

Niagara Parent Knowledge Study

Executive Summary

PURPOSE

In 1999, the now defunct Invest in Kids commissioned a parent knowledge study. The goal of the study was to fill the information gap about Canadian parent's knowledge about child development and where they sought information on child development. Additionally, the study asked parents about their feelings about being a parent and how competent they felt in their role as a parent.

The study provided insightful information about parents' knowledge of child development and parental levels of confidence. While the importance of the early years has been recognized for well over a decade, what the study highlights is that "across the board, parents need help – ALL parents" (Oldershaw, 2002).

Over the past few years, a small task group of the Niagara Children's Planning Council – Research Group (formerly Early Years Niagara Research Group), a committee under the local Best Start Network, laboured on developing a local study of parent knowledge of child growth and development (Niagara Parent Knowledge Study).

The goal of the Niagara Parent Knowledge Study (NPKS) was to gather information to answer the following questions:

- What knowledge does Niagara parents of children aged 0-6 years possess in relation to their child's growth and development?
- How confident are Niagara parents of their knowledge of their child's growth and development?
- Where do Niagara parents seek out information of their child's growth and development?

Potentially, the study results would help inform early years services for program planning in support of parents as well as provide valuable information on how to deliver/communicate information to parents. The study results could also be used to provide a baseline for future studies to monitor whether there are any changes/improvements/modifications in how early years services in Niagara are meeting the needs of parents and their young children.

METHODOLOGY

Parent knowledge questionnaire

As a first step a literature review was conducted by members of the NCPC-RG task group. The literature review encompassed examining research articles, questionnaires, public websites, and developmental screening tools for children aged 0-6 years.

The compiled list of developmental screening tools and reports were then shared with undergraduate students from Brock University, Faculty of Education who volunteered to support the project. The students were required to complete a more in-depth literature review to attempt to find tools/reports that were not already included in the list developed by the NCPC-RG task group. The students then used NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis computer software package designed to work with very rich text-based information, with the purpose of extracting and sorting information from tools and reports into the 5 developmental domains and subdomains of the Early Development Instrument (EDI).

Early in the project, the task group members decided to build on existing information available at the local level. One such piece of information is the EDI, which measures children's (i.e., senior kindergarten) ability to meet age appropriate developmental expectations at school entry. The EDI uses five domains to measure children's development:

- Physical health and well-being
- Social competence

- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive development
- Communication and general knowledge skills

Upon completion of the literature review and NVIVO scan, the Brock undergraduate students created spreadsheets that listed statements and data from reports, questions from developmental screening tools, and the source of the report/tool, sorted according to EDI domain then by age group.

Recognizing that parental knowledge of child development changes with the different ages and stages, the following age groups were agreed upon by the task group members as aligned with key developmental stages, and generally aligned with developmental screening tools:

- 0 to 6 months
- 6+ to 12 months
- 12+ to 18 months
- 18+ to 3 years
- 3+ to 4 years
- 4 to 6 years

The task group then forwarded the spreadsheets to key stakeholders (Registered Early Childhood Educators, Public Health Nurse) to review and identify any issues/topics (i.e. toilet learning, dental health, etc.) that were missed in the previous steps, and to filter down on to key issues/topics for each age group. Members of the task group then began the task of drafting and refining questions.

The draft questions were sent to local subject matter experts; Registered Early Childhood Educators, a Resource Consultant, Educators, a Public Health Nurse, a children's mental health provider, Speech Pathologist, a Pediatrician, and an Aboriginal partner (to ensure that the questions were culturally appropriate) for each of the 5 areas of child development (physical health & well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, communication and general knowledge). These subject matter experts were asked to do two things; 1) review the draft questions and provide their feedback and 2) have one final review to help identify any significant themes or topic areas that appeared to be absent.

While the primary focus of the study was to gather data on parent knowledge of children's growth and development to help inform key messages to be communicated with parents, the study was also an opportunity to educate parents. The study was intended to be supportive in nature, with questions and answers in a format that was encouraging and supportive of parents. Once a parent selected their response to the question, all parents viewed the correct response to the question. This reinforced the knowledge of some, and was an opportunity to share accurate information about child growth and development for those that responded incorrectly.

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a Good
Life Needs
a Good Start

Parents Voice

0%

6. A child's first dental visit should be soon after their first tooth, or by the age of one year.

True
 False
 I do not know

Next

Online Questionnaire Tools powered by FluidSurveys

Figure 1 is a survey question for parents with children between the ages of 7 to 12 months. Note that chosen response appears blue.

