



Niagara Parent Knowledge and Engagement Study

Summary Report

BACKGROUND

In 1999, Invest in Kids commissioned a parent knowledge study. The goal of the project was to fill the information gap about Canadian parent's knowledge about child development¹. The study provided insightful information about parental knowledge of child development, and parental level of confidence of knowledge. While the importance of the early years has been well known for well over a decade, the study concludes is that "across the board, parents need help – ALL parents"².

The Niagara Children's Planning Council-Research Group (NCPG-RG) implemented a similar Parent Knowledge Study locally to answer *What do Niagara parents of children aged 0 to 6 years know about child development?* and *How confident do parents feel in their knowledge of child growth and development?* in 2014. The primary focus of the study was to gather data on parent knowledge, but 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. For questions where there was deemed a correct response, parents were able to view this after providing their answer. This reinforced knowledge for some, and was an opportunity to share accurate information about child growth and development for those that responded incorrectly. An interesting outcome of the project highlighted that even though 96.3% of parents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am confident in the knowledge that I have of my child's growth and development," their actual knowledge of their children's growth and development diminished as children aged.

The results of the former study leveraged the idea to complete a second phase of parent knowledge of growth and development with a focus on parents of children aged 7 to 12 years. The second study explored parent perception of the influence of their involvement in their child's learning and school environment, in addition to parent knowledge of child growth and development, which was also an opportunity to educate parents. There is a substantial amount of research that has shown that parent involvement in children's school lives is correlated to better academic performance and mental well-being, and decreased risky behaviours. Therefore, the question remains: *Do parents perceive they have an influence on their child's overall well-being?* As well, *do parents perceive barriers and opportunities to become involved in their child's school?* These questions were used to build the inquiry into Niagara parent knowledge and engagement study for children 7 to 12 years old. The NCPG-RG was a successful recipient of the Ministry of Education Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grant for September 2014 to August 2015, and thus we were able to proceed with the next phase of this study.

¹ Oldershaw, L. (2002). The national survey of parents of young children. Invest in Kids. Retrieved from: http://www.phoenixpembroke.com/sites/default/files/National_Survey_of_Parents_of_Young_Children_FULL_REPORT.pdf

² (Oldershaw, 2002, p. VIII)

PURPOSE

The goal of the project is to gather local data to answer the following questions:

- What do parents of children aged 7 to 12 years know about child growth and development?
- How do parents perceive the influence they have on their child's school performance and overall well-being? (i.e., academic performance, risk taking behaviour and mental health)?
- What are the barriers and opportunities parents identify when thinking of their engagement in child's school?

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the research questions, a questionnaire was developed to be administered to parents of children aged 7 to 12.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was developed into two parts: parent knowledge and parent engagement. A literature review was conducted for the parent knowledge of 7 to 12 year child growth and development component. The literature review encompassed examining research articles, questionnaires, public websites, and developmental tools for middle childhood (7 to 12 years). Members of the NCPC-RG formed a task group to develop the questionnaire regarding parent knowledge. The task group members decided to build on existing information. One such piece of information is the Middle years Development Instrument (MDI). The MDI is a self-reported questionnaire completed by children in Grade 4 and Grade 7, administered through The Human Early Learning Partnership out of the University of British Columbia. It asks children how they think and feel about their experiences both inside and outside of school. The MDI uses five domains to measure children's development:

- Health and Well-being
- Connectedness
- Social and Emotional Development
- Constructive Use of After School Time
- School Experiences

Spreadsheets were created that listed statements and data from reports, as well as questions from developmental tools, sorted according to MDI domains and by age group. Parental knowledge of child development changes with the different ages and stages, the NCPC-RG determined that the 7 to 12 age group would be further split into a 7 to 9 age group and a 10 to 12 age group.

The task group then forwarded the spreadsheets to key stakeholders (i.e., Public Health Nurse, School Board Mental Health Leads) to review and identify any issues or topics that were not present, and to filter down to key issues/topics for each age group.

The parent engagement component of the questionnaire was informed by the work of Dr. Catherine Hands, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. The parent engagement questions were adopted from Dr. Hands' family engagement tool. The family engagement tool was designed to find out how parents are involved in their children's education and their views about and how educators can do to help parents support their children's learning.

The draft questions, for both parent knowledge and engagement were sent to local subject matter experts; a Resource Consultant, Educators, a Public Health Nurse, a children's mental health provider, social workers, and an Aboriginal partner (to ensure that the questions were culturally appropriate) for each of the 5 areas of child development. 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.

As a successful recipient of the PRO Grant 2014-2015 funding from the Ministry of Education, the NCPC-RG had the opportunity to access local translation services to translate the questionnaire and resources into French. The goal of offering the questionnaire in French was to ensure inclusivity and equal opportunity to participate.

