything. That helped a lot and I think it definitely benefitted the kids.

The constant flow of information – the workshops, the reading circles, the community forums, the parent groups -- has been amazing. There's been a vast highway of information and knowledge. Also, being involved and being asked to speak. My gosh, I never would have pictured myself as a public speaker. Now I've done it lots of times! I spoke at a conference on program evaluation downtown about my experiences on the research team and people came up to me afterwards and said "we enjoyed hearing you speak". A couple of people sent me letters because of that, and I received a \$30 gift certificate and a t-shirt as a thank-you for speaking. It was neat!

I can't imagine my life without Better Beginnings. Being at the school all the time. Feeling so needed. Being able to plug in where you're needed. Being accessible. Having the school trustee write me letters, call me on the phone. I think it's important for the kids, for the future, and for the community.

The Journey: What We Did

The people who told us their stories had participated in a varied range of activities at their sites. This is not surprising, given that one of the major criteria for selecting interviewees was that they were to have been "meaningfully" involved in the project. In general, the ways in

which individuals were involved in the projects can be placed into five categories: they were involved in that their children had participated in Better Beginnings programs or activities; they themselves participated in project activities; they had worked as “front line” volunteers with other residents; they had worked in a planning, administrative or fund-raising capacity; or they had worked as paid staff members of the project.

1. Our Children’s Participation in Better Beginnings Programs

Many of those interviewed talked about how their children had been involved in the project, and the impact their involvement had had on them. In the younger cohort sites, the interviewees’ children were involved in the project in several different ways: they attended a play group, participated in a school readiness or pre-school program, and were part of the Better Beginnings research, among other things. Children from the older cohort sites attended before- and after-school programs, took part in summer trips and activities, and used the project’s toy-lending library, among other things. Listed in the table below are some of the ways that interviewees described their children as having been involved in the project:

- participated in cooperative games
- attended before- and after- school program
- used toy-lending library
- attended play group
- was taken by Better Beginnings staff to doctor’s appointments
- was involved in the research
- attended school readiness program
- attended drop-in
- took part in snack program
- attended summer programs

2. Our Own Participation in Better Beginnings Programs

Many of the interviewees had also been participants in a wide range of Better Beginnings programs, or had used Better Beginnings services offered at their site. Among many other things, they had attended parent groups, been visited regularly by a community visitor, used the clothing and food bank, borrowed baby equipment, had help from a Better Beginnings staff member in settling a dispute with a landlord. Listed below are some of the programs and activities that interviewees described participating in as they chronicled their involvement with Better Beginnings:

- took part in community kitchen
- used clothing, food bank
- had a community visitor
- attended a parenting group

-
- had counselling sessions with a Better Beginnings staff member
 - attended a pregnant mom's group
 - obtained help in breast-feeding; borrowed breast pump
 - obtained parent relief
 - attended ESL classes
 - attended aerobic exercise class
 - attended conflict resolution workshop

A number of the programs were those in which parents and children participated together, and could therefore not be categorized as exclusively child or parent involvement. As families, parents and children attended parent-child drop-in, went on camping trips, and attended family picnics and celebrations, among many other things.

3. Our Work as Front-Line Volunteers

Many of the interviewees had been involved as volunteers with the projects in their communities, working directly with residents of the Better Beginnings communities, or doing other things, such as preparing food or developing parent-child activity packages that benefited residents directly. Listed below are some of the varied kinds of "front-line" volunteer activities described by those interviewed:

- played music at Christmas party
- volunteered at play group, drop-in
- worked at toy lending library, clothing bank, food bank
- provided office help, answering phone, tidying
- co-facilitated dad's group
- organized and helped out with special events
- developed activity package for toddlers
- recruited people for Better Beginnings programs and events
- made food for a Better Beginnings event
- helped with movie night
- worked in the school as a lunch room supervisor, teacher's aid
- worked in the project's snack program
- helped out on field trips
- dressed up as Santa Claus
- made aprons for children
- made mother & baby supply baskets
- helped paint community house

4. Our Work as Volunteers in Planning, Fund-Raising, Advocacy and Administration

Many of the respondents worked as volunteers in a different capacity. They served on committees, made presentation on behalf of the project, raised funds for project programs and

activities, and developed new programs, among other things. Below is a list of some of these more planning and administrative kinds of activities that interviewees described:

- served on a variety of committees (playground, steering, research, prenatal, management board, etc.)
- collaborated on designing new programs for site
- worked on Newsletter
- participated in hiring staff
- spoke publicly on behalf of Better Beginnings
- served as co-treasurer of neighbourhood organization
- helped write “Schedules A & B” (program plan and budget submitted to provincial government)
- organized fund-raising events
- wrote letters to politicians

5. Our Work as Better Beginnings Staff

A number of people who told their stories had worked as Better Beginnings staff, many on a part-time or occasional basis, and some on a full-time, or close to full-time basis. These individuals had taken on a variety of paid staff positions, including:

- community visitor
- family helper
- child care coordinator
- site researcher
- parent relief person
- summer day camp staff
- project secretary

6. All of Our Involvements

The majority of people who told us their stories spoke of multiple involvements with the project. Many had started as program participants, and then had become volunteers and then paid staff members. Others had started as staff members, but also contributed many volunteer hours to the project as well. For a number of respondents, Better Beginnings was a home away from home:

I spent the whole day [at Better Beginnings], like from the morning until they closed. Then I went back to the shelter to sleep because it was really dead there and it was really dirty too. Plus when I left my ex, I left everything at home. I ended up going to the clothing bank and getting new work. And that is one of the big things I found is really good, because for little kids, I couldn't start

buying new. I have two kids; my oldest is 6. I'm really grateful that I got the kids clothes, because I found buying is really expensive. Plus I find that I've been getting clothes that my kids really like and they're not dressed like the other kids in school. I went to Better Beginnings all the time. As soon as you walk in they say, welcome to Better Beginnings! For the longest time they kept saying, so when are you gonna move in? Because I was always there, every day. There was nothing to do at the shelter. So they would say, 'You're here again?'

The Journey: Challenges, Obstacles and Barriers

Most of the individuals who were interviewed for this report were people who had been involved with the project for some time. For the most part, these individuals were very positive about their experiences. However, they did encounter obstacles along their way to Better Beginnings, and a number of our story-tellers spoke about challenges that the projects still must be dealt with.

The neighbourhoods in which Better Beginnings projects were placed were all low-income communities, in which many residents had experienced an adversarial relationship with community agencies, tensions with their neighbours, and the debilitating stress of poverty. Not surprisingly, these tensions were often manifested within Better Beginnings, as well as in the community outside.

One of the sources of tension experienced by some residents, particularly at the beginning of the project, was the **relationship with service providers from community agencies**. Many residents felt uncomfortable working with individuals from agencies that they had seen as powerful and threatening. This was not helped by the language and dress of some of the agency people they were to work with:

it was a lot intimidating. You just didn't feel like you belonged ... everyone dressed in suits and had this look about them, that said big-shot, and so, you just felt like you weren't involved.

She [one of the human service professionals associated with the project] kept saying we need you, we need you. And then she would bring up this "empower". What the devil is empower? But most people did not know what it meant. And she used other words too, because that's part of the lingo that goes with being educated and so on.