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Parents Voice

50%

True

The Canadian Dental Association recommends a child's first visit to the dentist should occur within 6 months of the first tooth appearing or by the age of one year. You should start cleaning your child's mouth even before your child has teeth. Use a soft baby brush or wrap your finger in a clean, damp washcloth and gently brush or wipe your child's gums and teeth.

For more information see resources at the end of the questionnaire

Back Submit

Online Questionnaire Tools powered by FluidSurveys

Figure 2 is a survey answer for parents with children between the ages of 7 to 12 months. Note that chosen response appears blue.

A key piece of the education component was to ensure that the responses within the questionnaire were consistent with messaging by service providers in the community. Therefore, once the questions had been finalized by the NCPC-RG, the next important phase was to ask the same subject matter experts in the community to review the responses drafted for each question to ensure they aligned and were consistent with the messages from their respective sectors.

Prior to launching the online questionnaire to the region, the survey tool was field tested. Approximately 30 parent volunteers provided their feedback on clarity of questions, ease of use of the online questionnaire, and tested for any technical glitches. An additional round of testing was conducted to ensure the online questionnaire was compatible, displayed well, and ease of use with various mobile devices.

The questionnaire went live January 13th and was available online for four weeks, until February 10th, 2014. The promotion of the questionnaire was provided by Chimpanzee, a Niagara-based full-service communications agency. The communication plan outlined recommended targeted areas intended to encourage parents to visit the online questionnaire. (Please see Appendix I for the listing of promotion avenues)

Incentives were offered to encourage parents to complete the questionnaire and participate in the study. The following incentives were offered:

- 1 year family pass to the YMCA
- Family stay at the Great Wolf Lodge
- 4 tickets to the Backyardigans show at the Scotiabank Convention Centre
- 7 \$100 gift certificates

The questionnaire was developed using an online software tool (Fluid Survey) and hosted on the URL ParentsVoice.ca with links from Parent Direct Niagara and Niagara Region Children's Services webpage. After the survey closed, the data was extracted from the Fluid Survey account and stored on a password-protected computer drive, with only designated qualified personnel with access to the data.

While some demographic information about parents (age range, gender, level of education, household income) was asked to provide some context to parent responses, no identifying information was requested. All data collected was aggregated and all results were reported at the population level. The interpretation of analysis using the data followed accepted scientific standards.

Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), the analysis consisted of frequencies as to responses to questions to ascertain whether it was universally known or unknown by parents. For questions showing some variability in the responses, the next step was to look at the results in context of the demographic information provided by parents to determine if there was a relationship.

COMMUNICATION MEDIUMS

Another component of the study was to ascertain which communication mediums parents tended to favour and how to use this information in decision making related to disseminating key messages about child growth and development.

A literature review was also conducted that explored different communication mediums used to reach families with young children. The literature review helped to:

- define each communication medium;
- listed the different types within each specific communication medium;
- used current literature to examine the enablers and disablers of each type of communication medium;
- included local data/analytics from existing communication mediums to support these factors;
- and examined health literacy in the Niagara region and life style implications.

FINDINGS

From the analysis of the survey responses, the research team was able to identify some key messages that appear to be significant for parents to understand at the varied developmental levels of childhood. A brief summary of these key messages is indicated below.

What are the key messages that need to be communicated to families over the ECD period?

0-6 months:

- Picking up a child every time they cry will not spoil them.
- It is possible to recognize poor mental health during infancy.
- Infants cry most often when they are 6 to 8 weeks.
- A child's first dental visit should be soon after their first tooth or by age of 1 year.

7-12 months:

- An infant does not know how to influence (manipulate) parents to get what they want.
- For the first few months your child picks up on the rhythms of language as they hear you speak, so you need not worry about the content.
- At this time you should be introducing your child to solid foods. It's important to cut them up into small bite size pieces, and watching your child while they eat it.
- You should never put a soother, bottle nipple, or child's utensils in your own mouth for any reason.
- It is possible to recognize poor mental health during infancy.
- A child's first dental visit should be soon after their first tooth, or by the age of one year.

