

**Better Beginnings, Better Futures:
Resident Participation in the Project's Early Years
SUMMARY REPORT**

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This report describes activities in seven communities, and is based on individual community reports prepared by the following:

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BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES RESIDENT PARTICIPATION

1. Introduction

Better Beginnings, Better Futures is a provincially-funded, community-based program designed to reduce the incidence of social, emotional, behavioural, physical and cognitive problems in young children from economically disadvantaged communities. The project was designed not only to help at the child or family level; it was also designed to enhance the communities in which these children and families live, and to strengthen the ability of communities to respond effectively to their social and economic needs. From its earliest stages, it was understood that residents of the communities selected as Better Beginnings, Better Futures sites would be involved not only as participants in or “recipients” of the various programs, but as decision-makers and planners of these programs, as well. This report documents the nature, extent and impact of residents’ involvement in the seven urban Better Beginnings Sites during their initial stages of development, from time the sites were first announced in January, 1991 until September, 1992, at which time most sites had planned the majority of the programs that would be offered in their communities, and had already begun to provide some of these programs. These seven Better Beginnings, Better Futures projects provide prevention services to over 3800 families with young children.

2. Methodology

The research contained in this report utilized a qualitative or naturalistic approach. The primary source of information was the set of field notes compiled by the Site Researcher at each site. These notes consisted of a semi-verbatim account of what had been said at meetings of the site’s main decision-making group, along with summary notes of what had gone on at other meetings and events. The field notes also contained analytic comments which summarized the researcher’s personal reflections on what had occurred.

The field notes were supplemented by interviews with individuals and representative groups at each of the sites. During these interviews, both residents and service providers involved in Better Beginnings were asked questions concerning: the nature and amount of resident participation in the project; people’s motivation for participating; barriers to participation; how participation of residents had benefitted the project, the community, and the residents themselves; negative outcomes that the residents had experienced; and the relationships among residents, staff and agency personnel involved in the project.

3. Who is a Resident?

When the goal of having high levels of resident participation was first established for Better Beginnings, few people anticipated any difficulty in deciding who should be considered a community resident. However, it soon became evident that many of those involved in Better

Beginnings not only lived in the community, but also worked as service providers in the community. This became further complicated when residents were hired to staff the various Better Beginnings programs. For this reason, it was necessary to identify three categories of residents involved in the project:

- (1) Volunteer Residents: local community residents who are not paid as project staff or employed by a service organization involved in the project.
- (2) Service Provider/Residents: local community residents who are employed by a service organization involved in the project.
- (3) Staff/Residents: local community residents who are employed by the project.

4. Formal Structures for Resident Participation

Each of the Better Beginnings sites utilized a number of different groups or committees in administering the project and in developing programs. Typically, each site had a central decision-making group (often referred to as a steering committee or board of directors) which coordinated the major activities occurring at the site, and to which all sub-committees and working groups reported. In addition to the steering committee, each site had a number of sub-committees or working groups which took responsibility for matters relating to personnel, finance, research, etc. and for developing programs.

The numbers and proportion of volunteer residents on the central steering committees showed a large degree of variation. In two sites, a majority of the members on the steering committee were volunteer residents. Two other sites had approximately equal numbers of residents and professionals on their steering committees. The remaining sites had a somewhat smaller proportion of residents participating on their steering committees. While the proportion of residents participating on steering committees varied, five of the seven sites had set themselves the objective of having at least 50% of their steering committee be residents. Somewhat greater involvement of residents was evident on the various sub-committees and program development groups, with four of the sites having at least 50% of these groups comprised of residents.

Another major vehicle for resident influence on project development was the hiring of community residents as project staff. All the projects have hired several residents as project staff. At many sites, there are as many (and sometimes more) residents involved as staff in the project as there are resident volunteers. Thus, employment of residents provides a powerful means by which local residents can influence the development of prevention approaches in their neighbourhoods.

5. Who was Involved?

Another concern, in addition to the numbers of residents participating in Better Beginnings, is how representative those who do participate are of the community. It became evident early on in most sites that many groups in the community were not represented on Better Beginnings committees and working groups. One of the most obvious issues in this regard was the lack of male volunteers. The site reports indicated that overwhelmingly the residents volunteering or being employed by the project were women. Only in the latter stages of the period covered by this report were more men becoming involved in the projects. Participation rates also seemed to be governed to some extent by the location of the offices or neighbourhood centres established by Better Beginnings. Typically, residents in areas closer to the centres were more likely to get involved in the project.