Data Collection

The questionnaire went live April 22, 2015 and was available online for five weeks, until May 26, 2015. 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)

The Niagara Catholic District School Board (NCDSB) and the District School Board of Niagara (DSBN) were involved in the promotion of the questionnaire to parents of children 7 to 12 years old. Ethics approval to promote the questionnaire within the schools was obtained from both school boards prior to the data collection period.

Incentives were offered to encourage parents to complete the questionnaire and participate in the study. (Please see Appendix I for the listing of promotion avenues)

The questionnaire was administered 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.

Data Analysis

All data collected was aggregated and reported at the population level. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through Stata 12 statistical software. The interpretation of analysis using the data followed accepted scientific standards.

FINDINGS

Overall, 510 parents submitted responses to the questionnaire. After assessing the responses for data completeness, 418 responses were including in the final analysis.

Parent Academic Involvement

- The majority of parents are confident in their knowledge of their child's growth and development (94.3%).
- Over half of parents stated that they were involved in their child's school (65.1%); however their main limitation to becoming more involved were their work hours (64.7%). Other contributing factors were child care needs (13.7%) and they don't feel welcome (8.4%) or haven't been invited to be involved (7.9%).
- Parents agreed that it was their responsibility to contact the teacher if they think their child is struggling in school (99.5%) and to show an interest in their child's schoolwork (99.8%). Following that, almost 99% of parents strongly agreed or agreed that it is their responsibility to know if their child is having trouble in school.
- Parents feel good about their efforts to help their child do well in school (88.2%) and that they can motivate their child to do well in school (83.9%) as their efforts to help their child learn are successful (82.9%). However, almost one third of the parents stated that they never knew if they were getting through to their child (27.6%).

School Communication Support

- Parents agreed that schools keep them informed of classroom/school events with permission slips (81.3%) and information about classroom/school events is in a language they understand (79.1%). Parents also agreed that the school did well at telling them how their child is doing in school (70.0%) and identifying areas of strengths or areas of improvement and what the next steps may be on report cards (74.6%).
- Parents expressed they would like more information on how to check their child's homework (61.5%), and potential community events that they may want to attend (63.0%). Parents also showed interest in wanting to be more included on school curriculum, budget or improvement committees (59.3%).
- Parents find that evenings are the most convenient time to come into the school (59.4%).

Satisfaction

- Parents agreed that they got along well with their child's teacher(s) (84.9%), and that the teachers at the school cared about their child (83.9%). Overall they agreed that their child attended a very good school (82.2%).

Social and Emotional Development

- Parents understand that it is important for their child's social and emotional health to have a positive outlook and expectations for their future (99.5%).
- When looking for clues to their child's emotional wellbeing, parents uniformly agree that when their child is comparing themselves to others or has a negative attitude about their own appearance and abilities that it is reason for concern (96.9%).
- Parents of children aged 7-9 years old unanimously agree that when their child is frustrated with their ability to complete a project, that communication and talking about why they feel the child can't do the project is important (100.0%). However, when their child makes reference to themselves being stupid when making a mistake, parents were divided between just saying that they should stop being silly and slow down (40.2%) or that they need to break down the problem and find out where the frustration is coming from (57.2%).
- Parents agreed that there was a difference between tattling and telling on someone (85.2%).
- When it comes to a shift in friendships, when something has happened between their child and a best friend, parents agree for the most part that they should talk with their child about their lack of interest in playing with their best friend (77.3%). However, a few parents felt it's the decision of the child and they need to respect that (15.6%). Parents did more strongly believe that excessive drama in their child's friendships warranted a conversation (85.1%).

- Most of the parents think that 10-years-old is not too soon for their child to develop romantic feelings for someone in their class (80.5%).

Connectedness

- Parents believe that it is important that there is another adult in the school or community for their child to turn to if they need help (98.3%).
- Parents also agreed that they have a strong influence on their child's attitudes toward school learning and future success (99.5%).
- As children spend more time with their friends, parents did not think they should limit their child's socializing because they spend less time with their family (79.9%).
- When their child was not invited to the "popular" kid's party and they wanted to go to their friend for social support, parents of children ages 7-9 thought this was a normal part of development and there was no need for concern (83.4%). However, fewer parents of older children felt that this was a normal part of development (66.9%).

School Experiences

- An area for potential communication was found in the response given in regards to bullying. One in five parents of students ages 7-9 years thought that bullying is just a part of growing up (17.4%), while one in four parents of 10-12 year olds thought bullying is just a normal part of growing up (24.0%).
- Parents agreed that bullying does not only occur at school (99.5%).
- Parents were undecided if all teasing would lead to bullying if there was no intervention in both age groups, with 58.4% thinking it would not.
- When dealing with cyber bullying, just under half of the parents thought that effective ways of dealing with cyber bullying is to save the evidence, tell the bully to stop, report the incident to the school when applicable, and notify the police (42.2%). The most common course of action was to report the incident to the school (85.1%).