In some instances, the discomfort that individuals felt in relating to institutions such as schools and agencies may have stemmed from the culture from which they came:

... the parents ... were very suspicious of the school. They have such different expectations of the school. People from colonial countries expected to sort of sit there and be spoken to, not to participate. In their educational system, they have large classes and teachers, and they don't have the supplies to allow them to be as creative as they might. So, many of the ... new comer parents ... couldn't understand what was going on ... They didn't know that there was a role for them in this. So, it took a lot of work to ... begin to get them to understand that in Canada, we do like the parents to participate in that there is a role for them, that's, a totally different system.

A number of Better Beginnings communities were ethnically diverse, and some of the **ethnic tensions** in the community-at-large were also experienced within the projects:

. . there were two staff members, very rude. They told all the Chinese to go to the back of the bus. She said those seats are for them. Very rude. It was very degrading. I resent that very much. We don't know the seats are reserved for them, and they should at least asked us nicely. . . . There is another trip I overheard somebody say that this bus is not allow for Asians. They didn't want Asians on that bus . . . I'm very angry because it's not just once, it's twice and it was the same person.

you had two separate buses, (for an outing) in the way it was designed was pathetic ... Asians and Somalians on one bus and all the whites on the other. . . A lot of it had to do with the parents themselves. They sort of made it that way. We get this bus, they get that bus.

one kid had come to see what the French site was doing, because he belonged to the English site he was told that he couldn't come in because he couldn't speak French ... we have supported segregation and I think that's wrong.

Better Beginnings was only one program in the community, and could not deal with all the long-standing problems that existed in their communities. At times, residents felt that the **long-standing, continuing problems and tensions in the community** were too much for any program or agency to deal with:

They have the teen group, so that has helped to get them off the street twice a week, Wednesday and Friday I think, so my daughter goes there, she participates in that ... and all the other teens that go I guess. There are sixty-two I think, not just from this area but from the surrounding area, so it has helped them et off the streets at least twice a week, but other nights of the week its a different story. We are having cars turned over and quite a few police, and then getting on roofs and firing bottles ... twice this week that just passed, just driving like mad men. I

wish they could help stop that, I wish Better Beginnings could help stop that along with [city] housing. Only for the sake of the children, I wish they would put extra speedbumps or something like that. I mentioned it to them and they said its is not all up to them because it is [city] housing property.

You get a lot of these punks in this area who don't give a damn, they'll rip and and destroy anything and everything.

Some respondents also commented on the fact that Better Beginnings was operating in an environment in which there had been huge **cuts to social services**. This made it particularly difficult to keep a focus on prevention when people were more concerned with having enough money for basic needs such as food and shelter:

Given what's happening in [city] at large, the down-loading, the problems, the cutting of funding and so on, it's been a very difficult time, very challenging, and very worrisome to those people involved in the project who feel that the benefits that they have, would like to continue. The big issue was hunger in the community. Having some food in the school has made a difference because you always have something there that you can feed the kids. The teachers don't feel stretched to the limit because they don't have to provide food. Many schools still have that situation which is not any food provided.

Some of the challenges that Better Beginnings programs faced had to do with the nature and structure of the programs themselves. One issue that created problems in a number of the sites had to do with the **hiring of community members** to staff Better Beginnings programs, and the **distinctions between volunteer and paid staff**. When certain community members (and sometimes individuals who lived outside of the community) were offered paid staff positions, and others were not, this often created harsh feelings among those who were not offered jobs:

they say "oh my God, how come she got a job". We came before her and we didn't get the job. Sometimes they feel jealous of me. Even yesterday, one of the community members she was here before and she was talking to me. "Maybe you did flatter to them and that's why you got it." I said "no". There's no buttering up. I don't do that. I don't know how to do that. I hate that kind of thing.

I felt that there was a lot of favouritism shown to friends of friends and if the person was a volunteer or a community person that was not liked, they were let go really fast, it was almost like there was a divider between the community working and community volunteering. A lot of people were let down by Better Beginnings. A lot of people at the beginning thought they were promised things,

not only things that could help with their family, but they were also told that, they as community people, could be hired for positions. I think that some community people took that to mean, them personally, and not in general. So some people got really upset when they were overlooked and other people were hired. There was a lot of : I was good enough to volunteer and help you get the proposal and help you get the money....and now when it's time to come and hire all of the sudden I'm not good enough?

It's very difficult to stay motivated. It's very difficult for a volunteer to work in an organization where people that you work for are being paid a fairly good wage ... and I'm doing a lot of work for nothing.

Many of the Better Beginnings projects seemed to demand a great deal from their volunteers, in terms of time and commitment. Several of the respondents indicated that they had **difficulty juggling responsibilities to their families and to the project**. At times, this produced feelings of stress and burnout, particularly early on in the projects' history when there were fewer volunteers to share the workload:

[it was a challenge] to kind of organize my family life around my commitment here. By a being a stay-at-home mom, I had a lot of time on my hands and also had two small boys, so ... suddenly finding myself to juggle work and home ... took some planning, some organizing, some arranging to get things done. I remember we had many, times we met frequently and early in the morning and I would finish, you know, pretty well put in a full day, so I had to make sure meals were prepared beforehand and shopping was done ...

There was a real high level of stress, burnout ... because although other people were doing this as part of their work and they could go home after, this was part of my life, so I couldn't get a way from it...I was involved with it during the day, then I went home Better Beginnings was still in my life ...because there were only a few community people at first, I felt really stressed.

Most weeks I volunteer between 25 and 40 hours now. I was up as high as 40-60 hours a week volunteering as in Saturdays and Sundays. I have cut back somewhat because I've found I was getting burnt out, you know, I just was really feeling stressed and that, so I said, oh, the heck with it.

My husband would take (the children) and after a while he started saying no, don't do any more volunteering, I don't want to watch the kids any more because they just drive him nuts. They won't go to bed for him or anything ... he would have to call me up and say get home and just put these kids to bed.

I found my kids were saying, oh, you're going out again ... my younger one really resented the time I spent away from home.

Some of the interviewees also had difficulties with the way in which certain programs operated at their sites. A few parents who attended parent-child programs at their sites expressed concerns with the kinds of **negative parenting practices** they witnessed while attending the program. This made them uncomfortable, and reluctant to attend future sessions of the program:

[parents who disciplined their own children] were getting tired because other parents were doing nothing with their kids... it was turning into a war zone so we just said forget it we're not coming until things level out. Parents not dealing with their own kids which doesn't make your job easier - we're not coming back ... They [Better Beginnings workers] tried everything they could think of. They even tried consulting the parent, they tried telling them, listen if you're not going to take care of the children, don't come back. They would leave for about a week, two weeks to months, and then they'd come back and were back to square one again. . . . It was pretty hard to discipline kids when you got a big kids that are trying to tear the place apart. These kids are being so reckless. Sure kids are kids but there's a breaking point where, you know, being respectful of other people's property. We try to respect other people's property ... [we did not go on the apple picking trip] because a lot of the parents' children were breaking the trees.

I just find their attitudes with their kids really frustrating. Like the kids are there to please them and they get very upset when the child doesn't do something that they want and that sort of thing ... There is no respect between the parent and the child. They hit their kids, they yell at them, they swear at them and I find that very hard to deal with and that was actually one of the reasons we stopped going.

