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# **VITAL COMMUNITIES, VITAL SUPPORT**

## **How well do Canada's communities support parents of young children?**

**PHASE 1 REPORT: WHAT IS KNOWN**

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# I. INTRODUCTION

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One key characteristic of vital communities is healthy families and children – not just physically healthy, but socially, emotionally and intellectually as well. And we know from research that healthy children begin with parents who have the knowledge, skills, confidence and support they need to do their most important job – raising a child.

A vital community is one in which parents of young children feel supported in their role as parents, where every member of the community feels valued and our youngest children arrive at school with the developmental abilities to be ready to learn and make the most of their abilities.

The Invest in Kids *National Survey of Parents of Young Children*, and other research, indicates that parents do not feel supported in their role, and they feel isolated and anxious about their parenting skills. And too many of them lack the knowledge and skills to ensure the best outcomes for their children.

We need strong, vital communities to thrive as a society, as a country, as individuals. And we need to understand how to better support the parents of young children in their key parenting role, if we are to ensure the vitality of our communities.

A preliminary scan of existing research and large research initiatives uncovered a programmatic assumption that if there are plentiful services and resources in a community, parents will access them and feel supported and their children will thrive. But no one has asked parents what they need and want to be – and feel – supported.

The research that exists leaves us with only partial answers and an unexplained gap in linking positive child development with local resources – we are missing the perspective of the most important influence of all, the parents.

That is why we are so grateful for the support and encouragement of the Unilever Canada Foundation. With its interest in understanding and supporting vital communities, the Foundation has provided the funding for a critically important exploration to uncover, through a three-phase approach:

- What is currently known about how communities do or can support parents of young children;
- How parents feel about both the support they experience and desire; and
- How the support parents actually experience relates to their parenting skills and their children's development.

Our hypothesis is that the support and resources that parents received in order to be and feel supported in their parenting role play an important role in their parenting behaviour and their child's development. We believe it does take a village.

*There is a strong Anglo-Saxon culture of individualism in our society which says that 'if you have kids, you are on your own.' Fundamentally, raising children is a private matter and not a societal or community responsibility.*

*Dr. Clyde Hertzman  
University of British Columbia*

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report presents the findings and conclusions of Phase I of the Community *Vitality Initiative*, *Vital Community: Vital Support*. Phase I consists of: a worldwide literature review of published research and Canadian research initiatives; key informant interviews with policymakers, researchers and program directors; and focus groups of parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

### KEY FINDINGS

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**It is startling how little research has focused on what parents want and need in order to be and feel supported in their role as parents.** Community, as understood by today's parents, is a completely understudied field.

**Faced with the single most significant responsibility they will ever have, parents yearn to be welcomed, valued, recognized and supported in their role as parents.** They want the support and understanding of their local communities and need to feel that the broader public genuinely shares an interest in their success.

**Parents crave community.** Impending parenthood and the birth of their first child trigger a search for “community.” For most parents “community” is a very local concept; the search starts in their own backyards.

**But the community is not meeting what parents see as their needs.** Talking to parents suggests we have a long way to go. They need a better sense that communities value their contribution and appreciate the important role they have to play.

Most parents discover a significant gap between what they expect and need and what is actually available, often resulting in a real sense of isolation. This leads parents to feel they are expected to fend for themselves until their children reach school age.

**Parents need both tangible and intangible support.** Although programs and services (the “tangibles”) are important to parents of young children, the intangible and supportive characteristics of their neighbourhoods and communities, such as attitudes and beliefs, are equally important.

**Most parents are seldom considered.** Although programmatic support for “at risk” populations and families with special needs has been widely studied, how our communities can best support all the parents of young children has not been researched, and is poorly understood.

**Parents rarely have a say in program design, development, delivery or evaluation.** A number of factors prevent parents from having an impact on the kind of tangible and intangible support available to them, and how services are structured and delivered. For a host of reasons, the perspective of parents – their interests and aspirations – has little impact on program development, the research agenda, or efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

**Fathers are left out.** Despite the growing role of fathers in the care and nurturing of young children, there is very little in the way of tangible or intangible support to assist fathers with their parenting roles and responsibilities.

**Parents do have preferences.** When asked, parents of young children consistently request age specific, administratively flexible programs. They want unstructured opportunities for peer support where there are choices and options for participation. Parents prefer relationships with service providers that are mutually respectful, where ideas and strategies are shared – not taught. They value the opportunity to be listened to and validated in their role.

Few supports are created for parents who are not from at-risk, special need or other targeted populations. There are numerous structural barriers that prevent their participation in determining which services are provided, and how. As a result there is an ongoing disconnect between what parents say they want and need and how the vast majority of our services are funded, structured and delivered.

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## **AN IMPORTANT PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF SUPPORTING ALL PARENTS**

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As a society, we need to normalize the concept of support for *all* parents of young children, removing the stigma around “not knowing how to parent.” We need to create and foster a community culture that supports parents and their young children, and that sees parenting as a shared responsibility between parents and their community.

Currently, there is a stigma attached to needing and asking for support. This is a reflection in part of the reality that most of the services provided to new parents are targeted to parents and children who are identified as having special needs or are deemed to be at risk. In addition, there is a strong society belief that parenting is natural and intuitive. Therefore, the perception of parents who honestly don’t know what to do, or who are in trouble, is that there is something wrong with them.

Directing more of our efforts to support all parents would promote a greater sense of shared community responsibility for the success of parents and could improve societal and workplace understanding of the critical and challenging role all parents must play.

While the specific support that parents want and need will likely differ across communities, local efforts to ensure that all parents feel – and are – supported could make a critical contribution to healthy child development across Canada, and transform our communities.

## **DIRECTION FOR PHASES II AND III: LET'S ASK PARENTS.**

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What is clear from Phase I is just how little we understand about the sorts of tangible and intangible support that all parents of young children want and need to be and feel supported in their role as parents. Measuring how the availability, quality and effectiveness of community support for parents do, or do not, affect outcomes for children absolutely necessitates input and direction from parents themselves.

Therefore, we will consult parents of young children on a national scale in Phases II and III. This will provide important insight into their specific needs and interests. Aligning their ideas and aspirations with the existing system of support will have profound implications for policymakers, governments, communities and service providers.

Clearly, no one will have better insight into what will work than parents themselves. It is time we talked to – and listened to – parents.

