

Better Beginnings Waterloo: Summary of Early Research Findings

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May 13, 2016

What is Better Beginnings Waterloo?

Better Beginnings is a program to prevent problems and promote health development among children, families, and communities. The program emphasizes resident participation, community partnerships, universal, holistic prevention programs, and using schools as hubs.

Better Beginnings Waterloo was initially started in 2012 by a group of residents in North Waterloo who wanted to improve their community. The project will offer a variety of programs, resources and supports for children and families throughout North Waterloo, and has been developed in partnership with Cedarbrae and Winston Churchill elementary schools, Life Change Adventures, and House of Friendship, with funding from the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation.



Why do research?

Doing research can make a big difference in the effectiveness of community programs.

Some benefits of research include:

- Understanding what programs we actually need in the community
- Knowing whether our programs are working the way we expect them to
- Learning how we can improve programs
- Sharing what we learn with other communities
- Showing funders that we are achieving our goals

How we do research?

Doing research involves asking questions and gathering the thoughts and experiences of people in the community. This is often done using surveys, interviews, or community discussions. Before researchers ask community members questions, it is important that researchers explain why they are asking the questions and how the information gathered will be used. Participating in research is always voluntary.

It is important in research to engage people who have different perspectives and experiences in completing surveys or interviews. This way, the research findings reflect the whole community. Determining the findings of research involves examining the responses of everyone who participates and looking for similarities and differences. In the *Better Beginnings* research, we are looking to see what is going well for children, parents, and families in the community. We are also looking at what is not going so well, and what changes parents want to see happen to make things better. The *Better Beginnings Waterloo* research is guided by a research committee that includes researchers, parents, and teachers.

What have parents told us so far?

Parents have told us that they have concerns about their children's health issues, behaviour issues, bullying, and their future opportunities. Some parents were also concerned about their own parenting skills and abilities in terms of meeting their children's unique needs.

In the schools, parents said they would like to see more programs (e.g., after school programs, lunch activities, physical activities, music, reading, and chess) as well as academic supports for strong students and more communication between parents and teachers. Many parents want to be more involved in their children's school and would like more activities for parents and families at the schools (e.g., movie nights, dinners, multi-cultural programs).

In the community, parents would like more social events where they can meet with neighbours, and more play spaces in the neighbourhood for younger and older children. Parents believe that more programs are needed and that these programs must be affordable and easy to access. Parents are interested in music programs, programs about cultural inclusion, and after school programs. Increasing social activities for families in the neighbourhood, such as barbeques, picnics, is a change parents feel will help parents get to know one another and will promote inclusion and connection among families of different cultures.

What have been some successes and challenges in planning and implementing Better Beginnings?

An evaluation of the early, planning stages of the *Better Beginnings Waterloo* project was conducted. The aim of the evaluation was to assess participation of community members throughout the early stages of the project. Specifically, facilitators, barriers and outcomes of resident participation were examined as well as activities in which they participated.

The evaluation consisted of two stages. The Exploration Stage involved engaging in community events and completing business-related tasks, such as grant applications, in order to acquire funding.

During this first stage, the driving force for participation was the goal of creating a positive change within their community. However, difficult business-related tasks and lack of available time posed challenges. Once funding was acquired in December 2014, the Installation Stage began, which involved more concrete planning of the implementation of *Better Beginnings Waterloo*. During this stage, residents participated in project support, such as sitting on committees and volunteering at events. Despite the unexpected project timeline and lack of available time, community members found the learning opportunities and social support they received as motivators to continue participating in the project. Finally, throughout this project community members were able to improve their skills and social connections. Additionally, the project acquired funding and strong community partners, while the community has become more engaged in the *Better Beginnings Waterloo* project as well.

What is planned next?

Over the next two years, new programs will be offered in the community through *Better Beginnings Waterloo*. Our research team will continue to observe how the programs are being implemented in order to learn more about such programs, and to identify any challenges so that they can be addressed early on. In 2018, our research team will repeat the collection of data about children in grades 1 and 2, their families, and the community, and then compare it with the data we collected in 2015. This will help us to understand how *Better Beginnings Waterloo* has improved the lives of children and families, and the community as a whole. Findings from the research will be shared again with the community through local events and a brief report.

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