In a number of projects, it was mostly women in the community who participated in, staffed and volunteered in Better Beginnings programs. Some of the males interviewed for this report indicated that they were the only males that came to some of the programs, suggesting that, at least initially, **not enough was done to attract male participants and volunteers to the projects:**

The first year was challenging. I was the only male that went to that [Better Beginnings] class. The second year around I was still the only male.

It's been ... well, sad in a way because I'm the only man working with 15 to 20 women. We used to have meetings, our parent group, and I was the only man there, always, from day one.

One thing is we don't have males [on Better Beginnings staff]. Males were interviewed but we couldn't find any to do what we wanted, and with family visitors that was a real worry, because a man going into a single mom's home. Like how would we protect the men, let alone the other side. At the time we didn't seek that coverage, but we do now. We should have done that in the beginning, but we didn't. So no males were hired. I still would like to see some men hired.

When I first started going to the action group, there were two men on the action group, and one at first he was introducing himself as the token male. He'd been the only one for a while ... Well I had a long running battle about putting "single parents" in the paper work instead of "single mothers". I insist that there are single parents out there who are not mothers. A subtle hint that there are, that a lot of these single fathers are not being recognized... They are being recognized more. It's still taking time to get them to come out. A lot of them just feel very shut in. It's taking them longer to realize that there is something there for them ... at least, they are starting to realize that there is something there.

Some of those interviewed, despite being happy with the programs in which they were participating, were concerned with the **lack of resources in terms of funding, staffing or facilities** that they thought were necessary to operate programs at an adequate level:

one of the main difficulties we had in programming was largely because of restricted funds. It's good that we have the programs that we do have but there are so many other things, so many other issues and concerns the community has that have to be worked on. It's difficult to resolve these things. So they remain outstanding.

Playgroup was starting to get really crowded. I felt claustrophobic in there, it was really noisy! I just can't handle all this noise and this screaming and everything. Sure it was because the kids are having fun. Well poor Better Beginnings, the Playgroup is started and it's advertised in the pamphlets and everything and more and more people are starting to go but the place is too small! The kids are bumping into each other and running into each other, and you know, that's too bad because the idea of Playgroup is good.

Her [Family Visitor's] time was very tight. She had a very hard schedule she's extremely busy, they all are. They would need more hours, or more Family

Visitors to get involved. It's a great program but I feel they would need more staff doing it.

Another issue related to programming that was mentioned by a number of respondents had to do with the fact that Better Beginnings programs were focussed on younger children. They indicated that while the programs for younger children, within the targeted age ranges for the project, were sufficient, there was **little programming available for older children:**

You don't have many activities [for older children] ... The two younger ones, that's OK, but the other two, they have very little selection for children four and older.

I think it could be better if there could be programs for the older kids. I know there are programs after school for six and up, but there's nothing for five year olds. They fit in one place but not in another place. They're in the middle.

I learned about the Toy Library project when I was at home on maternity leave following the birth of my youngest child. I worked quite intensively as a volunteer to get the project off the ground. When a new position was created at Better Beginnings, I applied for the job and I was hired. I have been working in that position for the last 6 years, on an average of four days a week. From the beginning, my involvement in Better Beginnings went far beyond being just a job. My whole family has grown through our involvement with Better Beginnings.

Being independent is and has been second nature to me throughout the years. I have always worked outside the home and continue to nourish a large network of friends. On a personal level, I lived quite a difficult life. My marriage as well as my childhood were both very abusive and support of any kind was non-existent. My extended family was not tooled to provide assistance in any form to direct me positively out of an abusive marriage. They felt it was okay being that they also have extreme abusive behaviours. Their culture/beliefs are such that women should not work outside the home but remain a homemaker throughout their lives, raise the children and most of all obey their husbands at all times. Given that I haven't a character to support this style, I never fit the mold very well. After months of hard work, I have been able to leave that vicious circle and make a better life for myself and my children.

Emotionally, I was very unhappy, shy and rarely spoke to anyone. I was safe inside my shell. 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. I enrolled in the Arts program at Ottawa University on a part-time basis. I must say that my employment had a lot to do with my returning to school. It gave me self confidence, it helped me think that I was good enough, that I was good at what I was doing. This included my job, my abilities to succeed in school, as well as life in general. I remember speaking with my boss, and she put her hand on my shoulder, she said “I believe in you”. She stated that she had confidence in my abilities and she knew I could do whatever I set out to do. To some, this may be a statement that would go unnoticed, but to me, it was hope. This became an extremely important part of me. From that time on, I continued my struggles to change my direction in life. Little by little, I began feeling the stability in my person. My self-esteem was beginning to shine.

Support is the key that encouraged the changes. My values as well as how I choose to educate my children has always been encouraged and supported by my work environment. It is easy to get advice from my colleagues about my children. If I happen to be having a bad day with them, I simply ask what I can do. Advice flows freely from whoever I may be with, and it underlined that I can learn from all difficult situations or conflict I may be living. In the past, without the support I now cherish, a difficult situation would have only brought back the “abusive behaviour” I had been through, but instead of not knowing how to handle a situation, I have had access to the tools necessary to implement adequate behaviour changes in children. That has relieved me of a great amount of stress. Better Beginnings has affected many areas of our lives. It helps me stimulate and encourage my boys to continue their learning process in the french language. Better Beginnings has also contributed to maintaining the pride of our heritage in our mother tongue. 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 Journey: Satisfying, Meaningful and Rewarding Experiences

1. Benefits for Ourselves

The individuals who were interviewed reported a wide range of benefits that they had derived from their participation in the project. Foremost amongst these benefits was the **sense of confidence and control** that Better Beginnings participants felt, that allowed them to speak out when they had something to say, and to take charge of their lives:

I really learned to talk to people ... I was afraid because when you don't know how to approach people you don't know how to talk to them. I learned that there's nothing to be afraid of. You have to try and you can do it. I think I learned that. If you want to do it you can do it.

I learned that if I can't handle everything then I can say NO. Before, I used to say, well I have to do this I have to do this, even though I couldn't do ... everything. But now I learned it's okay to say no when you can't handle everything. . I was so quiet and now I can do things and I don't hold back anymore.

Before I came, I was shy. I didn't talk to men even. There were some bad things in me. After coming in this project I feel self-confidence. I can speak to anybody. I can go anywhere. Before I was so scared how I can go there. Now I have confidence. Better Beginnings gave me this confidence. Made me a different [person]. Now I think I'm standing on my own feet.

Better Beginnings gave me more confidence because now I am doing the Parenting Group and before I would have never led a group, not in my whole life. And I am going into a Theatre group and I never would have done that before. And now getting involved in that Parenting group which I never would have done before, you know, it's a group of people there and me at the front talking. And learning how to use a flip chart and everything. It's going good. And I am just feeling more confident, not being shy.

I felt valued and it gave me confidence in myself ... I'm really alive, I'm not just breathing air. I'm happy about my life and no matter what's happening with my family.

The 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.

since I've been involved with Better Beginnings ... I'm definitely ... more vocal, I'm not shy, I'm not afraid to speak my mind ... I'm not afraid to approach new people in new situations, whereas before I was. I'm a stronger person. I'm more outgoing. Before I was always shy and people always kind of thought I was just stuck up or didn't want to have anything to do with them or didn't want to be involved, but now I'm not shy.