### **III. OVERVIEW: THE COMMUNITY VITALITY INITIATIVE**

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The Community Vitality Initiative is a study to uncover what it takes for parents to be supported and feel supported in their role as parents in their communities, and then see if it relates to parenting and child development. Beyond actual tangible support, such as programs and services, this study will examine the intangibles of society attitudes, beliefs and relationships within the community. We will look at “support” in terms of what parents would ideally like to have, in contrast to what is actually available, and what is believed to be available, as well as how parents feel about the actual and ideal support.

The *Vital Community: Vital Support* report will also examine parents’ knowledge, skills and confidence about child development and parenting, as well as early child development, as at least partially driven by the impact of that support. Our hypothesis is that the supports and resources that parents receive in order to be and feel supported in their parenting role play an important role in their parenting behaviour and their child’s development.

The initiative has three phases:

- **Phase I: Understanding What Is Known**, explores what is documented and acknowledged about parenting and community support: what it takes to be and feel supported, both tangibly and intangibly, and how this is tied to parenting knowledge, skills and confidence as well as child development. This phase examines what the published social science literature says about supports and resources for parents, what conclusions policymakers, researchers and program directors have reached, but have not published, and what parents themselves say they need and want in terms of supports and resources.
- **Phase II: The Parents’ Perspective**, through a landmark national survey of parents of young children, will take a comprehensive national reading of what Canadian parents of young children think, know and feel about the tangible and intangible support for their role in their community, and how such support relates to their knowledge, skills and confidence about child development and parenting.
- **Phase III: Bringing It Back to the Community**, will be an in-depth examination at the community level of the interplay of parents’ understanding and perceptions of community supports and resources, their parenting knowledge, skills and confidence, as well as their children’s development. This investigation will provide a richer and deeper understanding of community vitality and the development of healthy children because we can match what a community provides, what the parents think, know and feel about it, and its impact on the parents and children who live there.

This report is a summary of the findings, themes, issues and conclusions that can be drawn from the research undertaken during Phase I.

# IV. FINDINGS FROM PHASE I: WHAT WE LEARNED

## IV. FINDINGS FROM PHASE I: WHAT WE LEARNED

### A. APPROACH

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Phase I was designed to address three primary questions:

- What does the science and research show?
- What can experts and practitioners tell us that has not been published in the scientific literature?
- What can parents themselves tell us?

These inputs are also intended to clarify the research questions that are most significant for Phases II and III.

Our research strategy for Phase I had three components:

- **A world-wide literature review** to learn what social science has uncovered about what it takes for parents to be and feel supported, and whether a link has been made between this and parenting knowledge, skills and confidence, as well as children's development. The review was undertaken by Dr. Carl Corter, professor and immediate past chair of the Child Development Institute at the University of Toronto.
- **Key informant interviews** with experts from the policy, research and academic communities, and with representatives of organizations working directly with parents, to learn what knowledge has been gained from relevant existing programs or initiatives, but has not been published. Mr. Graham Clyne, of the Change Collective, London, Ontario, conducted the interviews.
- **A series of five focus groups of parents** to provide important qualitative insight into parents' perspective on their need for community support and resources. The participants in the groups, two composed of fathers and three of mothers, were parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Ms. Jennifer Bermingham, of Strategic Navigator, Toronto, Ontario, conducted the focus groups.

### B. LITERATURE REVIEW

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Perhaps the most startling finding of the literature review is just how little research on what parents want and need from their community has been done. With so few academic references and sources available based on Canadian populations, the scope of the literature review was extended to a worldwide search. However, this effort provided very little additional information.

Where the actual needs or opinions of parents have been considered, the studies are almost invariably tied to the use of a specialized service or program intervention. Very few surveys, large or small, focused on parents' wants and needs to be and feel supported, outside of a particular program.

*Most parents assume that the programs they participate in are evidence-based, but in actual fact very few of these programs have ever been properly evaluated... never mind the question of whether or not they were what parents wanted in the first place.*

*Dr. Robert Santos  
Senior Policy Advisor  
Healthy Child Manitoba*

Despite the broad array of programs and service interventions that have been designed to support high-risk parents over the past 20 years, rigorous evaluation remains the exception. Importantly, there is little or no analysis of what programs work for whom and in what circumstances. Indeed, the possibility of unintentionally creating negative effects for different types of high-risk parents is quite real. Where proper evaluations have been undertaken, they are invariably tied to specialized programming, and the broader range of parents is almost completely unstudied as a result.

In summary, the literature review clearly suggests a need for further research on the sorts of tangible and intangible support that non-high-risk parents of young children in the broader population feel they need and want to be and feel valued and supported in their role as parents. What research there is focuses overwhelmingly on high-risk children and parents, and special need populations, who consistently express their need for childcare, parent support programs and parent education. It appears these parents also crave emotional support, peer support and validation from these programs and the broader community. Although a wide range of interventions has been designed and provided to meet the perceived needs of high-risk groups of parents, the effectiveness of these programs has generally not been evaluated. As for non-high-risk parents, little is known about their perspective and interests, and fathers remain almost completely ignored.<sup>1</sup>

## C. KEY INFORMANTS

Key informant interviews were conducted with a mix of policymakers, academics and community-based practitioners from across Canada to help assess what is known about the sorts of tangible and intangible support parents want and need to be and feel supported in their role. Participants were asked to identify published and unpublished information sources, comment on the research that has been done; reflect on the sorts of tangible and intangible support that are, or should be, available; discuss the merits of strategies intended to support all parents; and consider the implications of parents playing a more influential role in shaping the ways in which communities actually support them.

A number of consistent themes arose across the key informant interviews, despite widely different professional backgrounds, geography and perspectives on the issues related to parenting. Many of these themes echo the findings from both the literature review and the focus groups of parents.

*Only a handful of studies have attempted to hear from ordinary parents on what they need, how they would like to be supported and what their goals are. Clearly, it's time to 'ask the parents.'*

*Dr. Carl Carter  
University of Toronto*

The research that is available focuses overwhelmingly on targeted programs for high-risk populations, which makes generalizations from them to the broader population of parents inappropriate and provides little insight into “ordinary” parents.

The literature review also showed very little attention to the needs of fathers, in terms of the support and resources they need to be and feel supported. In fact, studies that use the term “parents” nearly always involved only mothers, or included only a handful of fathers – too small a sample to be meaningful.

What is clear from the literature is that support for parents can be understood and described as either tangible (e.g., material supports, services/programs, information) or intangible (e.g., social and peer relations, community and cultural attitudes, beliefs and values that support parents). In fact, the very way in which programs and services are provided can also be an important intangible support to parents. For example, the existence or absence of mutual respect, peer engagement and personal support that characterize the relationship between parents and service providers.

