

EVALUATION REPORT . 2015

EARLY YEARS CENTRES (EYC)





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In Partnership with:



Provincial Office
for the Early Years

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Fall of 2015, the Human Early Learning Partnership was engaged by the provincial Early Years Office to complete an early stage evaluation of the lessons learned from the first twelve Early Years Centres (EYCs) funded under the government's Early Years Strategy. This report documents the findings from this evaluation.

The evaluation used several conceptual models developed specifically to guide the evaluation, including a Theory of Change for the overall initiative, and two descriptive models that describe the processes of relationship building and service integration.

Evaluation participants stressed relationship building and trust, as core to the success of the EYC work. They form a foundation for the complex work of addressing service fragmentation in a systematic way. In many cases, the relationships referred to are long-standing, built over a number of years of networking and collaborative work. Much of this work has been done under the umbrella of Early Years Tables and evaluation participants reflected on this. In some cases, new relationships have been built as a result of the EYC.

Emerging from the evaluation interviews and reflective journals completed by EYC staff and leadership in the twelve sites, were a number of other lessons. Time was stressed as a key theme – the time required both to effectively build the foundation necessary for EYC success, and the time lag between activity and results. Two lessons emerged that relate to the early stages in the start up of an EYC: the importance of gaining commitment and buy-in from the start (including the planning stages of the EYC); and a focus on ensuring true community leadership and ownership of the EYC. Two lessons also emerged that relate to the focus and approach of the EYC: the importance of establishing a families first philosophy that places children and their families at the centre of any decision; and the importance of a vision that is shared across all partner agencies. Three lessons emerged that relate to the operation of the EYC's: the potential benefits that can accrue through co-locating services; the value of moving toward service integration; and the importance of building a shared decision-making and team approach.

The evaluation also confirmed that addressing barriers to access is an essential component of EYC success. A range of known barriers has been experienced by the first twelve EYC's. It is clear that the role of the EYC in broadening the reach of services through partnerships and working together is effective.

The early evaluation work established that the EYC's have been a catalyst for a variety of changes. The EYC approach has a number of strengths that have encouraged these varying forms and degrees of change. At the same time, the EYC's have been implemented in a complex system and there will need to be on-going systematic attention paid to building deep and meaningful relationships as a foundation for effective strategies that maintain a focus on children and families first. This will require sustained support from many levels of government and on-going dialogue at many levels as further lessons are learned and as EYC navigate the various opportunities and challenges offered by the EYC approach.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2012, the government of British Columbia (BC) released the Families First Agenda, a plan to better support children and families in BC. The government engaged with British Columbians across the province to gather advice on how to improve programs, refocus planning and better orient government. Key findings from public engagement about early years services included the need for enhanced integration, coordination, and development of existing early years policies and programs to address fragmentation and service gaps to better meet the needs of families across BC.



In February 2013 the BC government set out the Early Years Strategy (BC Early Years Strategy), an eight-year government commitment to improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of early-years programs and services for families with young children. A key component of the strategy is the establishment of Early Years Centres (EYC) in communities across BC.

In the fall of 2014, twelve Early Years Centres were funded. These centres are intended to enable parents and families in a number of BC communities to connect to early learning, health, and family services through a single window – families being served by one agency are easily referred to and connected with a range of services offered by other agencies without having to make multiple contacts for different services. Centres are supportive physical or virtual places (or both) and involve communities working together to ensure that families have access to services and supports that promote the health, well-being and development of children aged 0-6 years. Early Years Centres build on services that exist in communities, including information, services, and referrals for families, such as drop-in's and school based programs (e.g., StrongStart BC and Ready, Set Learn).

This report summarizes work done by the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) to conduct an early stage assessment of the lessons learned from the first 12 Centres. Data were gathered using two main tools: key informant interviews and reflective journals completed by Centre staff. A primary aim of the evaluation of lessons learned was to understand the common and unique perspectives, experiences and contexts for those personnel centrally involved in planning and implementing the EYCs in each community.

Though the report focuses on data gathered specifically to evaluate the new Early Years Centres, it is clear that similar work to enhance collaboration and reduce service fragmentation has been underway for many years in British Columbia, supported by many experts and Early Years Tables and coordinators. This work is part of the context into which the Early Years Centres have been introduced. The lessons emerging from the evaluation of the EYCs, in particular, therefore have relevance much more broadly. Our hope is that clear articulation of the lessons, along with a conceptual framework, will enhance the early years sector in BC toward improving outcomes for children.

EYC EVALUATION CONCEPTS

The EYC evaluation is guided by three key conceptual frameworks regarding: 1) an EYC Theory of Change, 2) an inter-organizational and inter-sectoral collaboration continuum, and 3) a service integration continuum. Existing literature and inter-organizational theories informed the development of the conceptual frameworks which are each summarized briefly below.

Program Theory of Change

The evaluation approach was guided by a working “Theory of Change” (see Figure 1 on page 5). This was developed to describe the story upon which the Early Years Centres are based. The Theory of Change model developed for the Early Years Centres focuses on two key strategic thrusts: the goal of increasing inter-sectoral collaboration and the goal of reducing service fragmentation through improved coordination and potentially, service integration. It describes these two goals as a foundation for decisions about service choice and delivery approaches. It also clearly connects the work of the Centres to the ultimate goal of improved child outcomes. This model does not go into the detail of describing the specific programs and interventions that will be used in each pilot site. These will differ depending on the specific model that each has developed, to reflect the context in which each Centre is operating. The theory of change provided a guiding framework for understanding lessons learned from the first six months of EYC operation.