13-18 months:

- Children can learn a lot from living in a bilingual home. However, it is best to talk, read and sing in one language at a time.
- Your child typically needs between 12 to 14 hours of sleep.
- Fruit juice is not a good way for children to get their vitamins.
- Young children require a balanced diet with lots of opportunities to sample from a variety of foods. Each meal should at least include a food from at least three food groups.
- A child's first dental visit should be soon after their first tooth or by age of 1 year.
- The 18 month well-baby visit is a longer, more in-depth and important visit with your child's doctor or health care provider.
- An appropriate age to expect my child to play with other children is generally around 18 months.
- When your child cries comfort them, your child needs their feelings respected. This is how your child is communicating with you.
- Hitting and biting is common behavior because they often lack the language skills to express their emotions.
- Playtime is an important part of how to talk, play games, socialize and make friends.

19-36 months

- From 2 to 3 years, most children will use short sentences, listen to stories and answer simple questions, and have conversations with family members.
- Children and babies learn best through play. Excessive screen leaves less time for active creative play.
- While there is no set age to move a child into a toddler bed, it is recommended to wait until they are closer to 3 years of age.

- If the first try at potty/toilet training doesn't work, take a break, it might be because your child isn't ready. If your child is not ready, don't be disappointed or upset.
- It could take several months or years for your child to stay dry during naps or all night. Your child can continue to wear a diaper at night, but encourage them to use the potty if they have to in the night.
- Young children do not need to be involved in organized sports (like playing on hockey, soccer or baseball team) from a very young age to develop their muscles and coordination.
- Many 2 year olds aren't developmentally ready to share and are just learning about possessions, so their favourite words are mine and no. We cannot expect them to share all of the time or even most of the time with other children because sharing is a learned activity and mastering it takes some time.
- Temper tantrums are a common part of development, and are a child's way of showing anger and frustration. During a tantrum parents should not try to argue or "talk sense" to the child. Keep the child from getting hurt, harming others or breaking things.
- At this age, a child is starting to test limits as they explore their independence. Parents need to speak to their children about where they are going, what to expect when they get there, and the expectations of the child's behavior.

37-48 months

- When a child does not want to eat what has been offered at mealtime, parents need to respect their child's decision not to eat. Even if a child decides not to eat, a skipped meal every once in a while is not a concern as long as your child is growing normally.
- Young children do not need to be involved in organized sports (like playing on hockey, soccer or baseball team) from a very young age to develop their muscles and coordination.
- Praise your child when you see them playing well with their friends.
- Three year olds understand what feelings are, even if they're not able to talk about them like adults do. They are aware of how their actions can affect others (e.g., teasing) but children sometimes need help getting out these feelings and emotions.
- Parents need to help children use their words when they are upset. Encouraging appropriate behaviour increases the chance of that behaviour happening again.

49-72 months

- Educational TV shows and videos do not make children smarter.
- A 5 year old should be able to use all speech sounds correctly in words with the exception of 'th' and 'r'.
- For children to be at their best, they require routine. A consistent bedtime routine helps children settle down and drift off to sleep. Children typically sleep between 10-12 hours each night.
- Most often, an eating problem is related to behaviours, the power struggle between parents and children. The best way to help your child learn to like vegetables is to offer different vegetables at meals and snacks without pressure. Pressuring, rewarding or bribing children to eat vegetables will make them like vegetables less.
- Children do not need to participate in organized sports, like playing on a hockey, soccer, or baseball team to get the full benefits of physical activity.
- Praise your child when you see them playing well with their friends.
- Parents need to praise children to encourage them to continue to behave well. When children are doing something a parent likes, it is important to give them encouragement and attention. This will increase the likelihood of the desirable behaviour happening again.
- A 4 year old is able to comfort someone who is upset. One of the most important tasks of parenthood is helping children learn to deal with emotions.
- When children are fighting, parents should wait to see if they can work it out on their own. If the situation is getting worse, then the parent should step in and talk to them about sharing and fairness.
- By 4 years of age, a child can understand three part directions and longer sentences (e.g., "Put your toys away, please go wash your hands and then sit at the table for lunch").