Although the literature review suggested that parents’ perceptions of their communities’ resources and support, along with their “sense of community,” have an impact on what they will want and need to be and feel supported in their parenting role, there is little research to demonstrate how these sensitivities and feelings are connected.

In terms of tangible programs and services for high-risk populations of parents, there is good evidence that childcare and parent support initiatives best address the primary needs for these parents of young children. Combining programs, such as parenting support with early childhood development and care, offering a single platform for a variety of specific services, flexibility and choice seem to be more effective and certainly reflect what high-risk parents want – when they are asked.

The limited published literature that involves high-risk parents describing their preferences reveals parents have some very clear ideas about how services should be designed and delivered, with important implications for service providers. There is a significant disconnect, however, when parents are asked to describe the services they need. They often cite programs that are already available in their communities. Similarly, many of their ideas are not complex and would seem easy to implement. Both findings suggest service providers are having difficulty reaching or communicating with parents about support and programs.

*It is interesting, as soon as we made clear the importance of the first five years of a child's' life, the agenda was overtaken by professionals and caregivers – not parents – despite the clarity in the literature about how central the role of parents and parenting actually is. Parents seem to be the forgotten piece of the puzzle.*

*Mr. David Young  
Executive Director  
Family Resource Programs Canada  
Ottawa, Ontario*

- **We need to hear from parents:** The contribution of parents – their ideas, interests and needs for support – is largely missing from research and program development. Including and addressing the ideas and needs of parents in developing vital communities will have potentially profound implications for service delivery, community organizations and public policy.
- **Intangible support is a significant factor:** Various informal forms of societal, community, neighbourhood and personal support are absolutely critical for the parents of young children, many of whom experience a profound sense of isolation.
- **Communities are local:** Efforts to more flexibly and comprehensively support parents are best provided at the local and neighbourhood level, but these sorts of approaches are often poorly suited to the complex web of structural, administrative and jurisdictional arrangements that can be found in most communities.
- **The vibrant community link to healthy families is unclear:** the intuitive sense that vibrant and healthy communities, where parents actually feel and are supported in their role, have a positive impact on family and child outcomes, has not been effectively demonstrated through research.
- **Shifting how we think about parenting is critical:** we need to normalize the idea that *all* parents need tangible and intangible forms of neighbourhood support to be successful in their parenting role. Broadening the sense of responsibility for the success of all parents will require a real shift in thinking.

A clear and consistent message that arose from the key informant interviews was that the findings from the *Vital Community: Vital Support* report may have the potential to instigate a much needed change in our society by giving voice to all parents of young children. The opportunity to link the needs and desires of parents for support to data on parenting behaviour and child outcomes will, for the first time, help to clarify the nature of these critical relationships. As well, there was considerable anticipation that systematically capturing and describing what parents themselves say they want to be and feel supported would have significant and profound implications for our current approaches.

## D. FOCUS GROUPS

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Five focus groups were held in Toronto with parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, three with mothers and two with fathers. These focus groups were designed to obtain a qualitative assessment of what parents considered they would need in order to be and feel supported in their role as parents. In addition to tangible program support, parents were asked to reflect on the intangible sense of support they receive from their communities and what might be done at that level to make them feel better supported. The sample of focus groups is small, but many of the issues and ideas they brought forward are supported by the literature and reflect the themes of this report.

*Focus Group report: for many women, the birth of a first child coincides with their own “birth” into the community.*

*I am more present in my community. Now I have something to contribute.*

*Mother of an infant*

**Parenthood does trigger a search for “community.”** By community, the focus group participants meant their physical neighbourhood. While other communities may have been – and may continue to be – important, the physical neighbourhood moves to the forefront upon the birth of a child. The neighbourhood community suddenly assumes immediate relevance. Many people manage to ignore or live apart from their neighbourhood before the birth of their first child, but becoming a parent is a critical life experience that sets off a search for community, and what it does or does not provide.

- **There is a cavernous gap between the ideal community parents crave, and the reality they experience.** Although the number and types of support available to focus group parents varied widely, feelings of isolation occur when parents perceive that a community exists, but sense they are not part of it. It was clear that the outreach and marketing of community programs is insufficient, and other barriers, such as offering programs when most parents are at work, keep parents from feeling supported by their community or from making use of what actually is available.
- **The lack of a relationship with the community was expressed in two different ways:** *self as cause* (“we keep to ourselves”), where non-involvement is a personal choice; and *community as cause* (“nothing draws you out”).

*Focus Group report: there is an alarming gap between the relationship parents have with their community, and that which they desire.*

*It's like a fairy tale. It doesn't exist.*

*Mother of a toddler*

- **Disillusionment is a common theme** when many parents describe their relationship to the community (e.g., “The community is not really there for families.”). A small minority of parents, however, did suggest that they have established a valuable connection to their community – largely as a result of becoming a parent. However, for the majority of parents in the focus groups, many of their tangible and intangible needs were not being met.
- **A number of intangible barriers to feeling supported were highlighted** by parents. These include:
  - Concerns about community safety.
  - Low value placed on parenting by the community.
  - Perceived judgments made by others in the community (some about mothers, others about fathers).
  - Lack of interaction with the community.
  - Lack of clear linkages to the community (no single linkage between parent and the community).
  - Fear of community demands taking up time and energy.
  - Insufficient time.
  - Lack of shared values between parents and community with respect to views on parenting and “family values.”
- **The intangible support parents sought transcend the specifics of parenting and reflect the yearnings we all have for relationships:** positive feedback, attention and respect, talking and sharing ideas with other parents, and the opportunity to bring children together.
- **The tangible support parents wanted was not complicated and included many services that already exist** such as family resource centres, local festivals and recreation centres. This reinforced our observation that there is a disconnect not only between what parents want and what is offered, but also between what is offered and what they are aware exists for them.
- **The focus group parents believed the community should play a role in feeding their parenting knowledge, skills and confidence,** but parents keep their expectations low as to what this role could or should be.

- What is clear from these groups is that **parents have an idealized concept of “community” in their minds**, best described as their local neighbourhood where supportive, friendly, diverse and accepting neighbours care about and support one another.
- While workplaces, cultural associations and other extended networks of support are valuable, for these parents of young children the **real “search for community” starts in their own back yard.**

**The overarching message from the focus group parents is their clear need to feel recognized, valued and supported by their neighbours and their community.** Unfortunately, the majority of parents in the focus groups did not experience this in their daily lives.