In addition to enhanced feelings of confidence and control, several respondents reported that their involvement with Better Beginnings gave them **enhanced self-esteem and a sense of purpose** in life:

[Since being involved in Better Beginnings] it has changed to the extent that I can get out of bed in the morning and begin [the day], and I feel good about myself. That's something I'd never experienced. I'd never had the feeling I was a worthwhile person, or that I was doing worthwhile things.

It's given me a lot of experience with being independent and feeling good about myself ... thinking that I'm somebody instead of when I thought I was going to be on welfare forever because I couldn't find a job.

I get up in the morning, make sure my hair looks good, put my blazer on, look real business ... I used to have a shopping bag for my briefcase ... and then when I came in with a briefcase, that was so hilarious, everyone thought well _____ graduated from a shopping bag to a brief case. I felt so incredibly worthwhile.

It's 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.

It [being involved in Better Beginnings] gave me self-esteem. I can say so, because I'm able to do things I didn't think I'd be able to do. Because I'd never done them.

The feelings of confidence and control, and the enhanced self-esteem and sense of purpose that respondents reported experiencing, seemed to come from many things. In part, it came from the **satisfaction from helping others** that they experienced while working on the project:

It is so satisfying, it's the nicest thing that can happen, when I take a child, work with a child that was really behind, or didn't have their language, and then a year later, I'm looking, this is the same child ... and by March, these kids are saying, 'I've got it, I've got it' ... I would like to think of it made a tremendous impact on just about any lives that it touched ... I think there's something that's very catching, that I would have liked to think that I passed on. And I know sometimes from comments that kids make, and parents too have indicated that yes, I think I made a difference in a lot of lives. And, I'm hoping that in the years to come, parents and children well remember ... that I knew this woman and she did this or she said that there really did make a difference to them. In terms of what I got from that

personally, and what people have received, I don't even think it's possible to tell it all. I think it's quite a lot.

I feel happy about volunteering because I feel I'm personally helping others.

...the most enjoyable, of course, is fundraising because I get to meet all the people in the neighbourhood ... knowing full well that the money I raise, every penny, goes towards something for our community.

My contribution was to give my time for the community ... at the end of the week, I could say, 'I don't work, I've no money coming in, but I help [with the project]. I give my time for nothing. And that's just as good. At least you give what you can. I can give my time. It doesn't cost me anything, but it gives me a lot of things.

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

Enhanced self-worth and self-esteem also came from gains that respondents had made in **work skills that furthered their career and educational development:**

It's like going to college ... its hands-on experience. Most people who go to college can get the theory part of it, you know, just theory, but ... hands-on is just, just so different, and, to me, I received a college degree in terms of the skills I learned, you know chairing committees, writing letters, ... going to events and meetings and actually making presentations, so it improves your speaking skills, takes away your fear to talk ... to a large crowd, and knowing ... regardless of how many people are sitting out there looking at you, you can handle this ... it was a job, it really was a job. . . . The benefits and the rewards, better than the job. I don't think I ... would have learned all I learned had I gone to college for that four years ... and also the more you learn, the more you feel capable, because I went back and took many workshops.

Before I became a member of this [Better Beginnings] administrative board, I'd never experienced anything of the kind before. I didn't know what it was to be the director of an administrative board. I didn't know what the duties were.

... through the use of the computer there, I was able to bring up my computer skills that I hadn't had before. I had typed on a typewriter but never used a computer before. I practiced how to use Windows. I had never used a Windows environment before.

I used to hate stuff like [public speaking] .. but I felt kind of good last week when I did the debate and I thought, you know, there's no way if Better Beginnings hadn't got me used to doing this public speaking ... if it hadn't been for that I wouldn't have been able to debate the same way.

It's something I'd always wanted to do [working with children], but I never thought it was possible because, of course, I've no qualifications ... That wasn't what I set out to do when I was young ... And I see that it will be possible, not remote ... I can almost touch it.

Many of the respondents who were interviewed not only acquired work skills and training through Better Beginnings, but they also obtained **paid employment** through the project. This often provided an important supplement to their income, as well as being a source of pride, gratification and enhanced self-esteem:

I'd never have thought that six years later [i.e., six years after her initial involvement with the project] it would be me that would be hired. Wow! Something I can do. And then, really, I'm not so bad at it. I have a lot of fun! Now, I'm [formally recognized as the person] in charge of what I do.

In addition, a number of interviewees indicated that they had gained **greater knowledge about community resources** that were available to them and to their children, and **greater comfort and confidence in dealing with community agencies**:

it's made me feel more comfortable, like getting, being involved in the school with ... the teacher, because we ... parents are able to be in the school.

And through working at Better Beginnings, I found a lot of resources that I never knew of before, like I found Big Sisters ... I also found [a camp program] for my son to go camping every summer ... I am finding out different agencies and stuff through Better Beginnings. I find now there are a lot more people using the programs. I guess it's with Better Beginnings staff encouraging their families. The programs are there, use them! Plus I find that families have a better relationship with [local housing agency]. Better Beginnings is connecting them in a nicer way. Rather than the family calling the Housing yelling and screaming, I find we encourage the families, 'You be nice to them, they will be nice to you.' And it works!

I would have been lost if Better Beginnings hadn't been here when I got here, because I was new to the country, I couldn't communicate with anyone, and I didn't know any services in the community. But being in this neighbourhood with

Better Beginnings, has allowed me to learn more about services, be independent and do things on my own.

We've got better relations with agencies and there's been a whole lot of difference in the neighbourhood now people know there's places they can go, there's people they can talk to and then those people can put them where they need to go or who they have to talk to ... When they see somebody from welfare sitting at the same table with you, they've proven that they're ordinary people. They're just like you and I and they have a job to do.

Some of the interviewees also talked about how their experiences with Better Beginnings had produced **greater political awareness and a feeling of empowerment:**

doing public speaking, like to the Premier of Ontario ... as I got to learn more about how political the lives of people are who are living in poverty, the more I wanted to do something to try and change that.

at the beginning the building was falling apart and housing wasn't doing anything. My kids have asthma and the paint was coming off and cracking. . . I guess working for Better Beginnings gave me the courage to go ... by working for them I learned that you do have a right to go to housing and tell them you have the right to fix something you rent. . . When before, you know, I used to think that this is subsidized housing and I'm just glad that I have this place and I never thought to like to go to them and tell them and say, look you don't do this I'm going to do this! Better Beginnings gave me the courage to know that I can do it. My place is better than it was before.

I've done I don't know how many public speeches. [We have] written a lot of articles for the newspapers and stuff we haven't done before, I've written articles [for three different newspapers]. Public speaking or speeches and that for different events that Better Beginnings had going...things like going down to Queen's Park and standing up and giving speeches, stand up to government for some things...

Before I was involved in Better Beginnings, you would have to give me a hint if you asked me who the Prime Minister was, I mean I was just so uninvolved ... nothing that was happening in the government was affecting me. But through them it kind of opened my eyes and it helped me realize that I can participate in the outcome of my future ... have control in that. I don't have to just let things happen to me. I can help change things and ... even if things don't necessarily change, at least I'll know that I didn't sit by and let people walk all over me or let the government walk all over me. At least ... I got a voice. I think having a voice is really important, and when people listen to you, it feels really good.