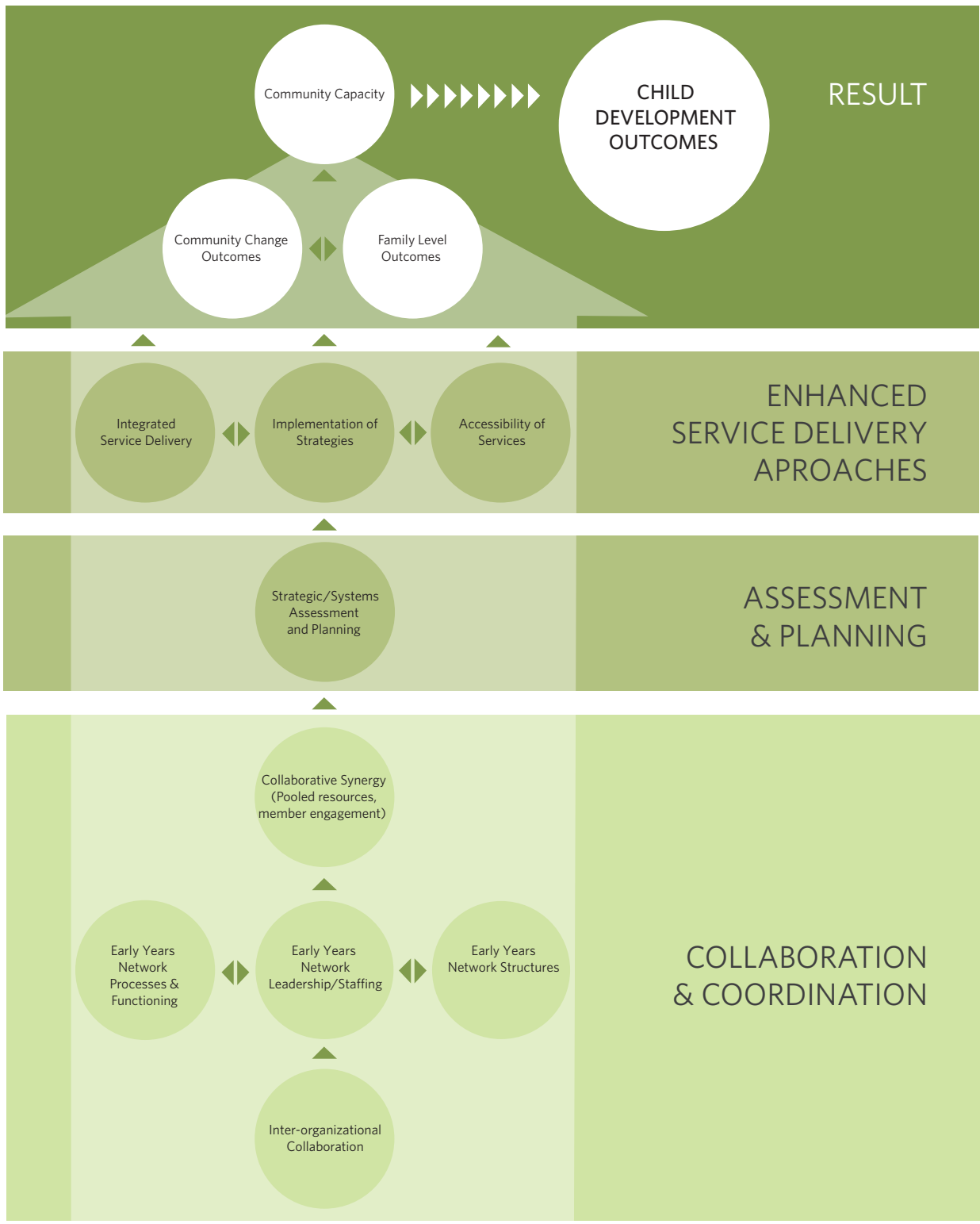


Figure 1. Early Years Centre Working Theory of Change

CONCEPTS OF COLLABORATION AND SERVICE INTEGRATION

HELP developed two models, each organized as a conceptual continuum, to provide more detailed definitions of the two primary goals of the EYCs: service integration and enhanced coordination. These conceptual working models were developed specifically to invite response and reaction from EYC personnel.

A Continuum of Collaboration

Collaboration and relationship building is about the capacity of organizations to work together toward a common objective in a seamless way, where together, the organizations achieve more than they could separately. The diversity of collaboration types has been characterized as a continuum where one end of the continuum is reflective of organizations that hardly relate to one another, even when a problem or issue extends beyond its current capabilities; a middle range where organizations may share information and coordinate activities; and the other end where organizations have merged their authority and capabilities.¹



Figure 2. Continuum of Coordinated Processes and Collaboration

¹ Kagan S. United we stand: Collaboration for child care and early education services. New York, NY: Teachers College Press; 1991.

Mattessich P, Monsey B. Collaboration: what makes it work. A review of research literature on factors influencing successful collaboration. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 1992.

Bryson JM, Crosby BC, Stone MM. The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations: propositions from the literature. Public Adm Rev. 2006;66:44-55.

Austin JE, Seitanidi MM. Collaborative value creation: a review of partnering between nonprofits and businesses. Part 2: partnership processes and outcomes. Nonprofit Voluntary Sector Quart. 2012.

Austin JE. Strategic collaboration between nonprofits and business. Nonprofit Voluntary Sector Quart. 2000;29 (suppl 1):69-97.

A Continuum of Service Integration

Service integration is about bringing together previously separate and independent services delivered by different agencies into a more comprehensive service delivery system. Service integration is a strategic approach to breaking down silos in service delivery models, such as service delivery fragmentation and service duplication. The steps toward service integration have also been characterized as a continuum with co-existence at one end and integrated service delivery at the other.