*“It’s not enough to be willing to help. You have to know when to step in.  
But it’s not like that anymore.”*

*Mother of an infant*

# V. SYNTHESIZING THE LEARNING FROM PHASE I

## V. SYNTHESIZING THE LEARNING FROM PHASE I

While there was little social science research that focused on non-at-risk parents, the learning from what research there is, along with the findings from the experts and the focus groups, began to paint a picture of the critical issues regarding what parents need to be and feel supporting in their role by their communities.

### A. THE SEARCH FOR “COMMUNITY”

Although the focus groups found that “parents crave community,” they also showed many new parents find the reality of their community, and its support and services, to be far different from what they had imagined. For most, the search for community and the sorts of informal and formal support they need begins only with their first pregnancy and becomes a critical priority when their child is born.

Paradoxically, most new parents become interested and involved in their neighbourhood community at the very time when the stress and logistical challenges of parenting often make them “consumers” or “clients” rather than contributors in their community.

Through the focus groups we check whether parents’ workplace community, cultural community or internet communities held any salience. We found that parents defined only the local geographic community as “their” community.

This notion of community, in the context of parenthood, as been explored and described in a number of ways, but the important elements include a common place where people are naturally and informally friendly and an opportunity exists to share and draw on support from one another. The primary framework which emerges to describe a sense of community suggests there are a number of key elements, many of which were highlighted by focus group participants, when asked to describe the “community they want.” These common characteristics of community included:<sup>2</sup>

- Membership and a sense of belonging.
- Influence and a sense of mattering to the group.
- Integration and fulfillment of members’ needs.
- Neighbourhood behaviour and social interaction.

*Mothers really do need time and help... but there is no community today, not like the previous generations when families had ten children each.*

*Mother of toddler*

*I got involved and then it got to be too demanding, so I’m hiding. I am running out of breath. Too much pressure to be a super Mom.*

*Mother of an infant*

There is a widely held view that parents' sense of community has an impact on their perception of their specific needs and wants, although little empirical evidence supports this assertion. Some research has shown that parents' sense of community and their satisfaction with their neighbourhood contribute to their sense of efficacy as parents.<sup>3</sup> However, the research does not allow us to understand the relationship between the degree to which parents have a sense of community and how well the community actually meets their needs.

## **B. TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE SUPPORT FOR PARENTS**

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The idea of exploring both tangible and intangible support for parents recognizes that there are many things beyond tangible supports, programs and services that affect how parents feel about the value of their role as parents.

*Tangible support* includes material supports (such as books and brochures), services and programs (such as prenatal classes, parenting and recreation programs and even broader policy such as maternity leave) and information (such as TV shows and websites).

Intangible support includes social and peer relations, community as well as cultural attitudes, beliefs and values. Focus group parents could easily identify a wide range of intangible community support they felt was critical to feeling and being valued in their role as parents.

### **1) TANGIBLE SUPPORT**

There are a few important universal programs directed at all parents that provide tangible financial support, including family allowance, parental leave and a number of specific childcare and other tax measures. The vast majority of formal services and programs for families with young children, however, remain focused on targeted or specific sub-populations deemed to be “at risk” or challenged by socio-economic circumstances. With services directed primarily at “special need” populations, it is little wonder that parents associate some level of stigma with seeking support for parenting, child development and behaviour issues.

These targeted programs are rarely evaluated, and little is known about the efficacy of these services or the extent to which they actually meet the needs and interests of parents. These programs tend to vary widely in their focus, age group of children and their program characteristics (e.g., duration, intensity, format). There is some evidence that program specificity and the methods of delivery are increasingly important to high-risk parents as their children age and their interests and needs shift over time. Parents do, however, consistently identify safe, flexible and accessible childcare and programs to support parents, as the primary tangible resources they want and need.

Focus Group Summary – TANGIBLE SUPPORTS for parents:

- Professionals who pay attention to us
- A link from hospital to community
- Help to find out what is available
- Consistent advice on parenting
- Non-denominational gatherings
- Less crowded preschool programs
- Public places to get involved with our kids – not just drop them off
- More and better community centres
- Friendlier more flexible program administration
- Community events to get me out
- Childcare and temporary care
- Safer streets

Dad specific:

- Public feeding rooms, change tables and diapers in our washrooms
- Off hour community centres and events

Some common themes emerged from the focus groups for the *Vital Community: Vital Support* report, suggesting that the same sorts of tangible support are important for many parents of young children, including:

- Accessible and flexible childcare and respite support.
- Linkages from the hospital to the community, including home visitation and support with primary health issues.
- Community centres, public spaces and local events where parents and children interact with one another.

Fathers specifically stated their need for the following:

- Public feeding rooms, change tables and diapers, and designated parking for fathers.
- Off-hour events and programs.

Importantly, parents wanted programs and services that are more flexibly administered, less restrictive about when and how they can participate and easy to become aware of and access.

*I would like it if my community had more free and inexpensive activities for kids ages 0 – 5, where they would play, learn and exercise. Parents could get respite care for a few hours if they needed it, and fathers would be comfortable there. ... We need programs that are offered later in the day.*

*Mother of a toddler*

The health and social service emphasis on standardized programs, restrictive time and admission criteria and a limited number of options from which to choose, all conspire against meeting the actual and practical needs of parents today. At the same time, unstructured and flexible opportunities to share ideas with parents of same-aged children were reported as being conspicuously absent in their communities by focus group participants.

Parents appear to have specific interests and preferences regarding how services are delivered and the methods and approaches used by service providers. Parents want real input into the design of services (how often, when and how) to ensure that they will meet their needs.

*There needs to be programs for preschoolers that run after 5:00 p.m. I am a working mother and find it very difficult to attend programs, especially because I commute for three hours a day... It seems as though we cater to mothers who can afford to take mat leave.*

*Mother of a preschooler*

The literature review suggests there is growing evidence that the integrated combination of early child development, childcare and parental support is likely to be more effective than stand-alone programs, both in terms of outcomes and meeting the actual and evolving needs of parents. Similarly, those services and programs that encourage and involve direct parent and child interaction seem to show greater effectiveness,<sup>4</sup> as do programs that have broader “ecological reach” – training parents, teachers and other caregivers who have a shared responsibility for the child’s well-being.