Several of those who were interviewed talked about the close **friendships** they had made through their participation in the project, and how Better Beginnings had helped to break the isolation they had experienced and given them a sense of belonging and support:

... it has made a difference because I have made a lot of very good friends that I could really depend on ... that if I'm not there one day and something should happen to my kids, I could easily call the people here to take care of my kids before I get there ... We have ... made friends to the point that we're more like a family, like we're beyond friendship ... we're like family ... we work very closely together ... whatever problems we have, there's someone that we can talk to.

I was made to feel very comfortable. It [Better Beginnings] was like a family to start out with, almost ... It was very, very, very warm.

[If it were not for the project] I wouldn't have any friends, I wouldn't have a working group ... I'd be lost, maybe I wouldn't be here any more.

Better Beginnings is like an extended family. Instead of phoning my mother all the time, I could talk to anybody you know, friends I've met down here or anybody else. Its a strange feeling you know to actually have that many people to turn to.

I would fight tooth and nail to keep Better Beginnings. It's my family. It's my extended family. I don't have anyone in the city. I don't have anyone here. I have lots of friends but no family. They have become my extended family... They're not judgmental. Not at all. They're not prejudiced, nothing... [Better Beginnings people] will all go beyond the call of duty. They're not, they will never be any agency. Agencies are cold.

Several of the projects were in communities where many of the residents spoke little English, and some of the interviewees talked about how their being unable to converse with people in their own language contributed to their sense of isolation. Better Beginnings helped break the isolation that many of these individuals felt, by bringing together people who spoke the same language, and who had the same cultural background:

To be able to talk to people who speak the same language as you, who have the same concerns as you ... You say a thing and they'll understand you, and what's more, they'll give you feedback on what you say.

For many of those interviewed, the greatest benefit they received from Better Beginnings was much-needed **support during times of stress and crisis** that helped them cope successfully with difficult life events and situations:

Just having someone to share, someone to talk to. When my husband lost his job he went back to school. Well that whole year I was practically a single parent and I found that very hard to cope with. School all day, studying all night and then he was like in a crash course, so he didn't have really have much time for his family ... it was very hard ... She [the Family Visitor] was a good ear to lean on, that hour or two, it was like gold to me.

I don't have any family, I haven't seen any family for a long time, since I was fifteen. I really needed support, someone to talk to, because my marriage wasn't going well and I didn't know how to get out of it, and I didn't feel good about going through that alone. My Family Visitor came at a good time. I think she started coming twice a week. She helped me pack and blow my nose...I went through a lot when I was young, and having a baby brought that out right into my face. I really needed someone to talk to. I found that my Family Visitor replaced my Mom really ... [Better Beginnings] gave me a small family that I didn't have. And I think that I'm not alone in that situation, with no family around, no support. It gave me a cushion. Now you can go to bed thinking that someone knows who you are, and someone likes you, its less scary. .. For a person who felt all alone and who was afraid of not offering enough to my child, and not being able to offer him any uncles and aunts, well, I am offering him a whole community, and a whole world of resources!

it has to tally changed my life. I don't know ... where I'd be if I hadn't had their support. When I think back to it I think that there was a good possibility that I might have had a nervous breakdown and be hospitalized ... I was feeling suicidal as well ... but I was also afraid that the kids if I couldn't take care of them that they would go to their father, who I didn't think was and I still don't think that he is capable of taking care of the children.

In addition to receiving support in terms of someone to talk to during difficult times, Better Beginnings staff and volunteers also provided **concrete support** to residents, helping them gain access to food, shelter, clothing, transportation and other needed items and services:

at the beginning she [the Family Visitor] used to put me in touch with different places. She told me all about the food banks that were around, and I'm not one to use them, but I had to use them a few times. She asked me if I knew of all places that were available for help for my kids.

And there are people who don't have cars and if they don't have cars people should take the bus, but people don't have money for the bus. So they took the Better Beginnings bus, like that bus would pick up a load of people and take them to get food or whatever. That's why I think that it is rougher in the other places because

they don't have that support or the care that Better Beginnings has in their community. Better Beginnings tries really hard to help everybody as much as they can on such a small budget.

They helped me enroll my son in school and even helped me open my first bank account ... At the beginning, I started taking ESL classes, and Better Beginnings paid for the child care for a long time. I'm still taking ESL courses now ... For the first couple of years I was very dependent on Better Beginnings. They did all my paperwork, especially with schools and with Immigration Canada. Now I can handle my correspondence because my language skills have improved and my paperwork isn't as difficult as before. I'm now a Landed Immigrant.

2. Benefits for Our Children and Our Families

In telling their stories, many of the Better Beginnings residents whom we interviewed talked about the benefits their children experienced through participation in the project. Better Beginnings provided opportunities for children that would normally not have been available to them had the project not been operating in their communities. For example, children were involved in a host of **activities (trips, creative activities, plays) that they would have been unlikely to experience without the project:**

They had a pumpkin ride ... the kids loved it, they enjoyed it. They were exhausted by the time we got home ... they would go for nature walks and they could try to find certain things in life like, for instance, an old bird's nest ... It's good because it gets the whole family out of the house, out of the [neighbourhood] ... It gets the whole family out ... gets them lots of fresh air that kids so desperately need.

For the last two years I've gone to [Better Beginnings country retreat], I love going there! It reminds me of Somalia because of the animals and the kind of life, it reminds me of home. And it was free, there was no money involved, even the food, everything was free!

the families got together and did the camp-out [a native camping experience]. So I got to do things ... that I wouldn't have had money to do. They helped cut down a lot of barriers. They provided equipment and tents and stuff that I didn't have or couldn't afford.

My kids have something to do, somewhere to go ... [Now] I can say, OK, good ... it's a day off, we can go to Better Beginnings ... I like it, when they are interested in something else than just being at home, watching for the twentieth time some

film they got for Christmas or something ... And the children see things they maybe wouldn't have had the opportunity to see if Better Beginnings hadn't set it up.

Several of the interviewees also talked about how the project had provided their children **opportunities to play with and interact with other children**, helping reduce their children's sense of social isolation and improving their social skills:

Playgroup was good because it gave my son a chance to learn and mingle with new kids and it also gave me the chance to meet with other parents and exchange different ideas. I thought that Playgroup was quite good because he was my first child so he needed other kids to play with. I think it made a difference in his life by preparing him to go to Nursery School and school. I think he is a better person because he shares and he likes playing with kids and you know he's not a fighting kid. I brought him every day until he started Nursery School. He never wanted to leave.

My baby enjoyed playing there with different toys and all the other children and I enjoyed the warmth that we feel at baby day and I feel welcome and have the opportunity to see many other mothers who have babies and I thought baby day is our time ... When I say to him, we're going now to the [project], he laughs and he says, Mommy put on my jacket ... he's very happy.

According to many of the resident parents who were interviewed, their children also benefited greatly from the **emotional and other forms of support provided by Better Beginnings staff members**:

... kids drop in ... often [to Better Beginnings]. Like if they have a problem, they will drop in and ask to speak to the Project Coordinator. Even the little kids. Like this one kid, he stopped in, like he's running away from home because nobody loves him. And I said, 'Well, everybody here loves you' He was going to school all by himself on a big school bus, so I connected him with a little girl, who said he could sit with her on the bus, she would make sure he got to school okay. And then the Project Coordinator went to visit him at school one day and he was so happy and proud.