Through the process of capturing lessons learned we also gained some new insights into adaptations to the collaborative and service integration continua: how they can reflect more appropriately the intent and outcomes of the EYCs. Adapted models, based on experience, will therefore be possible for the next cycle of EYCs.²

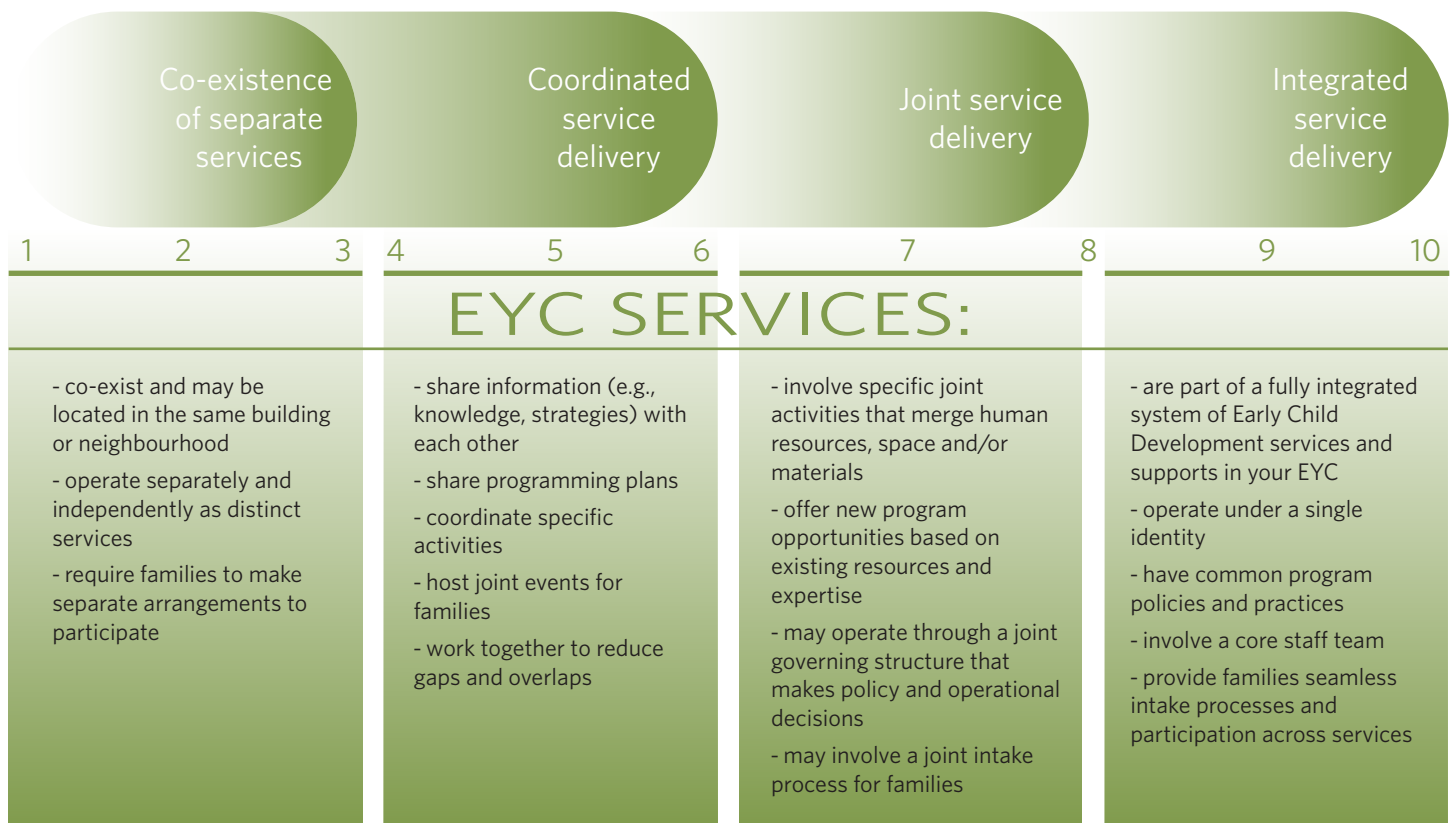


Figure 3. Continuum of Service Integration

² O’Looney J. Marking progress toward service integration: learning to use evaluation to overcome barriers. *Adm Soc Work*. 1997;21(3-4):31-65. Keast R, Brown K, Mandell M. Getting the right mix: unpacking integration meanings and strategies. *Int Public Manage J*. 2007;10(1):9-33. Provan KG, Milward HB. A preliminary theory of interorganizational network effectiveness: a comparative study of four community mental health systems. *Adm Sci Q*. 1995;40(1):1-33.

Approach to Understanding Lessons

The work to understand the early lessons learned from the first six months of operation of the 12 Early Years Centres was built on the core principles of continuous learning and adaptation – using data capture and reporting to generate community support and engagement, building capacity, refining strategies, and improving practice. The primary goal was to gather information that would contribute to understanding lessons learned as the first Centres started up and as their work unfolded.



The 12 sites involved in the evaluation were:

- Comox Valley (Comox Valley Child Development Society)
- Delta (Reach Child and Youth Development Society)
- Golden (Golden Community Resource Society)
- Langley (Langley Children’s Society)
- Mission (Fraser Valley Child Development Centre)
- 100 Mile House (Cariboo Family Enrichment Centre Society)
- Nqsilt (Penticton and District Community Resources Society)
- Revelstoke (Revelstoke Child Care Society)
- Saanich Peninsula (Beacon Community Association)
- Sooke (Sooke Family Resource Society)
- Sunshine Coast (Halfmoon Bay-Chatelech Community School Association)
- Vanderhoof (Carrier Sekani Family Services)

The evaluation approach focused on gathering qualitative data from selected leads (staff and host site managers) at EYC pilot sites to assess the leads’ perspectives on key qualities of the EYC initiative. Methods included:

- A review of EYC proposals and interim reports;
- 60 to 90 minute individual semi-structured telephone interviews with 25 EYC leads;
- Multiple written reflective journal entries from 24 leads collected at two points in time.