Health and Well Being

- Parents disagreed that mental health problems do not affect children, and that mental health problems were not just a part of growing up (99.3%). Parents also believed that they could effectively help their child manage their stress (98.1%).
- Parents did not all agree how they problem solve when a child does not want to eat the meal they prepared. Just over half thought they should respect their decision and let them leave the table (55.0%), and some parents thought that the punishment should be no dessert (21.8%), or have no consequences and make the child an alternative meal (15.6%).
- Parents agreed that their children were not too young to talk to about drugs, tobacco and alcohol (96.7%).
- Parents agreed that their child was not too young to talk to about their changing bodies and their sexuality (95.0%), even if it may be awkward and embarrassing for them (98.8%).
- Most parents knew that their child should have 10 to 11 hours of sleep each night (64.6%), while one-third thought that less than 10 hours was sufficient (29.2%).
- Daily physical activity benefits were understood by parents of children in both age groups, as they knew it improved movement skills and fitness, improved motor skills, helped bones to become stronger and built a healthier heart (98.1%).

Constructive Use of After School Time

- Parents knew that children do not get all the activity that they need from active screen time (97.8%). Parents also agree that the best way to limit the amount of screen time that their children have is through establishing ground rules (95.9%); however, fewer parents thought that having no electronics in the children's bedroom is important (27.0%).

- Most parents did not think that their children needed to participate in organized sports to get the full benefit of physical activity (74.2%).
- Parents uniformly agreed that establishing a routine will help with the battle that may occur when trying to get their children to complete their afterschool homework (90.2%). Approximately five percent of parents thought that their children accepting the consequences from their teacher was a better learning experience for the future.
- Keeping a busy schedule with structured activities every day was not seen by parents as beneficial for children academically and socially (74.6%).

CONCLUSION

The Parent Knowledge and Engagement study is a collection of local data on parent knowledge of growth and development of children 7 to 12 years old and parent engagement. Level of parent knowledge of child growth and development were reported based on 5 domains of middle childhood – Health and Well-being, Connectedness, Social and Emotional Development, Constructive Use of After School Time, and School Experiences. These results will help to inform future community events, workshops, and programs to help support parents and families in Niagara. The study also collected valuable information about ways to better engage and support parents in schools. Future implications will use these data to better inform, plan, and support quality workshops, programs, and events for families in Niagara.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Niagara Children's Planning Council-Research Group (NCPC-RG), we would like to thank everyone that was involved in the Parent Knowledge and Engagement Study. Thank you to the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to successfully support the project through the Parents' Reaching out (PRO) Grant. Thank you the Niagara Catholic District School Board (NCDSB) and District School Board of Niagara (DSBN) for the opportunity to promote and support the study through the school board. Thank you to Dr. Catherine Hands for her commitment and support throughout the development of the questionnaire. Thank you to all Niagara Children's Planning Council (NCPC) partners, and subject-matter consultants, for your continuous support for children, parents and families in Niagara. Thank you to all of the parents in Niagara that took the time to support the study and complete the questionnaire. And thank you to the Business Education Council (BEC) of Niagara for your continuous administrative support.

This report is completed by:

Stephanie Tukonic*
Niagara Region Community Services
Stephanie.Tukonic@niagararegion.ca

Rachel Skellet
Niagara Region Public Health

*Primary contact

APPENDIX

Listing of Promotion Avenues

Digital advertising:

BEC employment services branches and their 8 partners
 Facebook ads
 Google ads
 Kijiji
 Niagara Parents twitter
 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

Poster advertising:

Concord Soccer Club
 Greater Fort Erie Youth Soccer Club
 Pen Centre Mall (posters in desired locations and near directories)
 Seaway Mall
 St. Catharines Roma Soccer Club

Survey Post Card and Posters:

Centre de Santé Communautaire
 Children's Services Fee Subsidy Staff
 District School Board of Niagara (DSBN)
 Family and Children's Services Niagara at 5 Counseling Centres
 Licensed child care centres with before- and after-school programs
 Licensed home child care
 Niagara Catholic District School Board (NCDSB)
 Niagara Indigenous Children's Planning Council
 Pathstone Mental Health
 Public Health programs
 Youth University summer camp registration at Brock University

Listing of Parents' Voice Prizes

1. Holiday Inn Parkway Lanes Bowling and Pizza Gift Certificate
2. Niagara Inflatables \$400 Party Package
3. Niagara Whirlpool Jet Tours
4. Robert Nowell Photography Family Portrait
5. YMCA One Year Family Membership
6. Zap Zone family pass