*We really need to join things up so parents don’t have to run around to find help...but you get the sense parents don’t know about what’s available and no wonder everything is so disconnected.*

*Ms. Jane Bertrand  
Executive Director  
Atkinson Centre for Society  
& Child Development  
Toronto, Ontario*

## 2) INTANGIBLE SUPPORT

Very few parents have been asked what sorts of tangible support they want and need; fewer still have been asked about intangible support. The topic of intangible support struck a deep and important chord with parents in the focus groups. In fact, we found that when parents were asked to articulate what they want and need to be and feel supported, they talked first about tangible programs and services, but quickly went on to include other less concrete but equally important intangible forms of support and assistance. The specifics they articulated as desirable reflect their yearning for the community to recognize and address their individual needs and concerns, without attaching any stigma to them. They would like the community to demonstrate through these intangible “signs” that the community values their role and recognizes the challenges they face in their parenting role.

Social and cultural contexts play some role in shaping the sorts of intangible support available to parents, and these differences are apparent across cultures and from community to community.<sup>5</sup>

Focus Group Summary – INTANGIBLE SUPPORTS for parents:

- Genuine caring for one another
- Respect for different family definitions
- Mutual respect and understanding
- Welcomed to step out with my baby
- More peaceful, less chaotic physical environment in the community
- Acceptance of our struggles so we can step out in our weakest moments
- Variety in our life with baby
- Guidance that continues after baby’s first year.

Dad specific:

- Appreciation of our attempts to be less aggressive
- Understanding when we feel exhausted from work
- Trust in our parenting approach
- Widespread embracement of parental leave

*We need to focus on the values that a community should be founded on. Respect, willingness to help, friendship and trust [working] to create a peaceful, safe and fair environment. Give everyone an equal opportunity to share and benefit from the riches that a ‘true community’ can provide.*

*Father of a toddler*

*Sometimes I think the best thing we can do for parents is help them to make a friend while they're here ... and then the two of them can go and look after one another.*

*Ms. Aileen Wittstien  
Executive Director  
Merrymount Children's Centre  
London, Ontario*

The sorts of intangible support parents want in order to be and feel supported in their role reflect some very basic human needs, rather than specific parenting issues. Such support includes a more peaceful and less chaotic neighbourhood environment, genuine caring among neighbours, mutual respect and acceptance, and a community where parents feel safe and free to step out.

There is another important, and not well understood, type of intangible support that occurs when personal relationships are formed between service providers and parents, and between and among participants in programs. This is particularly evident when professional-parent relationships are characterized by mutual respect, coaching and sharing of ideas, and when the opportunity is provided for parents to be heard and validated in their role. The peer networks and personal relationships that develop during programs are an important source of intangible support for parents.

Social support can be a strong influence on parents, affecting their parenting behaviour and the way in which they are able to adapt to stress. In fact, the presence or absence of appropriate social support has been shown to affect the quality of parenting, the degree of parent-child interaction, maternal psychological well-being, child outcomes and the sense of self-efficacy and isolation experienced by parents of young children.<sup>6</sup>

Relationships with family and friends are often in great flux for today's new parents. Over 75 percent of parents are working fulltime prior to the birth of their child. Many people are postponing parenthood to become more financially secure, and career obligations often take parents of young children far from their immediate families. As a result, couples expecting children begin to seek out new friends that share their perspective and responsibilities as parents, leaving older friends and family support behind. For today's parents, this means inventing a new way to find the social support they need – just then they need it the most.

There is research evidence that suggests that parents who already possess strong social skills and personal resources have an easier time attracting social support from others in their communities, including their interaction with professionals.<sup>7</sup> Given the impacts of adequate social support on a range of parent-child outcomes, this intangible support is most important to those parents who are least able to generate it on their own.

Parents also understand the importance of the relationships that they build with professional and community-based agency staff. When parents access tangible services they express an interest in having a supportive, equal and mutually respectful relationship in which they are listened to and validated in their role. These relationships can provide an important – albeit intangible – support for parents.

In summary, although insufficient effort has gone into assessing what all parents want and need to feel supported, when asked, parents do express some clear ideas and preferences regarding the quality and nature of the support they seek.

*I took my prenatal class at the Y and when my son was born they welcomed him into the community. That got me off to a really good start as a parent.*

*Mother of an infant*

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## C. CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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Comparative international studies on parenting behaviour included in the literature review show there are differences between national cultures in a number of both tangible and intangible ways. Public policies, program supports and services differ across regions and countries with a few, notably Scandinavia and France (and more recently, Britain and Australia), adopting a universal or “population health” approach, in an effort to support all parents – rather than focusing on only high-risk groups.

While disparities in government and community policies are to be expected, much of the variation in parenting style and the roles parents see for themselves and others are culturally driven and reflected in how the intangible support is configured in their societies. Notable among these differences are perceptions about child-rearing responsibilities, balancing parental and spousal roles, pressure and support from extended family and differing societal attitudes about the importance of parenting.<sup>8</sup>

Needless to say, there are widely varying perceptions among parents from different countries about their own abilities and the level of satisfaction they derive – and expect – from their experience as parents. In the Canadian context, however, despite a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds, parents in the focus groups had remarkably similar interests in terms of the support they felt would help them in their role as parents.

In addition to the five focus groups from this initiative, over the last 18 months Invest in Kids has observed an additional 20 multicultural focus groups of parents of young children, including parents from every corner of the world – Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and far-flung parts of Canada. Regardless of their origin, parents listened attentively whenever someone shared observations about a parenting experience, and they were keen to learn from one another. And while each may have come to parenthood with different expectations for support and resources, based on where they came from, they all wanted essentially the same thing – to be recognized, valued and supported in their role as parents.

We entered this project with the hypothesis that culture and ethnicity would be a major influence on what parents want and need, and that defining “vital communities” would be very complex. What emerged from the very culturally diverse focus groups were nearly identical descriptions of the tangible and intangible support their previous home environments would have provided for them, and the near complete agreement on what they wanted and needed now. It mattered little whether they came from First Nations in Canada, Europe, Asia, Africa, South America or other places. For all parents, the similarities outweighed the differences.

*Being alone in the country, having a baby and coming to the country as a new immigrant I want to be more in the community. So that I can help my son grow better. I can take care of him the way I want to, but don't know how. . . . I really want to find the best way to take advantage of the services my community can provide.*

*Mother of an infant*

#### **D. INCLUDING FATHERS**

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There is a particularly significant dearth of information to understand what fathers want and need to be and feel supported in their role. Fathers appear to feel profoundly detached from their community, and isolated in their role as a father. With no clear bridge to the community, they struggle with the inhibiting reality of spending most of their time parenting at home. It is moving to hear fathers talk about how they yearn for connections and support from their community and different ways they would like to tie in to their communities and other parents.