[my daughter] can trust them [Better Beginnings staff] with whatever she is going through ... I recently separated from my husband and there's been a couple of tearful outbursts that she has taken to the staff and they could call me aside afterwards and say, you know, this is what's going on and I'm much better able to deal with it rather than having her bottle it up inside ... So, I'm working with them to make sure she gets through it okay.

Several parents who were interviewed also mentioned that Better Beginnings staff had provided **referrals for their children's health problems**. Parents often sought help from Better Beginnings staff, who helped find an appropriate source of professional or community assistance. In a number of instances, it was the Better Beginnings staff person who identified the difficulty that the child was experiencing, and then helped the parent with a referral:

Once my son was constipated, I phoned her, [the Family Visitor] and she brought me a lot of recipes to give him, natural things to give him. It was good to get help at that time because I didn't want take him to the doctor ... it still wasn't anything really to worry about. He needed something to help him.

... my son had a hearing problem, because he was only two and a half and too young for me to know. It was the nursery school who identified the problem. They called me and the Family Visitor Coordinator and we went together, and they asked all kinds of questions. So I found out he has a hearing problem. Now he wears a hearing aid and with the help of my Family Visitor, he sees his doctor regularly, once a week. The doctor has the Better Beginnings telephone number to call if there is something that needs to be talked about.

The parents we interviewed noticed a wide range of **improvements in their children, from changes in their behaviour and social skills, to greater confidence and independence, to improved language and cognitive development**, which they attributed to their children's participation in Better Beginnings programs:

When I brought my baby here, she became not so shy, not afraid of people. So I know this is good for her.

Better Beginnings got my daughter off my hip. It made her more independent, and she is doing pretty good.

[after getting services, preschool resources, daycare] she's learning to talk which everyone thought she was going to have to have speech therapy but we never ended up with it.

My daughter was shy, unsure of herself. Well, maybe the fact she volunteered [with Better Beginnings] that showed her how to have initiative, to look after herself, to have self-confidence, and to be able to answer when she was spoken to, to talk to people, to come out of her shell and to say: 'OK, I see I can contribute something'.

I find kids are different too. Even my own children. They were not in the Better Beginnings target age group, but my kids attended meetings, lots of kids did.

They sit in, and they listen and so on. So I found my own children standing up and speaking up. They're becoming much more formal and their vocabulary changes, a lot of things like that. They are more forward because they would hear me standing up and say yes, I want such and such, and this is how we are going to do it, and this is my idea and I would push. They became more like that, and I found that in the school's now into that the kids, the older kids, Better Beginnings participants, there a lot of them, they're more forward in what they do and they are more go-getters.

A number of parents also talked about how their children's involvement in the project **enhanced children's feelings of cultural pride and awareness**, through involvement in a variety of language and cultural programs:

My daughter is half native, and because I have no contact with her father, and because Better Beginnings was offering the concept of working together in finding out about other cultures, that fit into my hopes and my dreams for my daughter to learn more about her culture and being white myself I didn't have that knowledge or the experience to share with her, so she would have been missing out that part of her life....I was able to let her experience stuff that would be beneficial to her about learning about her culture ... like the native craft program, the native language at her school.

when I first started working here, no child would admit that they were native, not one of them ... the native community educated those of us who were working with the kids and not only the native people saying they were proud to be native, so were the English, the French and other people saying be proud of who you are, no matter what.

I notice a lot, from year to year, that if I wasn't working in a francophone environment [at Better Beginnings] the language my children speak would be entirely different.

In addition to benefitting directly from their own involvement with Better Beginnings programs, the parent respondents indicated that their children were also benefitting indirectly from the supports that they, the parents, received from the project which produced **greater knowledge about child-rearing and improved parenting skills**:

She [the Family Visitor] told me about how the baby develops, and about the food and everything. Nutrition. The developmental stages. She gave me many books to read. She referred me to the parents' drop-in . . . At least I know how the child grows up . . . The development. . . Recently, when my baby had chicken pox, she gave me a lot of books on how to take care of her and things. I think this is a

good program. Without this program, I think it's a lot worse especially to us Chinese ... Before, I didn't know a lot of things. I need this kind of information to help me, to support me. For the children. I still have to learn because my baby is still small.

[it was] a living hell... each kid wanted attention, more than the rest of them ... it [Better Beginnings program on parenting skills] taught us how to do different kinds of discipline without doing any harm to them so now we're letting them do their own things.

So I take all the skills and the techniques and I take them home, and it makes me, it forces me to make sure my kid's homework is done, I look it over and I assist in any way I can ... So it doesn't matter how exhausted I am, it doesn't matter if I get in at 6:30, and all I need is a quiet corner with a cup of tea, I tell myself I can get back at 9:30, let me spend some time with the kids. It doesn't matter how many problems I have, whatever, once I get home, I put it aside in a corner and I say, you know, to my kids, 'How are you, how was your day?' ... really talk to them, so they know someone cares... And so those are skills that I learned and so I apply it to my job, and I apply it to my house.

Better Beginnings has helped in the way that I raise my kids, with my daughter being so difficult, we used to always get into arguments. Like me and her, we would get into some major arguments. But now, with Better Beginnings, and the training and learning to give choices and not be so demanding, it's gotten better. So it helps in my family life for one thing ... more parents are going to Parent Teacher interviews. And the kids are more proud because their Moms are going. They had one a couple of weeks ago at my son's school. Well, the Better Beginnings bus driver had to do three busloads to get parents to this and before you would never see parents, like last year we did one busload. And all these kids are so excited, 'My Mom is coming!' or 'My Dad is coming!'

[my daughter] had gone through a lot of counseling, she'd gone through [names of counseling centres]. She was a very difficult child, and I was raised different too so I guess maybe it could have a lot to do with my own bringing up and I didn't know a lot about parenting skills. I needed to know more about it than what I did. And with Better Beginnings, they taught me to become a better parent, how to interact with your children without having to spank' em and yell at 'em. Now I wish I had done it with my first because I'm having a lot of problems with my first one and she is now 13 years old.

...my parents never spanked me and my sister, they used to knock our heads together as if that was better than spanking...I just grew up thinking that, that was

acceptable, that's what's going to happen if you are bad, you get a spanking or a slap, or whatever. If I hadn't taken the Nobody's Perfect program I would have just resorted to spanking as a discipline or even sitting in the corner with their face to the wall or something... These guys don't know that [being humiliated]. Because they have their times-outs or they have privileges taken away from them or things like that as a form of punishment. So that makes me feel good that I can do that and that I don't turn into one of those people that I see still around here that are just yelling at their kids constantly. Just yelling at them or ignoring them.

I've learned a lot about nutrition through Better Beginnings. I always assumed it was OK to give the kids canned spaghetti or whatever, it was easy. Hot dogs, Kraft dinner and stuff, it's easy, you know. They ate it. I think that they [Better Beginnings] [talked about] the research results that came out talking about the poor nutrition children in this area. That's why the nutrition working group started and from there it was the basic self, food box, now there is a dry food co-op starting now and the newsletter committee...