EYC leads from each of the 12 sites participated in the project. The data were analyzed using a process that enables us to identify and understand core concepts and themes. For more information about the techniques used, please contact the lead research for this project at the Human Early Learning Partnership (Brenda Poon, Assistant Professor) at brenda.poon@ubc.ca.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

A Summary of the Findings

Lessons learned from this early evaluation work fall into three main categories.

Relationship Building

- » Relationship building is essential to improving outcomes for children and cannot be rushed; it takes time to build relationships and trust

Improving Coordination and Moving Toward Service Integration

- » Allow for the time allocation required for a truly collaborative, team approach
- » Early Years Tables as a facilitating influence for the EYCs
- » Importance of confirming engagement and willingness from the start
- » Establishment of true community leadership and ownership of EYC
- » Importance of a families-first philosophy
- » Developing a shared vision is essential
- » Developing a shared responsibility approach is an important foundation
- » Co-locating services in one location facilitates relationship-building between professionals
- » Service integration as enhancement not loss

Enhancing accessibility of services

- » Barriers to access for families are structural and relational
- » Broadening service reach and supports for families is strengthened by building partnerships and working together



RELATIONSHIP BUILDING LESSONS

Relationship building cannot be rushed; it takes time to build relationships and trust

Relationship building was a critical process for both the planning and implementation of the EYCs. It is important to note that strong, respectful and enduring relationships serve as a pre-requisite for progress and underlie the lessons learned about collaboration, moving toward service integration and enhancing service accessibility.



“...the bottom line of this work is that it’s about relationships and it goes right back to the relationships between the service providers, relationships between organizations and relationships between service providers and their families. That is the bottom line I think of what we are trying to do. So it’s not really so much of the money as sort of the planning work and allowing for time.”

The evaluation confirmed the importance of establishing relationships, making connections and information sharing with other potential programs or organizational partners. Successful collaboration requires that people truly listen, persevere and take the time as needed to understand others’ value systems, their goals, and importantly, ways that they were working towards the same goals. A priority objective of building relationships for most EYCs was to promote awareness of the Centre itself. For some sites, this meant being flexible and facilitative in bridging to other organizations and people in order to truly connect and become a regular trusted, known presence in the community.

Participants also noted the importance of not only establishing new relationships but also building upon pre-existing relationships between professionals in the community. In most cases, early years professionals already knew each other, particularly in small communities, and have built connections and strong working relationships over an extended period of time.

“I think again we’ve already got a historical relationship. So a historical relationship... those hours have been put in. Those relationships have been made and really now we are just enhancing.”

There were several facilitators for the relationship-building process including:

- general enthusiasm and openness for the EYC initiative,
- a general commitment and prioritization about the potential benefits of the EYCs for families; and
- trust as central to the relationship-building process.

There were some challenges to trust and relationship building:

- personality differences between community stakeholders;
- the presence of existing tensions amongst partners; and
- perceptions that personnel from other organizations, disciplines, or sectors viewed the services or programs offered as lower quality than their own, and, therefore, were hesitant to collaborate.

“One of the key insights has been that it is more work to deliver a project that has a collaborative, team approach. Ensuring that all of the stakeholders are included in decisions and planning takes time. It is important for us to remember that not everything will be accomplished the first year of the project.”

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT IMPROVING COORDINATION AND MOVING TOWARD SERVICE INTEGRATION

Allow for the time allocation required for a truly collaborative, team approach

The evaluation made evident the importance of not rushing the process of developing a collaborative approach and developing community capacity to improve supports for young children and families.

Time is necessary to foster commitment, change in practices, and continuity in communications across organizational partners and buy-in across every level of the system. The evaluation highlights the importance of time and collective action needed to achieve systems-level change.

In some EYCs, time is allocated to reaching out to build collaboration and a broader sense of involvement and inclusiveness with partners, not only at the managerial and decision-making levels, but also at the provider level. For example, some sites organized community forums to include service providers in the EYCs and also offered continued professional development opportunities; which some participants stated was critical for promoting quality services; particularly when there were professionals who worked distances away from each other and were not in one physical location.

Time Challenges:

“...the collective process and building the collective project is you know, it takes time and you have to not have too high expectations that changes are coming too quickly because these are big systems that we’re working with.”

EYC personnel often feel stretched for time and this can influence efforts to enhance collaborative, team-building approaches. There is a need for additional time to focus on coordination and integration efforts (i.e., “the big picture”), but also to address specific program and project needs (e.g., website development, offering programs). It is a balancing act, given the range of responsibilities and priorities encompassed by the EYCs. It takes time to truly devote sufficient energy to relationship- and trust-building processes that were necessary and central to enhancing the EYC’s coordinating and integrative functions.



Early Years Tables as a facilitating influence for the EYCs

Evaluation participants were asked to reflect on the alignment of their Early Years Table with their EYC. Typically, the Early Years Tables were described as a facilitating influence for the EYC and a number of examples of this relationship were described as described below.

In many cases, Tables have a shared history of working together and numerous collaborative initiatives completed or underway, which meant that there was often a foundation for EYCs to draw from. Evaluation participants provided examples of The Tables providing the EYC with an established place to share information and programming ideas, with the goal of reducing service gaps. In many cases, evaluation participants perceived the Early Years Tables as a support network for the EYC, where members could bring forth issues and ideas for feedback and also access resources to facilitate planning activities. For example, EYCs can draw from their Early Years Table strategic plan to develop an EYC work plan that aligned with the Table's vision and objectives. At sites where there was mixed representation of table members from across sectors, there were also opportunities for cross-sectoral/Ministerial planning and involvement in EYC development.