*I wish I could find out about events or groups where fathers could share stories and knowledge with other fathers... and a phone line for Dads to call to ask general questions, if they're confused or need to know if what they're going through is common... Or an after birth class just for Dads about what's going to be happening, what to expect and how their lives will change.*

*Father of an infant*

Men are almost completely ignored in studies that assess parenting support, and where the term “parent” is used, it generally refers to mothers. More reluctant to seek specialized support or services than their spouses, fathers rely primarily on their spouse/partner, their experience with their own fathers and mass media messages to help shape their behaviour as parents.

The literature review showed that where efforts have been made to understand the role and influence of fathers on child development, the degree of engagement (being available, being supportive, sharing responsibilities) is used as the principal indicator of fathers' important. This evidence suggests that higher degrees of engagement by fathers correlate with better child *and* father outcomes.<sup>9</sup> While it seems that fathers feel increasingly able to play a role in their child's development, they continue to feel less able than their spouses to affect the emotional development of their children.<sup>10</sup>

*Please take my role as a Dad more seriously and provide support services – understanding the important role Dads play... Dads go through a similar degree of stress, exhaustion and even parking issues, like Moms, but aren't provided similar supports. I do think the community values and appreciates me, but probably under-services me and other Dads.*

*Father of an infant*

There is evidence that fathers have seen a shift in their role as parents in that they more frequently cite their ability to influence their child's development as an important responsibility.<sup>11</sup> In the focus groups, fathers said they did not feel supported by their communities in their role. They identified a number of intangible supports they felt would help them feel better about their role as parents, which suggests that societal attitudes have not yet caught up to the needs of fathers. Fathers cited the need for:

- Appreciation of men's efforts to be more nurturing and less aggressive.
- Understanding when fathers are exhausted at work.
- Greater trust in their abilities and approach to parenting.
- Widespread acceptance of paternity leave.

*Our society still believes that women should raise the kids.*

*Father of a toddler*

There are some identifiable barriers to the full participation of fathers, noted in both the research and the fathers' focus groups. These include: a sense they have a limited or lesser role in parent-child bonding, feelings of incompetence as their partners coach them and a general feeling that fathers play a more peripheral and less influential role in child development.<sup>12</sup> These perceptions are certainly supported by the vast majority of mass media and health promotion messages, which stress the importance of the mother-child relationship and virtually ignore the role of fathers.

The few programs that try to engage fathers report their reluctance to use them, particularly compared to their spouses, so we know little about whether these programs would satisfy father's need for support in their role as a parent. That said, with so few programs designed specifically to support fathers in their role as parents, it is difficult to know whether, and in what circumstances, fathers might access any of the support they may need.

*If we [fathers] show up at daycare, they say, "What are you doing here?" People think we don't know what we're doing, especially with little girls.*

*Father of a toddler*

Given the substantial neglect of the important and evolving role of fathers and of research into the sorts of tangible and intangible support that would help fathers feel supported, the Community Vitality Initiative will provide an important opportunity to hear first-hand from fathers – a missing link in our understanding of how best to support parents of young children.

## **E. WORKPLACE SUPPORT FOR PARENTS**

With so many parents of young children working either full- or part-time, the difficulty of balancing obligations to employers with the responsibilities of being a parent presents a significant challenge for most.

When talking to parents about workplace support, in some respects it seems our country's policy on parental leave may have moved ahead of our societal norms and practices. Focus group parents were adamant about the need to improve both the tangible and intangible support they receive from their employers – and their co-workers. Although tangible support like parental leave is a legislated benefit designed specifically to assist parents of infants, informal (and even overt) pressure from supervisors and co-workers often prevents parents, especially fathers, from exercising this option to the degree they would like.

Despite the oft-heard workplace rhetoric about "understanding the need for work/life balance and family time," mothers suggested "it is more acceptable to call in and say you have car trouble than to say you're staying home with a sick child." Fathers feel that they are stigmatized and criticized for taking parental leave, and feel little support or sympathy from co-workers when the challenges of parenting a young child have an impact on their work time or energy level.

*We need to slow down, take time and appreciate life... but playing my role as a new parent makes it even more difficult with all the tasks of everyday life and work. Personally, I wish I could spend more time with my family... the beauty of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly can only be appreciated if you have the time to enjoy it.*

*Father of an infant*

## **F. CHANGING NEEDS: INFANCY TO SCHOOL-AGE**

Previous Invest in Kids research suggested that there may be a difference between what parents want and need to be and feel supported, based on the age of their children. The focus groups were structured to reflect this through three groupings of parents: those with infants under one year of age, those with toddlers aged two to three years old, and parents of preschoolers who were three to four years old.

When asked in the focus groups about the types of support they needed to be and feel supported, the parents of infants more frequently requested services aimed at their perceived health and medical needs, including hospital care during and after childbirth, home visits linked to the hospital with nursing support, assistance with breastfeeding, Telehealth and greater access to emergency medical assistance. These findings are supported in the literature review, where it was noted that health care services and health visitors are considered to be an important tangible support by parents, particularly during the early transition to parenthood.<sup>13</sup>

Some recent unpublished research surfaced in the key informant interviews showed that parents of three- and four-year-olds see a role for the neighbourhood elementary school as a preferred location for the provision of other forms of support, and there is early evidence that these integrated approaches to supporting parents of young children are more effective than stand-alone efforts.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, while parents of young children are more comfortable having knowledge “dispensed” to them, over time as their children grow older, parents seek more “relational” and then “reflective” engagement with service providers.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the findings from this study are in line with other research which shows the interests of parents, their approach to their role as parents and the sorts of support that they need, change over time, reflecting both the age of their children and the issues they face.

While the differing support needs and aspirations among subgroups of parents based on age requires further exploration, the common theme – disappointment and discouragement with what was available to them – affected all parents across all the focus groups.

## G. DO SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY VALUE THE ROLE OF PARENTS?

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The focus groups clearly suggest that parents' perceptions of their community have important influences on their feelings or experiences of being supported in the parenting role. This is consistent with a conclusion that emerged from the literature review – that the social context of community life plays an important role in shaping parents' perceptions of the support and resources available to them.

We know cultural and social norms play an important role in shaping the informal support available to parents, influencing public policy and affecting the range and types of services that are provided. However, whether or not parents feel supported and valued in their role as parents by their communities and the broader society is a critical but understudied question. Invest in Kids 1999 National Survey of Parents of Young Children showed is that only 42 percent of parents strongly agreed with the statement “I think Canada values its young children.”<sup>16</sup>

*Dear Community: Myself and my baby need you around. We need your help and presence with us. I would like our kids to be born and grow in a happy, supportive and caring community. So be there for me, and I will be there for you. Let's get together.*

*Mother of an infant*

The suggestion is frequently made that mass media, public encounters and even comments from friends and neighbours all have an impact on parents' sense of how they are valued – or judged – by their community. Although there is little empirical evidence of this relationship, parents of young children report that they feel pressure from a variety of sources, and focus group parents clearly expressed their interest in more supportive communities and workplaces. Because so little work has been done to assess how parents feel and whether communities are actually becoming more or less supportive of them, detecting a shift in societal attitudes regarding the vital role of parents is difficult.