In sites serving areas of mixed income levels, it appeared that participation was related to income level. Individuals from higher income families were less likely to participate in the project than those with lower incomes. Another, perhaps more significant concern was the fact that, in the early stages of program development, the sites with substantial ethnic, cultural or linguistic minorities had not yet involved members of a number of those groups in program decision-making.

6. Motivation to Participate

Residents were motivated by many things to participate in Better Beginnings, Better Futures:

- their desire to enhance the lives of their children, and to work for a better future for them
- their desire for more activities in the community for their children, as a means of helping children learn, and preparing them for school
- their wish to make their community a better place to live
- a desire to help others in their communities, especially young people
- a need for relief from the unremitting drudgery many residents were experiencing, or from the demands of child care
- the opportunity to meet people from their neighbourhoods, make new friends, share ideas
- the opportunity to acquire new skills or knowledge
- the desire to keep in touch with what was happening in the community, especially as it related to their children

- a belief in the project's vision
- opportunities for employment with the project

7. What did Residents Do?

When the original proposals for the demonstration sites were developed, meaningful resident involvement was quite limited at most sites. Participating residents were often heavily outnumbered by professionals and felt quite unsure of themselves in the process. Lack of confidence was also characteristic of residents' involvement in the early stages of project development. However, since then, at those sites where progress has been made at increasing volunteer resident involvement, there have been substantial and continuing changes in both the quantity and quality of the residents' contributions. At the end of the period covered by this report, residents were substantially involved in a number of different areas. Among many other things, residents

- participated on steering committees, sub-committees and program development work groups, in many instances chairing, co-chairing or facilitating meetings of these groups
- worked as full and part-time staff on the projects
- worked as volunteers in a variety of programs
- organized special events and activities, and performed many of the tasks necessary for these events to be successful (e.g., prepared food and provided child care at a community fair)
- participated in staff selection and staff performance appraisals
- made presentations to a variety of groups in the form of news conferences, speeches, and theatre productions to make people more aware of the project
- organized the delivery of specific program components (e.g., clothing room, library, toy library, friendly visiting, drop-in centre facilities)
- helped with the maintenance of the grounds and premises
- participated in residents' groups or committees
- participated in lobbying and social action activities
- provided translation assistance

- assisted in fundraising

8. What made resident involvement more difficult?

While most sites were quite successful in involving residents, there were a number of obstacles and barriers that had to be overcome before residents could participate in a meaningful way. One of the issues that arose in many of the sites was that most meetings were scheduled during professionals' working hours. This meant that only residents who were available during the day could attend meetings. In addition, there was a concern in some sites that the location of meetings made it difficult or uncomfortable for some residents to attend. Another issue was the difficulty in finding child care for those who were involved in meetings or other program activities.

Another barrier to greater resident involvement was the lack of familiarity many residents had with the structure and organization of meetings. The whole process of decision-making was alien to many residents who had little experience with rules of order, social service jargon, and other aspects of program administration. This was especially problematic in those situations where professionals greatly outnumbered residents, and when professionals did not make the effort to encourage and respect residents' contributions. These problems were compounded by the fact that many of the residents were initially unsure of their own abilities. In addition, residents were often keen to get going and were unused to the lengthy discussions involved in making decisions.

One stress felt by residents participating in project development was the very heavy demands placed on them, particularly at those sites relying on smaller numbers of residents. These pressures were particularly difficult for mothers, who made up the great majority of residents participating in the projects. A major complaint of many of these mothers was that the demands of the project were taking away time that they usually spent with their children. Indeed, some the mothers, because they were so busy attending meetings, were not able to participate with their children in the very programs that were designed for parents and children to do things together.

Another barrier related to the fact that some partners of the women volunteering their time for the project objected to their participation. A number of women reported that they were pressured by their partners to end their involvement in Better Beginnings.

A number of sites reported difficulties in involving volunteer members of minority groups on their main decision-making bodies at this early stage in the project's development. In part, this was due to language barriers. However, there were also differences in values and expectations that needed to be addressed in order to achieve greater representation from these groups. For example, in some cultures, it is not considered appropriate for women to go out of the home and participate in meetings without their husbands present.

9. Fostering Resident Involvement

A great deal of effort has been invested in overcoming barriers and fostering resident involvement at the seven sites. Some of these efforts have occurred at the organizational level, and some at the interpersonal level, with regard to the interactions between residents and professionals.

In general, the sites with the greatest levels of resident participation were those which had established clear objectives and a strong commitment to involve residents from the start. Sites with lower levels of resident participation typically had not set specific goals for the proportion of residents they wished to participate in their steering committee and working groups, or did not see goals related to resident participation as needing immediate attention.