"It's more of the competition, a bit about turf war kind of thing and the feeling that the Early Years table feels that we, as an Early Years Center, are trying to take over."

However, there were also challenges in synchronizing the work of Tables and EYCs:

Some EYCs underutilized the Table in their community. In these cases the challenges related primarily to the historical context of the relationship amongst people and organizations, as well as longstanding feelings of competition, where it was felt that one agency or group was trying to take over all early childhood development supports and programs in the community.

In some EYCs, power struggles developed when the 'newcomers' to the table and/or the EYC felt marginalized by the experienced resistance from longstanding members. In order to prevent perceived inequities amongst members of the tables, some communities were proactive in communicating to its members that all voices at the table were equal. As one participant stated,

"It's crucial for us. It's the most important thing and that it's equal voice at the table so it's the parent or the superintendent -- you have the same respect, and the same input and [that] has to be there. You can't have that imbalance power. There has to be a balance."

“...we made it a priority if we were going to apply for the Early Years Centre. At the application stage, we needed to be all included. We needed to be one team moving forward.”

“When we did the planning around the proposal that we wanted to put forward we did kind of a round table at one point where we really challenged organizations to say are you willing to go down this road because the whole idea around the EYC was that we would have an expectation from each other that we would hold each other to account to make sure that we are doing the most that we can around collaboration.”

“It has not yet been my experience, however, that the stakeholders are taking true leadership over the EYC – just responding by attending meetings and doing whatever they are asked to support the effort. This is wonderful of course, but leaves me with a feeling that this is more a project of the [organization], with a lot of willing helpers, rather than a joint endeavor.”

Importance of confirming engagement and willingness from the start

The implementation of EYC principles and approaches in a community required buy-in, commitment and the engagement of all partners from the funding proposal stage onward. It was important early on for all partners to be on the same page about their plans and objectives and to be clear about each of their respective roles, responsibilities and expectations moving forward. It was important to gauge and obtain partner involvement from the EYC application process onward.

Early stage commitment to the EYC process and activities was particularly important in two regards:

It was essential that partner staff and professionals were being connected and accountable to one another. . This was achieved through consistent staff involvement. Regular check-ins and communication between staff also helped partners remain engaged and committed to their agreed upon responsibilities in implementing the EYC.

Engagement of community stakeholders across organizations and programs in development of the EYCs required early stage commitment to understanding each other's value systems and goals, and assessing and pursuing new ways of working together toward similar goals. Early identification of shared values across organizations and partners also strengthened the likelihood that other involved parties would “buy in” or commit to participation in, and involvement with, the EYC process.

Establishment of true community leadership and ownership of EYC

In general, the initiation of an EYC at each site generated enthusiasm amongst community stakeholders about the potential to enhance supports for young children and families. It energized relationship-building efforts across organizations. Although there were opportunities for service enhancement and collaboration, there were also significant challenges in collectively moving forward from the proposal stage to further planning and implementation. There was general consensus, in principle, about the importance of a team approach in developing the EYC. However, in practice, the 12 EYCs did not report a strong sense of collective leadership, though building or enhancing collaborative community leadership was noted as a key goal for some sites.

Another challenge to community leadership and ownership involved habitual ways of working together that were less amenable to building or encouraging leadership capacity, often as a result of the historical functioning of the Early Years Table. At Tables where the primary function was networking rather than collective action, this was particularly the case. Full collective leadership potential, involving an extension or adaptation of pre-existing relationship ties across organizations, was not yet being explored or realized.

“And we’re really trying to shift that focus at the table so instead of coming and reporting what you’ve done, to come to the table asking for feedback about what you’re planning to do.... So just shifting that mindset. It’s ever so slightly but it’s a huge step forward.”

“When space becomes available, we have sort of a shared understanding of what it is we are trying to create, what sort of community partners could work in that space to serve the community families with young children. Yeah, I think it’s the shared vision and values and opportunities to meet together more and pulling [together] leaders and ideas. And I guess we are doing more problem-solving together.”

A further barrier to building collective community leadership was the fear over the potential loss of funding and programming if EYCs continued to pursue integrated service delivery. In some places, there were also longstanding territorial issues (i.e., disagreements about “turf”) across organizations or personality differences that hindered collective leadership efforts.

EYC personnel described a range of strategies for addressing these challenges:

The importance of a mindset shift for organizational partners - moving from thinking and acting as separate entities toward collective ownership and leadership of the EYC - was clear. At Table meetings, there was a need for a change in communication and ways of relating to one another where members moved beyond information sharing and updates toward more collective planning and decision-making.

For some Tables, this shift occurred through engaging in a process of joint grant proposal development. This helped in encouraging discussions about shared values and a shared vision. Other strategies for promoting collective ownership included implementation of a shared branding strategy for different EYC sites and, in some cases, sharing a physical space where different agencies and programs that were previously located in different geographic locations moved to be at one site.

To promote community leadership and ownership, participants noted the importance of continually reaching out and building relationships with people from other sectors who work with families of young children.



“Well, work with and alongside your [Early Years] committee; get to know your community inside and out. Establish strong relationships to work together to coordinate and integrate programs, reach out to parents, families and people in your community for ideas, thoughts, resources. Pay attention to the needs of the community, listen to families, participate [in] community events, talk to people...”

“I think that so often we talk about [a] colleague-focused thing when we talk about collaboration and integration -- we are actually are looking at the systems and the professionals. I'd like to turn it on its head and look at the families and if [we] absolutely put the families first and their needs, the other things should fall into place.”

“I think the big difference between before the Early Years Centre and after the Early Years Centre is that we all feel that we don't have to fight so hard for our individual programs. We're all saying, 'okay we can do this for us this time and then we'll work something for you next time'.... And just making sure that everybody is working on the same plan.”