Parents in the focus groups consistently mentioned their reliance on the larger social benefit programs, including family allowance and extended parental leave, although how well these programs actually meet the needs of parents remains unclear. Informal, societal and workplace pressure does seem to have an impact on the ability of parents – especially fathers – to fully utilize legislated parental leave. Fathers sense they are not seen as a primary caregiver for their young children and that there is little appreciation for their trying to play a larger role, particularly among co-workers and employers.

Here again, there is a considerable gap between what we know and what we need to know in terms of building community and societal support that will actually address the needs and interests of parents. Although it seems clear that neighbourhood, community and societal attitudes will affect the extent to which parents feel and are supported, how this relationship works and how it affects the outcomes of children and parents are not well understood.

What is clear from the research is that *all* parents yearn to be and feel supported in their role as parents. The Phase II national survey of parents will provide a unique opportunity to ask parents directly about what they want, need and expect from their communities to support them in this most important of roles – raising Canada’s children.

## H. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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**It is startling how little research has focused on what parents want and need in order to be and feel supported in their role as parents.** Community, as understood by today’s parents, is a completely understudied field.

**All parents want to be and feel supported in their parenting role.** Despite some differences, all parents of young children share a common desire: the sense that their neighbours, neighbourhoods and communities appreciate the challenging and important role they play. Faced with the single most significant responsibility they will ever have, **parents yearn to be welcomed, valued, recognized and supported in their role as parents.** They want the support and understanding of their local communities and need to feel that the broader public genuinely shares an interest in their success. While culture and ethnicity are important in shaping how a parent expects to be supported, there is surprising similarity in what all parents want – to be recognized, valued and supported as parents.

Talking to parents suggest we have a long way to go. They need a better sense that communities value their contribution and appreciate the important role they have to play.

**Parents crave community.** Impending parenthood and childbirth trigger a search for “community” and the services and personal support it may be able to provide. For most parents “community” is a very local concept; the search starts in their own backyards.

**But the community is not meeting what parents see as their needs.** Most parents discover a significant gap between what they expect and need and what is actually available, often resulting in a real sense of isolation. This leads parents to feel they are expected to fend for themselves until their children reach school age.

Although programs and services (the “tangibles”) are important to parents of young children, the intangible characteristics their neighbourhoods and communities exhibit are equally important. Opportunities for peer interaction, sharing and providing emotional support to other parents, safe and welcoming public places and a feeling of belonging and interdependence all work to create a sense of a community where parents can and do feel supported in their parenting role.

**Most parents are seldom considered.** Although support for “at-risk” populations and families with special needs have been widely studied, how our communities can best support all parents of young children has not been researched and is poorly understood.

*Developing a real consumer-driven focus on what service providers do would involve a huge paradigm shift.*

*Mr. Tony Diniz  
Executive Director  
Child Development Institute  
Toronto, Ontario*

**Parents rarely have a say in program design, development, delivery or evaluation.** A number of factors prevent parents from having an impact on the kind of tangible and intangible support available to them, and how services are structured and delivered. For a host of reasons, the perspective of parents – their interests and aspirations – has little impact on program development, the research agenda, or efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

These reasons include:

- Parents are seldom consulted *before* programs are designed, thus when implemented they only get to “choose” between what is available – and nothing.
- Services are primarily designed for at-risk, special need or other targeted populations. Parents are either recipients of a service or the object of the intervention itself – not partners or equals in the relationship.
- Often research and programs are driven by professional, academic, funder and government needs – rather than the interests or needs of parents.
- The intangible support that parents really want and need does not “fit” the administrative structures and funding requirements of service providers – so the needs of the providers prevail.

**Fathers are left out.** Despite the growing role of fathers in the care and nurturing of young children, there is very little in the way of tangible or intangible support to assist fathers with their parenting roles and responsibilities. Fathers *are* interested in local and informal opportunities to meet with other parents, and to feel supported and validated in their unique role as fathers, but find few community supports that address their needs and interests.

As yet, societal and workplace attitudes seem to place little value on the increasing responsibilities and specific needs of fathers. Research, services and health promotion messages are directed overwhelmingly at mothers; media stereotypes of fathers are generally unflattering.

**Parents have preferences.** When asked, parents of young children consistently request age specific, administratively flexible programs. They want unstructured opportunities for peer support where there are choices and options for participation. Parents prefer relationships with service providers that are mutually respectful, and where ideas and strategies are shared – not taught. They value the opportunity to be listened to and validate in their role.

Few supports are created for parents who are not from at-risk, special need or other targeted populations. There are numerous structural barriers that prevent their participation in determining which services are provided, and how. As a result, there is an ongoing disconnect between what parents say they want and need and how the vast majority of our services are funded, structured and delivered.

**VI. THE VALUE OF SUPPORTING  
ALL PARENTS: PRELIMINARY  
IMPLICATIONS FOR  
POLICYMAKERS, SERVICE  
PROVIDERS AND COMMUNITIES**

## VI. THE VALUE OF SUPPORTING ALL PARENTS: PRELIMINARY IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS, SERVICE PROVIDERS AND COMMUNITIES

While the next phases of this initiative will provide a deeper, richer understanding of what parents want and need from their communities and our society to ensure the best outcomes for our children, the learning from this phase of the project has what appear to be some clear, if preliminary, implications.

Focusing the vast majority of our societal resources to support parents of high-risk or special need groups has two significant and unintended consequences: (1) we will overlook or exclude the majority of all parents, whom the research tells us struggle with their role of parents, and (2) the stigma around needing assistance with parenting will remain and be even further reinforced.

Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) present the most convincing arguments to support shifting resources into programs and support for all parents. These findings clearly show that “vulnerable” children (e.g., those with identifiable problems that put them at risk of serious long-term negative outcomes) are not restricted to high-risk populations that are identified using the demographic or socio-economic criteria.<sup>17</sup> **The simple fact that the vast majority of parents and children who will need special support are not found in high-risk groups – and are not identifiable in advance by traditional socio-demographic criteria – is a powerful argument to shift some of our resources and efforts to broader approaches.**

Offering support to all parents is an opportunity to normalize the need for education and support, and can create willingness to access the sorts of differentiated resources that parents will need to be successful. There are indications from other jurisdictions that have implemented universal support for parents that the uptake in specialized support increases with the advent of basic level support and education for all parents.