One of the barriers to more meaningful resident participation mentioned by many of the sites was the formal and often intimidating nature of meetings. To overcome this barrier, many sites attempted to make the atmosphere of meetings more comfortable, especially for first-time participants. This generally involved trying to simplify formal decision-making procedures, encouraging professionals not to use “unnecessary jargon”, and trying different ways of presenting information at meetings (e.g., adding a visual presentation to an oral one and providing a verbal clarification of written material). It was also seen as important to allow residents to speak for themselves and to have them take on responsibilities such as chairing meetings and making reports from sub-committees to the board. Some of the sites attempted to provide training and orientation to residents before they took on tasks such as attending or chairing meetings, so that the process would not be so intimidating and unfamiliar to them. In addition, as the number and proportion of residents increased on the committees and working groups, residents felt less isolated and more confident, especially when they saw other residents contributing.

Other attempts were made to overcome some of the practical difficulties residents encountered. Some of the sites decided to hold meetings at times convenient to residents rather than during professional working hours. Most of the sites made arrangements for child care during meetings, and provided help with transportation where necessary. Some of the sites also provided compensation for lost salary or revenue incurred in attending meetings.

While sites had as yet had only limited success in attracting individuals from various minority groups within their communities, a number of attempts had been made to increase the representation of these groups in the project. Some of the strategies employed included

- hiring staff from minority groups
- having written publicity in different languages
- developing programs specifically for minority group members
- using interpreters at meetings and in outreach activities

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- working with associations and organizations which represented these groups in the community
 - having some separate organizational structures and program development groups that operated in different languages

10. Hiring neighbourhood residents

Large-scale hiring was just beginning at the end of the time period covered by this report, and many of those hired were residents of the community. Indeed, hiring neighbourhood residents was seen as a major strategy at all sites for incorporating residents' perspectives and knowledge of the community into project and program development. However, the hiring of residents has created a number of challenges for the Better Beginnings Better Futures sites:

1. those residents hired were often the most active and competent of the resident volunteers, leaving a gap in the volunteer ranks as they became staff
2. sites were faced with the decision as to whether or not residents who became staff members should continue to hold board/committee positions
3. residents often felt they had lost their voice as representatives of the community when they became staff members and found themselves supervised by professionals
4. tensions sometimes arose between residents who were staff and those who were not
5. residents who had applied for jobs but were not hired by the program may have lost some incentive to volunteer.

11. Resident-only groups

Four of the seven demonstration sites had some form of resident-only group that was initiated through the project. Where the resident-only groups were clearly integrated into the administrative structure of the site - for example, a program development group making suggestions to the steering group and implementing program decisions - there were few difficulties reported. However, in two sites which had invested considerable effort in developing an "independent" resident-only community group, those groups had somewhat unclear linkages to the project's administrative structures and decision-making. Early on, one of these community groups reportedly made substantial contributions to the initial project proposal and to the early project development stages at the site. However, as the site's administrative structures became formalized, as residents began to participate on these structures, and as staff were hired and program activities began, the purpose of these community groups became less clear and their influence diminished.

12. Payment and recognition of volunteers

One of the difficult issues faced early on by the sites had to do with payment of resident volunteers. In almost all the sites, there had been discussions, sometimes lengthy and heated ones, about whether and how residents should be compensated for what might be considered “volunteer” activities, such as attending meetings, organizing community events, and helping with project programs. In all but one of the sites, it was decided that only residents’ direct expenses would be compensated.

Residents in one site were given \$10 plus an additional \$7.40 an hour to attend meetings. There were a number of reasons for paying residents to volunteer their time to the project: it would encourage greater numbers of residents to participate; it would compensate them for costs incurred in participating; it would make them more equal to the service providers who were being paid for the time they contributed for the project; many of those who were volunteering were in financial need and could use the extra money.

There were also reasons for not paying volunteers: it was perceived by some that people who were paid were only involved because of the money they received, and not because of their interest in the project; paying some residents for attending meetings, while not paying other residents for other kinds of contributions would introduce inequities in the project between those who were paid to volunteer and those who were not; paying of large numbers of volunteers represents a substantial expense to the project. Primarily for these reasons, the practice of paying residents to attend meetings was discontinued in the one site after about a year into the project. There was a fear that participation in committees would drop dramatically as a result of this decision. When payments stopped, however, no one dropped out of the project, and neighbourhood participation continued to increase. There was a feeling that paying volunteers had been an effective way of encouraging involvement initially, but needed to be discontinued as the project grew and changed.

While most of the sites felt that a policy of paying volunteers was too problematic to implement, there was still a desire to acknowledge the contribution of community members to the project. At one of the sites, a “Fun and Recognition” committee was established to organize and plan events that would recognize the contributions of the volunteering parents. Residents who had contributed to the project were recognized at these functions by receiving certificates and modest gifts (e.g., a t-shirt with the project’s logo on the front).