Importance of a families-first philosophy

The first step in providing accessible services for children and families often involved learning from families what their needs were. The second step was developing and implementing a plan for community supports, programs and services to meet those needs.

The characteristics of a families-first philosophy include professionally trained personnel whose values encompassed delivering high quality, family-focused programming. Programming was centered on working with families to develop and build upon their strengths, identify families' needs, and develop ways to meet those needs.

“For me and for our agency quality means universal access, it means local access, it means well trained, qualified, holistically-functioning staff, it means your service delivery is holistic [and] strength-based and that the families, the people you are serving, come first.”

A families-first philosophy also involved EYC personnel connecting with the community and establishing the EYC as a key community resource.

A families-first philosophy, if prioritized by all organizational partners, can facilitate:

- the development of a shared vision and set of goals, and, in turn, enhanced integration of services;
- a collaborative approach amongst organizational partners that involved connecting about how families were being supported within the community, identifying gaps, and collectively determining ways to address those gaps. Central to promoting a families-first approach was respect for values and preferences and recognition of power imbalances professional-to-family and also professional-to-professional.
- outreach and barrier reduction. This includes reaching families beyond the physical location of the EYCs by going to parents' homes or places they often visited to share information about the EYC and build rapport with families so that they would feel welcome at the centres. Outreach also reflected efforts to build relationships with families to meet families physically and emotionally where they were comfortable.

Developing a shared vision is essential

EYC development required that different people and organizational partners worked together toward a shared purpose and toward a common vision. Developing a shared vision requires time, reciprocity (i.e., give-and-take) across partners, and ongoing dialogue to understand each other's priorities and perspectives.

"I'd like us, as a table, [to] have more discussions about common language.

How do we even actually not just talk about our own services, but how do we talk about each other's services in a way that truly is sharing a vision of early years service. So not only common language but positive language. I think that sometimes it's easier for folks to talk about their own services in a really positive light and it's hard to talk about other people services that way because you don't know them as well."

"We have a team meeting every week at the Early Years Center. We document and we monitor the changes [in] integration, where we can improve and we brainstorm strategies to help develop the positive relationship. We are very team-oriented here. I am the coordinator, but I do work within a team. Any decisions or anything that I have, we decide as a team."

Building blocks for the development of a shared vision included:

- strong communication between organizational partners, including efforts to speak the "same language" and develop shared meanings about the vision and objectives of the EYCs;
- organizations that were knowledgeable and also appreciative of the types of services and supports that each of the partner organizations offered, in order to portray a positive, cohesive vision of an EYC to the community;
- organizational partners who had a strong understanding of community needs and the challenges that different organizations may be facing (e.g., funding availability) that would hinder the extent of involvement in the EYC; and
- a shared value of being "in it for the kids" and their families. This appeared to be a binding factor in relationship building across professionals and organizational partners, even in light of differences of opinion in other areas. Of central importance was a family-centered philosophy, where organizational partners placed the utmost value on being responsive to the community and what families needed.

Importantly, a shared vision provided a strong foundation for the development of strategies for measurement and documentation of EYC processes and outcomes, which was occurring to a varying extent across sites (aside from the mandatory provincial reporting).

Developing a shared responsibility approach is an important foundation

The evaluation made evident the importance of a "team" approach. Acting as a team meant that no one person made decisions; decision-making was a shared process. Shared decision-making involves developing collective responses to address community needs and concerns: essentially, a shared responsibility approach.

Factors that enhanced a shared responsibility approach included:

- tools and processes for formalizing and sustaining a shared responsibility approach;
- personnel/human resources and organizational partners who possessed values and skills in teamwork and who embraced a family-centered philosophy;
- clear direction and leadership not only in maintaining focus and action on reaching the broad, long-term goals and vision of the EYCs, but also managing the day-to-day operations of the centres. Direction and leadership was needed at multiple levels; including the expressed need for commitment at a senior level from various stakeholder agencies to enhanced service coordination and integration, as well as additional provincial guidance and leadership regarding the EYCs' overarching objectives (i.e., the "big picture"), action plans, and desired structure or organization.

“...we were asked to be including and collaborative and have the blessing of the Early Years Table for the project, which we were able to acquire quite early on in the game. But now it’s confusing around what the roles and responsibilities are for me.”

“It’s easier now to collaborate on program and initiatives because they all can happen under one roof... not all of them but many of them can happen under one roof. That was one of the barriers before to really collaborating in a visible way within the community -- was that we were fragmented.”

“I think it [an EYC involving co-located services] might be a little bit harder for those who don’t actually live in those buildings in service delivery to feel truly a part of it.”

“My goal has been to spend, as much time as needed, listen to show that their particular program and service can be enhanced not lost and I think there was some fear of that.”

Challenges to a shared responsibility approach included:

- difficulty in finding and hiring people who were a good fit with the designated EYC roles and responsibilities;
- ambiguity in defined work roles, with respect to specific tasks and responsibilities. There can be confusion about roles and responsibilities and the need for greater clarity; and
- staff changes or turnover particularly in cases where EYC sites did not yet have a model of collective or team leadership in place, and instead were relying on a single person or two to lead and also do the bulk of the work.

Co-locating services in one location facilitates relationship-building between professionals

Co-located services facilitated relationship building by:

- providing a common space for easier communication and collaboration between professionals who might otherwise work in isolation;
- fostering coordination across agencies where resources, such as space and equipment, could be shared. This fostered opportunities for additional communication and increased frequency of interactions, both in person through meetings, as well as electronically through e-mail communications;
- enabling new and different partners to develop a sense of working together and belongingness as part of an EYC.

There were also challenges to co-location:

- it was not always easy to find an ideal location for an EYC that would not contribute to feelings of territorialism amongst different organizational partners; and
- if all partners could not be housed under one roof owing to space limitations, it can place stress on relationships and lead some organizational partners to have less of a sense of belonging with the EYC.