I have a family that I visited when I first got involved in Better Beginnings. When I went into the house, you couldn't see the floor. Couldn't see the table. You couldn't see anything in the house for the dirt and the garbage, and just the way they were living. They didn't have the skills or know better, and for a long, long time, CAS was heavily involved with this family. After a lot of hours, a lot of hours, my time and their time together, we even actually stopped meeting at their home for a while because I was strong enough within myself to say, I'm not comfortable with visiting in this mess anymore. We'll visit at the plaza until you clean up this pigsty, that's what I referred to it as. And I think they were shocked that I said that and they phoned me three weeks later and they said we can visit at the home. And I said OK, I went to the home. It was amazing. They had been up all weekend. They did it together. They cleaned, they washed the floors, they got rid of all the garbage. Put all the furniture where belongs, and with my help, they kept up that way of living. CAS closed the file on this family a year ago, a little over a year ago... I know I have made a difference in this family's life. When they moved out of this area I went to do one final visit. They have a beautiful house, everything was in order. This is also a family that went from eating chocolate bars, cookies, junk food 24 hours a day to opening up their fridge now and they have the carrot sticks, celery sticks, Mom makes muffins, there's not soda pop, there's juice, there's not even freshie ... and I think of that family and I think they'll never go back to the way they were. This is also a Mom that successfully breast fed her second child, again because of the support of Better Beginnings. And their first child was drinking Coke out of a bottle at four months old. Was drinking Coke and Pepsi. The second child at 7 months was still breast feeding because of the

support. Oh, a major change in this family, major, major changes ... and I don't think they will ever go back.

A number of parents also commented that the project had given them much-needed **emotional support and respite from the demands of caring for their children**, which also benefitted their children indirectly:

you can get two hours respite, they call it, so you can put the kids over there and if you have to go to the doctor or something, wherever you want to go and you want to get some time off they do that for you. In general, I have a better outlook on life. Their help, their support, the bread donations that are given over there, that helps me, the clothing helps me, the nurse helps me, it all helps me in all the ways to have a better life.

I honestly thought I ought to get rid of my kids. And not because I didn't love my kids but I was starting to feel like I was an awful mother. Rotten. I don't deserve to have these kids in some ways. But my attitude has changed, you know, that was just the depression basically. You don't realize it until you get somebody who can look at it through another perspective ... [the counseling and Family Visitor] was a great support system ... and I really needed it. It fell at a very good time.

Some parents indicated that their own involvement in Better Beginnings helped them become **better role models for their children**:

[my children] can see the involvement... I think that the more involved you are, the more likely they're to be involved in things and they can see how it benefits us ... it all affects the family, you know, if they see that their mother is involved.

The parents may have been sitting at home on welfare or mother's allowance for whatever reason, even people with good jobs are losing them and going on welfare. But these parents all of a sudden went back to school. So the kids saw this, Mom and Dad went back to school, I think I better stay in school.

Other parents talked about how **improvements in their own self-esteem, satisfaction in and appreciation for life were transmitted to their children**:

If I feel good, the children are going to feel good too. If I can get things for myself, automatically I'll pass them on to the children ... confidence, education ...

Taken together, all of the changes that parents saw in their children and in their own capabilities as parents made them **more hopeful about their children's future**:

My kids do have a future; their kids are not going to be born in poverty, and you know they're not going to have ... the ragged clothes, the hand-me-down stuff, the food bank business, all that stuff... there is hope that they can be really good contributors to society as well.

3. Benefits for Our Communities

In addition to talking about themselves and their families, many of the people who told their stories talked about their communities, as well. Several individuals said that their whole community was enhanced by the presence of Better Beginnings in their neighbourhood. A number of residents, for example, said that their involvement in the project gave them a **better understanding of other cultures**. This awareness and understanding, in turn, resulted in **decreased levels of racism and racial conflict** in their communities:

We go in to socialize amongst other families, to adjust more with other children from different cultures and different backgrounds, because we try to get our kids used to other people that live on this planet and not to be racist ... our oldest one [daughter] used to be very racist with Asians. So, we broke her out of it ... And the group of five that are at her table [at school] are all Asians and she gets along with them.

I think that Better Beginnings has helped a lot and makes a difference because it tries to pull the community more together with the Playgroup and then those different types of meetings. If I hadn't gotten involved with Better Beginnings I wouldn't know as many people, or I would probably know a lot of people but probably in the wrong crowd. Because Better Beginnings is so positive and non-racial. I mean you have got whites and blacks, you can tell that it is community-oriented. And you can tell that they are just people just like us with different values or different whatever but I mean we are all the same.

Maybe I was a little racist before. Maybe it scared me, and when you go to the community Centre and they are there, they give you a little smile and they don't know how to talk to you, it's less scary. I know their culture, I heard them talk, I know the problems that they have, so I'm less tempted to judge them. I'm even tempted to have discussions with them and meet them. I find that a program like that mixes up the cultures well. It's less difficult to cross the bridge - it's like it breaks the barriers.

I am learning English, at first I talked with Canadian women. I am learning about the Canadian culture and other cultures, too ... it is not only important to me, it is important to my son because I think he learns too.

A number of those interviewed talked about issues relating to their feeling of safety in their neighbourhoods, and commented on how they felt that their **communities had become more safe and secure places** for themselves and their children:

I think people feel safer too with Better Beginnings here. The Project Coordinator has a big part in that, because she did a lot of work with getting the police to come into the community and work with the kids. I guess the more the people get to know each other the more they feel safe too.

[Better Beginnings] has gotten a lot of the teen boys involved, like they help her out doing work at Better Beginnings. And that has helped too because those were the guys that were out stealing cars and stuff. It's a lot better now that they are all volunteering, like there is not trouble, you hardly ever hear of a break-in or stuff like that. And it used to be really bad, but it's improving.

One of the things that I know that it has done for my daughter is that it's a guaranteed safe house. If something were to happen here, you know coming home from school or whatever, the house is open until 4:30 and so if I ended up going grocery shopping and I didn't end up making it back in time for the school bus, she would always check at home and the next place she would go to would be Better Beginnings to see if I was there ... This is a place in the neighbourhood that I consider safe for her to go to, because when she was really little, this wasn't a safe neighbourhood, at all. The only time you saw the cops was when they were coming to get a bad guy. Now, when you see the cops in there, it's like a community thing going on, completely different.

We're a much stronger community, much stronger. I mean we've done endless things. [One of the Better Beginnings residents], there, she gets people to go around and get petitions and things from the city council. We have that four way stopping flashing light at the bottom of the hill. A little boy was killed here. We have our other stop signs and things too. We've gone out there and fought for it. We fought for our community but it also hits the press and it's been done. Better Beginnings did it right.

When I taught ballet years ago, kids would come and smash the windows, throw things at my students. Now you've got the Neighbourhood Watch and so on. But the people are learning to speak up... People are encouraged to say something and go for help. Even if they don't do it directly, at least they will speak to someone on the issue and handle it. I find you can walk the streets more, I don't have a problem with it... I'm on the court community committee for the Youth diversion program, and we have kids coming in there and the majority of them are in detention in other communities, not here.

Several interviewees talked about the **sense of connection with the people in their community** that they now had, and attributed this sense of connection to the presence of Better Beginnings:

There's definitely been lots of changes here. It's a lot quieter, people are talking to their next door neighbours no matter what race they are. I have participants that are visiting with their neighbours no matter what race they are ... visiting with their neighbours and they never would have before. Last year we had a potluck here at the Community Centre put on by Better Beginnings and the Tenants Association. And we had one family who came over for the potluck, that had lived here for eight years, and that was the first time they ever set foot in the Community Centre. I was on the association and I could never get them out to anything, but they came to this potluck! It was amazing! I think that's because Better Beginnings is around, and people know it. I think 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, They exchange, you know, tit for tat, 'Watch my kids this time and I'll watch yours next time.' Or two of them will go out and do groceries together so that there are two adults watching the kids because the kids will go crazy! And they have adult company.