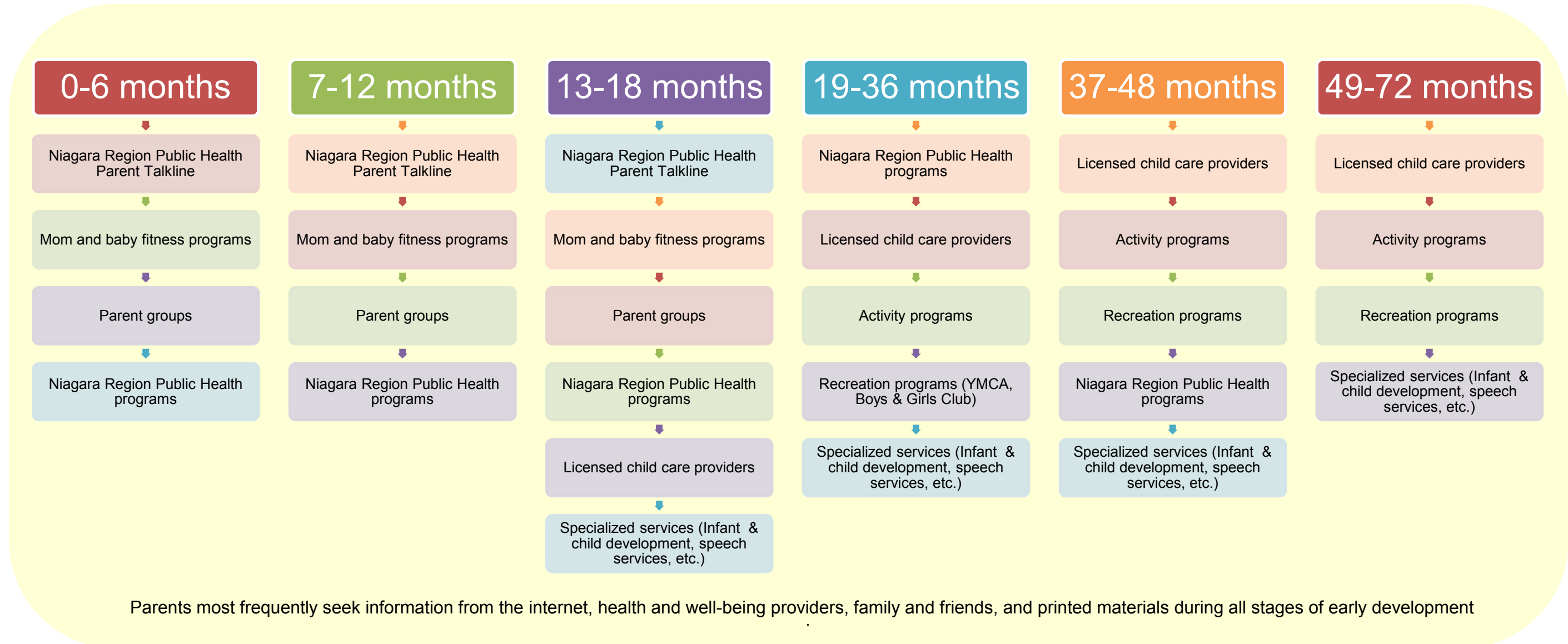
What are the best ways to communicate these messages with families?

Based on the literature review, there are several mediums that are currently being used to communicate with parents, including Twitter, websites, health care professionals, and print resources. There are several enabling and disabling factors that are associated with each other these communication mediums. (For more details please see the document *Innovation Fund Project Literature Review*)

Diagram A depicts the Just in Time Communication Model, showing a variety of sources parents identified through the questionnaire as to where they seek information on child growth and development at different stages.

Just in Time Communication Model

Parents seek information on child growth and development from a variety of sources at different stages of early development



APPENDIX I - Listing of promotion avenues

Digital advertising:

BEC employment services branches and their 8 partners

Facebook ads

Google ads

Kijiji

Momstown Niagara Region

YMCA Niagara sites (Niagara Falls, Grimsby, St. Catharines, Welland and Fort Erie)

Website links:

Niagara Region Children's Services

Parent Direct Niagara Region

Print advertising:

Niagara Falls Review

St. Catharines Standard (with online advertising on main page of website)

Welland Tribune

Mall advertising:

Pen Centre (posters in desired locations and near directories)

Seaway Mall (digital TV ad, mall entrance TV ad, bathroom ad)

Survey Post Card and Posters:

BEC Partner Breakfast

Children's Services Fee Subsidy Staff

Family Resource Programs

Licensed child care centres

Licensed home child care

Municipal arenas

Niagara Regional Housing

Niagara Regional Native Centre

Ontario Early Years Centres

Port Colborne Family Literacy Event

Public Health programs

Public libraries