Service integration as enhancement not loss

An essential aspect of promoting service integration was a dialogue with existing and potential organizational partners in the community about the influence of the EYCs on the integrity of individual programs. Integral to these discussions was developing a shared understanding that service integration in the EYC context was not necessarily equivalent to a loss of individual agencies; instead, the aim was to build from what each program had to offer.

“Although each of us recognizes that all components have value, the reality is that we hold some aspects closer to our hearts than others. It has been important to surface the fear that we will become ‘territorial’ and will ignore the aspects that some hold most dear. It is a process of building trust, which is a slow, yet important aspect of a project such as this.”

Some of the challenges to service integration included:

- the complexity of moving toward integration when funding and existing services were based on year-to-year contracts and, therefore, vulnerable to funding cuts;
- developing a shared understanding of the EYC principles and functions across organizational partners amidst pervasive siloes in service delivery models;
- longstanding power struggles; and
- divisions between programs, philosophies, mandates of the program based on the Ministry served by the program, and different funding structures were barriers to service integration.

To help overcome past boundary setting and feelings of territorialism, it was important to develop shared understandings amongst community stakeholders of the purpose, principles and functions of the EYC. This included increasing the awareness of power imbalances between organizations and recognizing potential inequities between populations in the community.

“It’s the primary piece of it is building trust, understanding the program, knowing what each person does fully and how being a part of an Early Years Centre is going to enhance a program or not. It’s about providing time and collecting information and being empathic to the understanding of their history and their philosophy of the program and taking a really high look down on what is actually... what are they being asked to do and how can that work to meet the needs of an Early Year Centre and maintain the integrity of their program and philosophy.”

A move towards integrating each partner’s vision into a new expanded vision was also a tool to address the challenges. This encouraged the creation of opportunities for meaningful dialogue, where at the core of relationship-building were processes for building trust and shared understanding.

Generally, the evaluation established that the hesitancy for integration and prevailing feelings of territorialism and boundary-setting can be resolved, at least in part, if the primary focus across organizational partners is on the big picture of helping families access services in their communities, to meet families’ needs, and to provide the best supports possible for families and their young children.



“While the [transportation] will be paid for, for a medical appointment [at a distant location]. It’s not that affordable for them in many other ways, it’s a full day away from home, that could mean child care for somebody that means transportation... it means food while you’re away.... There’s no way they are going to get to see a speech pathologist for example, unless they take a day off work, so that’s loss of income and time conflicts.”

“Our website, we’ve totally focused in making it easy, family-friendly, inviting and so, that always looking at it through the lenses of a child, and a young family, right? That’s really important to us. I also think too much information can be a barrier keeping the information simple. I know in my own school, too much information can be completely overwhelming to families, so we make a point of not putting out more information than is necessary.”

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT ENHANCING SERVICE ACCESSIBILITY

Barriers to access for families are structural and relational

Participants identified numerous barriers that children and families may experience in accessing the EYCs. These barriers were either structural (physical or logistical barriers, such as location of the EYC or lack of transportation) or relational (psychological or attitudinal barriers such as mistrust, anxiety and feeling judged).

Structural barriers

Transportation, centre location, and program scheduling can be key structural barriers, especially for geographically isolated families and families experiencing financial difficulties or living in poverty. For some families living in small towns or outside of urban areas, the EYC can be difficult to reach. Other barriers included perceptions about whether the EYC was centrally located, or the times and dates for the programs of interest not meeting families’ needs, resulting in limited or inconsistent participation in EYC programs and services.

Parents’ financial difficulties

Being socioeconomically disadvantaged or experiencing financial difficulties compounds the structural or relational barriers that families’ experience. Transportation to EYC sites using public transit or a vehicle may not be feasible owing to a family’s limited resources and other priority concerns. Access to online informational resources may also be limited or non-existent, owing to lack of affordability of internet services. Access to specialized services or supports may also be challenging for some families. For example, travel to EYC sites was impracticable for some families, as these trips incurred costs of travel, meals and sometimes overnight hotel stays, if more comprehensive assessments were required.

Parents’ lack of awareness of services

Another barrier was the parents’ lack of knowledge and information about the EYCs. One contributing factor is that families may not access the information available. A common strategy to address this was the use of online communications materials. At the same time, there were concerns that not all families can access the internet, especially isolated, low-income, and non-English speaking families; and parents have varying levels of literacy.

The primary strategies used to increase awareness of the EYCs included the creation of websites that were family-friendly, simple and clear in content, relevant to families in the area, and inviting. Some EYC sites also created other online platforms, such a Facebook page.

Other strategies to address this barrier included translation of informational resources into the languages most spoken in the area; the creation of a community ‘navigator’ role, a person to act both as a central informational resource and also to assist families to connect with necessary services; outreach and building connections with families, including meeting families in person at community events.

Relational Barriers

A number of relational barriers influence families' participation in the EYCs. In some cases, the environment of the centre and staff can be intimidating for families. Consequences of this may be not only limited family engagement with the EYCs, but also lower likelihood of information-seeking, owing to feelings of discomfort in asking others for information. Families may be hesitant to approach the EYCs for fear of being judged by staff and also by other participants. As one participant put it:

"The good thing about a small town is everybody knows everything; the bad thing about a small town, everybody knows everything. So a lot of people, if there's information out there it gets spread really fast and so I think that some parents out there who maybe... don't think that they're doing such a great job shy away from a lot of programs because they think they're going to be judged."



"What I'm feeling is that we all are talking about how to reach families and there is a real sense that creating -- it has to be sort of done differently this time around, that it's not just about creating a new program and hoping that people come. It's about trying to find innovative ways of reaching out."