13. Resident/staff/service provider interactions

For almost all sites, residents and service providers developed a relationship of trust and respect only after some time and much hard work. There were many inherent inequities between the two groups that had to be overcome before a solid relationship could be built. Service providers were paid for the time they spent on the project while, for the most part, residents were

not. Service providers were often professionally educated, while residents were not. Service providers were familiar with the language of social services, and were more knowledgeable about things such as rules of order, dealing with government representatives, report-writing, formulating goals and the like. To community residents, this whole area of activity was often alien and foreboding. In addition, service providers came to the project with very different agendas and perspectives than did residents.

Most sites reported a dramatic change in the relations between professionals and residents as time passed. The most important factor in improving these relations appeared to be the opportunity for professionals and residents to get to know each other as individuals by working together as equals to plan programs, or by sharing meals and celebrations. In addition, the service providers at many sites made conscious attempts to make residents feel more comfortable, appreciated and equal. For example, in some of the projects, residents were provided with an orientation to the project's history and meeting procedures, so that attendance at meetings would not be so daunting to them. In addition, the format for some meetings was changed, with people getting together in smaller and more informal groups so that residents would feel more at ease contributing. Another factor that appeared to be important in forming a bond between service providers and residents was open and direct communication between the two groups, especially when problems arose.

In some sites, and for some segments of the community, relations between residents and service providers were not as amicable and productive as might have been desired. One reason for this appears to be a lack of communication between members of the two groups. Other sources of tension had to do with community members not feeling heard or appreciated by the service providers. This feeling was particularly prevalent among some of the visible minority residents at one of the sites.

Another important aspect of the relationship between service providers and residents was the balance of power between the two groups in project decision-making. In the early phases of most of the seven projects, agency representatives outnumbered residents, and played a dominant role in terms of decision-making. This was often resented by residents, who felt that the agencies had "too much say" in what was happening. As time passed, residents in most of the sites began to feel that a more equal partnership was developing between themselves and the service providers. This was due to many factors:

- increases in the number of residents who sat on committees and working groups
- open communication and attempts to resolve issues between the two groups
- empowering of residents by having them participate in hiring staff, making presentations, and chairing meetings
- the emergence of strong leaders among the residents

Relations between residents and program staff were, for the most part, quite positive, right from the time project staff were first hired. There were several possible reasons for this:

- residents were involved in hiring program staff, and perceived them to be working for the community
- many of the staff hired in the various sites were members of the community, and were well known to many of the residents
- the staff were generally friendly and approachable, as these characteristics had been key factors in hiring them
- residents had frequent contact with the staff, because staff were the “front line” of the projects

While relations between staff and residents were, for the most part, positive, there were instances in which staff and residents did not get along. In one of the sites, the original community development worker was dismissed because residents felt that she had been “shutting them out” from program planning activities. Problems between staff and residents also emerged at another site, due, in part, to the fact that the community centre is located in one of the two neighbourhoods comprising the project, but is some distance from the other neighbourhood. This tended to reduce the amount of interaction between staff and residents of the more distant neighbourhood.

As the information for this report was being compiled, many of the sites were undergoing a major transition by hiring large numbers of staff, many of them community residents. This created a number of issues: whether resident staff could or should still speak on behalf of the community; with the hiring of staff to perform many of the tasks initially taken on by resident volunteers, residents would have to relinquish some of the control they had over the project; with a large staff, there was the possibility of the project becoming less grass roots, and more institutional and hierarchical.

14. Outcomes

The active involvement of residents in Better Beginnings Better, Futures produced a number of positive outcomes at the individual, program and community levels. Residents experienced a number of benefits as a result of their participation. By far the most frequently mentioned benefit of participating in Better Beginnings was an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. To a large extent, this appeared to derive from the fact that residents were now speaking their minds, and felt listened to and respected for their opinions. The new skills and knowledge that residents reported gaining from their involvement was also important in enhancing feelings of confidence and self-worth. In addition, many of the residents who began as volunteers were eventually employed by

the sites. This not only provided some needed income, but served as further recognition of their ability and personal growth.

Another major consequence of participation for many residents was the opportunity it offered to get out of their house or apartment and to meet other residents. For some, the social contact offered by Better Beginnings Better Futures was a way to meet new people, make friends, and have someone to do things with. Other residents appreciated the fact that they now had people with whom they could exchange ideas and from whom they could get advice. Some also saw their new friends as sources of help if the need arose. For a number of residents, Better Beginnings helped relieve their feelings of isolation and boredom, and provided a needed respite from child care responsibilities. The availability of social support and relief were described as key elements in helping residents cope with lives that were often stressful and chaotic.