I haven't really met anybody at the Centre that I didn't like so it's nice now that I can walk down the street or drive down the street in this area and say, hey, there's so and so. I know a lot of people.

I felt so much support. I could just walk over to the Centre any time I wanted and chitchat, grab a cup of coffee, run again ... I loved the neighbourhood ... quiet times with acquaintances and sharing a yard and helping.

It's a lot quieter and people are pretty respectful. And we know each other, like I know a fair amount of people around her. If they need stuff, they can come her or if they need help they can go to X ... there's a connection. If people have problems they can phone and have people to talk to ... You'll drive by a house for sale and you'll think, that's a nice house for sale and then I'll go, but it's not in the Better Beginnings neighbourhood and I really don't want to leave, because it's working so well here ... We did it because it was the best for the neighbourhood, not because it was up to us personally.

You can sit out in the backyard and people come over and, you know, how are you doing, and people remember when the kids were little and it goes back to all the

different parties that they've had, the barbecues they've had, all those things you know, the kind of little things that brighten up your life along the way.

I'm not going to let this fall by the wayside as I've seen too many changes. Too many positive changes. Big changes in the community. People stand up in front of groups of people, and television, or anything else, and 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. They want to be in Better Beginnings, they want to be part of what's happening.

A number of respondents said that their **neighbourhood had become physically cleaner and more attractive**, partly through Better Beginnings initiatives, and partly because residents were beginning to feel a greater sense of ownership and pride in their communities:

You also see, like last summer, there was a lot more people taking care of their back and front yards better, planting flowers.

[a neighbourhood playground] was the closest physical playground to us but it was an abandoned dump and now it is a safe place to be in. ...the kids know their value and I get talking to some of the kids and they are very concerned that there is garbage on the streets. ...I still see adults throwing garbage, shopping carts, garbage into the creek. But, I don't think I see kids doing that.

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 ...

I came to Canada from Somalia 4 years ago, when I was 17 years old. I am a single mother of two-year-old twin boys. When I moved to this neighbourhood I was four months pregnant, and I didn't know anything about pregnancy. I didn't know anybody in the neighbourhood, and my family warned me that it was a bad area. When I first moved here, I couldn't go out, I'm too scared. I couldn't go out after 6:00 PM. I stayed home, I can't buy milk, I can't buy anything. If I hear any sounds or talking, I want to go to the bed and sleep. I couldn't even open the door, I couldn't wash the window.

A Public Health Nurse told me about Better Beginnings. The Better Beginnings staff came to my apartment and told me about the different programs. I started with Better Beginnings by going to the Prenatal group. Before, when I didn't have the Prenatal or

Better Beginnings, it was confusing and all. Sometimes I would sit in my house and watch TV and say to myself, 'you don't have nobody to help you, you don't have no one to talk to you, what are you doing?' Better Beginnings gave me a lot of experience. I don't have any mother, I don't have any father. I don't have any sister, you know. When I had Prenatal, I had everything. I didn't worry anymore. Better Beginnings gave me a video about having twins to watch to help me understand what was happening inside me. The Nurse explained everything about pregnancy, and I liked that. I felt comfortable, and then I talked with other pregnant women, and we learned from each other.

After my babies were born, a Family Visitor came to my place every week. She is from Somalia too, and she speaks my language. She told me all about other neighbours from the same culture, and African community groups. I met all my friends through the Prenatal and Postnatal program. I know about 8-10 Somalian people. The first time I went to the group, everybody sat and just watched. The second time, they asked me to sit with them, we talk about where we live, our families, we become friends. I like to meet lots of people, it is very good for me.

My kids made lots of friends at Better Beginnings. It is fun for them because they have other kids to play with there, and they can play with different toys. They like to meet new people. We went to pick-your own farms, and we used the toy and equipment lending library. I cooked Somalian food for special events.

One of my boys has asthma and we had to get out of our apartment because with his asthma and with twin boys, it was hard getting up and down the stairs in our apartment building - there was no elevator. My Family Visitor helped me to explain to Housing why I needed to move, and we got the transfer. Now we are in a different neighbourhood, but I can't forget [the old neighbourhood]. When I lived there, I lived like a normal person. I could do anything. I had someone to call every day. When I had a problem, I called Prenatal to help me, if there's anything I want for my children. I can't forget [my old Better Beginnings community]. I miss it.

The End of the Journey: A Better Future

The stories our respondents shared with us were as unique and varied as the people themselves. Despite differences in culture, language, gender and background, however, the tone of the stories, and the feelings they expressed about the project, were similar in many respects. The majority of those we interviewed had experienced a hard life prior to their involvement in the project. Many of them had emigrated from other countries and had experienced economic hardship and isolation because of language and cultural barriers. Others were isolated because of a combination of poverty and a lack of affordable and accessible activities in their communities. These hardships had affected both them and their children. Their children were also isolated, and lacked opportunities to learn and to interact with other children. Contributing to their isolation, and to the feelings of distress and despair that many described, were the communities they lived in. The story-tellers described their communities as places that were physically unattractive, had high levels of crime and violence, and were rife with ethnic tension.

From the stories that the interviewees told, one obtains a picture of the projects' beginnings as a truly grass-roots venture. Outreach appeared to be an important component of almost every Better Beginnings project. Residents heard about the project through neighbours, staff members, teachers, service providers, relatives, and friends, as well as through Better Beginnings flyers and newsletters. They were approached in their homes, in parks, at their children's schools, and many other places. They began by participating in a single program, such as a parent-child drop-in, or a family visiting program, and eventually (for many) became involved in other programs, as well as volunteering, helping to raise funds, serving on committees, and working as paid staff (among other things).

Their relationship with Better Beginnings was not always an easy one. Particularly in the early years of the projects, participants reported experiencing some difficulties in their relationships with service providers from the community, ethnic tension, and burn-out from the many different things they were asked to do. One particularly thorny issue, which still occasionally plagues a number of the projects, had to do with the hiring of community members as paid staff. Individuals not hired for staff positions often felt that their contribution to the projects was not valued as much as those made by individuals who were hired as staff.

While issues such as these at times produced considerable tension, almost all the stories that people told were filled with experiences that brought them feelings of joy, satisfaction and fulfilment. They talked, often in glowing terms, of how the project had affected themselves and their families, providing them with meaningful and affordable activities, enhancing their feelings of confidence and self-worth, and giving them a sense of purpose in life. They talked about skills that both they and their children acquired through their participation in the project, and the support that they all received from Better Beginnings staff, and from other residents who were involved in the project. Many interviewees talked

about how their communities had become better places to live – cleaner, safer, and more attractive – in which residents of all language and cultural backgrounds understood one another better and got along better.

The stories people shared with us told us that Better Beginnings had worked in the way it was supposed to. People spoke about how the project had changed their lives, their children's lives, and their communities, and how they had played an active role in the change process. Despite the many stones (and the occasional boulder) on the path from Better Beginnings to Better Futures, it seems that most of our story-tellers had reached their destination.

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