Other barriers included parents' fear of gossip, meeting individuals with whom the parent had strained relationships, and the stigma of poverty. According to EYC personnel, these barriers were quite pronounced for families living in rural and semi-rural environments.

'Cultural safety,' and the importance of promoting inclusiveness and families' ease of access to and comfort in participating in EYC programs, particularly in terms of feeling respected for their diversity, whether this was by cultural or immigrant status, socio-economic status, family structure, or gender were widely considered as critical to enhancing service accessibility. The unique histories of local First Nations peoples, being aware of intergenerational trauma, mistrust of the 'system', and avoiding potential triggers is essential. For the majority of participants, however, there was limited description of concepts of cultural safety that reflected trust-building, historical context, and balance of power in relationships. Fostering processes of mutual learning and respect may be a topic area that merits further dialogue and development amongst and between EYC teams not only in terms of cultural safety within professional-family cross-cultural interactions, but also professional-to-professional interactions.

Many innovative ideas emerged about how to reach families through the EYC, but a challenge was that often these were viewed as add-ons rather than alternatives to what was already being done. In one participant's words, "in order to have impact there needed to be an element of change."

“...the walls have come down and it’s not so much about “it’s my [group]” it’s more that people have realized that in order to help and in order to support and to reach out to these families that it makes more sense to work together and to use every single one of us to get what we need for these families, right?”

“To increase your resource, to increase your knowledge and all of it -- I think that’s the biggest thing that everybody has realized. It takes a village to raise children... especially in [this community] they have realized that there is so much need of support in a lot of areas that they have realized you can’t do it on your own only if you stay in your little box you have to stay in that box not going ahead and I think with that it opened it up way more and made it so much nicer to see the communication ...”

Broadening service reach and supports for families is strengthened by building partnerships and working together

Broadening the reach of early childhood supports and services involved enhancing ways of working together that moved beyond approaches to programming, where organizations operated independently or competitively with one another. The evaluation made evident the importance of building partnerships and new ways of interacting with other organizational partners that would help meet the needs of families.

In order to optimize opportunities for coordination and integration of services, organizational partners needed equal access to accurate information, resources, and supports to assist them in their work with families. This enabled every organizational partner to be equally responsive and knowledgeable about all available resources in the community such that every family can access the same information and opportunities for programs and supports. This approach was referred to as: “Every door is the right door.” In this way, regardless of the family’s point of contact with the EYC, families would have equal opportunities to reach EYC programming and appropriate referrals for services.

Various pathways and strategies were being used to improve working together with organizational partners to create a sense of a cohesive, one team approach. In some cases strategies involved reaching out and playing a bridging role in communities by being accessible and mobile for families and other professionals. In other cases, a sense of a collective approach was created through co-location opportunities or creating a shared, new identity through branding, signage, and community-wide grand opening events across multiple sites.

The importance of working together in partnership and broadening the approach to serving children and families was particularly important in each site’s efforts to reduce barriers to service access. A broad level of involvement and commitment across stakeholders at multiple levels of the system was viewed as critical. However, it was challenging when there was a disjuncture between an organizational partner’s will and commitment to work together on an EYC and actual ability to work towards collaboration. This was particularly relevant when potential partners wanted to engage at the provider level, but were constrained by limits placed on them because of differences across sectors, disciplines, program mandates or policies. Relationship-building activities to promote development of the EYCs were not similarly prioritized across or within sectors (e.g., supervisory levels to provider levels). As one participant stated:

“It is recognized that collaborative practices will benefit communities yet collaboration needs buy-in from all parties and is only possible if time and priority allows. All partners need time allocated for collaboration/integration work.”

CONCLUSIONS

Spanning across each lesson learned was a general premise that EYC funding and principles have been a catalyst for varying forms and degrees of change, whether in terms of enhancements to existing programming, changed structures for organizing programs, adaptations to facilitate families' access to programs, or creation of new or modified ways of working together. They have played a role in supporting initiatives and activities that were already underway or in the planning stages.

The lessons learned from this evaluation indicated that there are numerous strengths in the EYC approach including the focus on planning and development that can be built upon at existing and incoming EYC sites to support coordinated and integrated service delivery and enhanced service accessibility. Relationship- and trust-building across organizational partners were core activities in the first five months of EYC development. These relationships facilitated varying levels of collective planning and decision-making and will also serve as the foundation for fostering continued development of collective leadership at each site.

Given the complexity of the multi-disciplinary and multi-sector system in which the EYCs are embedded, participants identified a need for sustained, synchronous action within and across every level -- local, regional, and provincial. At the provincial level, for instance, participants indicated a desire for provincial guidance regarding the broader vision for the EYCs, including desired organization, structure and outcomes. Such guidance may also create opportunities to promote greater clarity and cohesiveness in approaches between project leads, managers and service providers within and across sectors.

Areas for further development and dialogue at the local level and also potentially across sites, include identification of strategies for promoting shared responsibility and collective decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership; developing a shared understanding of key terms; creating greater clarity in roles and responsibilities of EYC personnel and also the Early Years Tables; identifying opportunities for shared measurement; and continued relationship- and trust-building efforts to strengthen coordination and service integration efforts. The tools developed from the current lessons learned evaluation, such as the continua for collaboration and service integration, may be useful resources for promoting further dialogue within and across communities about ways of working together that minimize fragmentation and duplication of efforts and services and also effectively strengthen models of collaboration.



NOTE OF APPRECIATION

This evaluation would not be possible without the efforts of the EYC personnel at the 12 sites, ECD Tables and community partners.

We would like to thank all those that have participated and shared their insights and perspectives. It is our sincerest hope that with this ongoing evaluation that all stakeholders will use the lessons that are emerging and being carefully documented to enhance their work on behalf of families with young children in BC.