Other benefits experienced by residents derived from their increased contact (on a basis of equality) with service providers and professionals who worked in their community. Residents reported being much less apprehensive about talking to these individuals when a problem arose, and also had better knowledge of how the various agencies and organizations in their communities operated.

Many of the residents who became involved with their community's Better Beginnings Better Futures project did so because they wanted to provide more activities and a better life for their children. Resident parents found that their children were experiencing many of the same benefits that they had experienced themselves: their children also had someplace to go, and could meet other children and adults; the children were proud of their parents' involvement in the project, and this enhanced their own feelings of self-esteem; some parents indicated that their children's behaviour had improved, as well.

The involvement of residents also had a substantial impact at the project level. Residents were seen as crucial to the development of sound programs. In many communities, it was felt that many of the programs would never have got off the ground without resident input. Residents also were described as playing a key role in other aspects of program development: they participated in hiring program staff; they helped make decisions about the location of neighbourhood centres and programs; they brought other residents out for programs and events; they provided a knowledge of what kinds of activities were possible in their communities and which were not.

Another impact that residents had on the project concerned their effect on the professionals with whom they collaborated. The kind of equal-status collaboration between residents and service providers required just as much learning and accommodation on the part of the professionals as it did on the part of the residents. One of the drawbacks of this collaboration was the fact that this collaboration tended to slow down the process of decision-making.

While resident participation in Better Beginnings Better Futures has varied from site to site, many of the sites have begun to see effects of this participation at the community level: residents who were involved in the projects were beginning to see a "sense of community" developing in

their neighbourhoods; people from different ethnic and income groups were interacting more freely; residents in some communities had begun to take action for needed programs and services in their neighbourhoods; and residents were working together to help themselves. These impacts, of course, were felt primarily in those communities in which substantial numbers of residents were involved. Some of the sites who were just beginning to reach out to the community experienced less impact at this level.

Resident participation brought a number of negative outcomes as well. Many of these negative outcomes were associated with large amounts of time that are required from active residents. While these residents appear to derive the greatest benefit, they also, at times, experience stress, burnout, and remorse at not being able to spend more time with their children. In addition, involved parents sometimes suffered the resentment of their partners and other members of the community who were not involved in the project.

15. Conclusions

During this initial stage of the development of Better Beginnings, Better Futures, resident participation has grown from a concept and an ideal to a reality in almost all of the sites. Residents have become an integral part of every aspect of program development, decision-making and implementation. This growth in participation has taken a considerable amount of time to achieve, and has only been accomplished by a consistent and conscious effort to facilitate the participation of residents as equals in the program decision-making process, and to overcome the many barriers that stand in the way of greater resident involvement.

Resident participation has produced many benefits, even at this early stage of program development. At the individual level, participating residents experienced an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, acquired new skills and knowledge, gained opportunities for jobs and additional income, made new friends and gained additional social support, obtained needed relief from boredom and child care responsibilities, felt less apprehensive about talking to social service providers when a problem arose, and also had better knowledge of how the various agencies and organizations in their communities operated. In addition, participating residents reported that their children also benefitted from their parents' involvement; pride in their parents' involvement was said to enhance the children's self-esteem. At the program level, residents have been crucial to the development of sound programs that address the needs of their communities and appeal to those living in the community.

While there has been dramatic growth in resident participation over the initial phase of Better Beginnings, there are still a number of issues that need to be addressed to progress to an optimal level of participation. These include the need to reduce the demands placed upon those residents who are feeling stressed or burnt out and the need to involve more individuals from groups who have not participated in the project (e.g., men, those from cultural and ethnic minorities).

Perhaps the most striking finding of the research on resident participation to this point has been that the process of involving residents in developing programs seems to have been preventive in and of itself. In many cases, before programs were even implemented, involved residents were showing evidence of increased self-confidence, enhanced self-esteem, greater social support, new skills and knowledge, and a host of other benefits. The impact of their involvement is probably best expressed by the residents themselves:

I probably feel better about myself in the last year than I've ever felt about myself, ever, and that's because of the project.

Sitting on various committees and actually having people seeming like they were listening to me ... I started getting respect for the first time in a long time ... people were actually listening to me.

I've been allowed to blossom. I've been given new challenges and each challenge I've been able to learn a lot.

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

One of the greatest challenges for the future development of Better Beginnings, Better Futures will be to maintain and perhaps even increase the numbers of residents who get involved, and to ensure that those who are involved continue to benefit while the projects grow in size and complexity.