Taking more of a universal approach to supporting parents of young children may have the desirable consequence of actually broadening community – and intangible – support for parents, encouraging employers, co-workers and other community agencies to accommodate this “routine” expectation of all parents. In many respects, this sort of “universal programming” and a population health approach for children now begins at age five when the school system becomes a critical support for all children. Moving the approach downward to include younger children and their parents has a number of obvious potential advantages. Certainly there is good evidence that more parents who need help could be reached by efforts aimed at all parents.<sup>18</sup>

Statistics tell us that our nation’s youngest children and their families are in trouble. Findings from Canada’s NLSCY revealed that nearly 30 percent of Canadian infants and young children have a social, emotional or learning problem.<sup>19</sup> These children are called vulnerable because the lack of a concerted effort to help them will affect their ability to lead happy, healthy, confident and secure lives.<sup>20</sup> Many of these problems are related to a lack of positive parenting practices.<sup>21</sup>

In the past it has been assumed that a major factor driving both poor child outcomes and a lack of positive parenting was low socio-economic status. However, analysis of the NLSCY showed low income and low socio-economic status explained less than 10 percent of the variance in children's problems, and likewise a full range of variables describing family structure and socio-economic status accounted for only about 2 – 6 percent of the variance in parenting practices.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, not only children from low income areas are vulnerable and at risk for long-term negative outcomes. While children in the lowest income families are more likely to have difficulties, a disturbingly high proportion of children in middle and high socio-economic circumstances also have problems. If all programs are targeted to disadvantaged groups, we will miss the actual majority of vulnerable children and their families.

The need for parent education and support for all parents is buttressed by the findings from Invest in Kids *National Survey of Parents of Young Children*, which revealed that while over 90 percent of parents believe being a parent is the most important thing they do:<sup>23</sup>

- Most parents have very limited knowledge about how children grow and develop.<sup>24</sup>
- Too many parents fail to use the positive parenting practices that promote healthy social, emotional and intellectual development.<sup>25</sup>
- Parents are anxious and concerned about their parenting skills; as a result they lack confidence and feel ill-equipped to handle the challenges of raising a child.<sup>26</sup>
- Parents need improved knowledge, skills and confidence, regardless of their age, income, education, marital status, gender or working status.<sup>27</sup>
- Too many of today's parents don't feel supported in their role as parents.<sup>28</sup>

In reaction to these and other findings, many policymakers and program providers advocate some combination of targeted programs for traditional risk groups of low income and socio-economic status, and universal interventions for all families.

The research from this initiative offers an important caution to this approach. The literature review shows that parents in targeted programs are seldom consulted on the front end about what programs would meet their needs, or about how the interventions could be structured to best meet their needs. These programs are rarely evaluated on the back end, so we do not know much about whether they are working, or for whom. It seems strange that so few programs and services emanate from the expressed interests, needs and desires of parents themselves. As one key informant suggested, "We just sit in a room somewhere and come up with all these programs... no wonder they don't work so well!"

If advocating for “universal interventions” means creating programs where everyone gets the same thing, and yet once again parents are not consulted about what they want or need, the same problems will arise, and the last thing parents need is more of the same. Parents want to be asked, by their communities and larger society, about their personal aspirations and desires regarding what they need to be and feel supported in their role, and then to have the programs and resources designed and built to accommodate their needs.

*There is a sense that parents should just do the job until grade school, and then [our society] will have an interest in supporting that child. Why do we think that children under the age of five – and their parents – don’t need any support before then?*

*Dr. Ray D. Peters  
Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario*

Imaginative and thoughtful efforts are greatly needed to reach out to all parents – who want more customized and flexible solutions, not a one-size-fits-all approach. This critical concept, of building services “from the parents up,” would represent a profound shift from current practice, where funders, governments and agencies decide which issues and which approaches will be the priority.

It is critical to reiterate a central theme from this report: Parents’ yearning for and interest in community support is not focused solely on programs. Parents want their neighbourhoods and larger society to support them on all levels and to better appreciate the important responsibilities they have to raise healthy and well-adjusted children – the very children who will become our next generation of parents.

# CONCLUSION

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

In our efforts thus far to understand what is known about and what it takes for parents to be and feel supported by their communities, our research has led us to a series of preliminary insights, to be tested in Phases II and III, both nationally and in a number of communities.

- Parents yearn to be welcomed, valued, recognized and supported in their role as parents, by and within their community.
- This is not what they are experiencing. There is a significant gap between what they live and what they want from their community, in both tangible and intangible terms.
- Parents have largely not been consulted in the development and delivery of tangible programs and services, yet they have clear ideas on what they want and need, both the tangibles and intangibles.
- As a society we need to normalize the concept of support for parents of young children, removing the stigma of “not knowing” how to parent. Today, parents generally feel they are left to fend for themselves until their children reach school age.
- We need to understand and foster a “community culture” that supports parents and their young families – that sees parenting as a shared responsibility between parents and their community.
- Yes, it takes a village.

**VIII. NEXT STEPS:  
DIRECTION FOR  
PHASES II AND III**

## VIII. NEXT STEPS: DIRECTION FOR PHASES II AND III

What is clear from this report is just how little we understand about the sorts of tangible and intangible support that *all* parents of young children really want and need to feel – and be – supported in their role as parents. Measuring how the availability, quality and effectiveness of community support for parents does, or does not, affect outcomes for children absolutely necessitates input and direction from parents themselves.

Consulting parents of young children on a national scale will not only provide important insight into their specific needs and interests. Aligning their ideas and aspirations with the existing system of support will have profound implications for policymakers, governments, service providers and communities.

### LET'S ASK PARENTS.

Knowing that all parents want and need to be and feel supported by their communities, in a range of tangible and intangible ways, is a good start. The challenge will be identifying the specific ways that our local communities and Canadian society can work together to address the needs of all parents to feel, and be, supported and to sense that they are valued and recognized for the important responsibility they have.

What are the critical elements of a “community culture” that really does value and support parents? What sorts of behaviours, attitudes, practices and policies could – collectively – describe and characterize a community that cares about the success of its parents and young children? And what bundle of intangible supports, that parents say they want and need, can be combined at a local level to make a significant difference for parents and their children?

These are critical questions, if we really want to change attitudes and create a culture in Canadian society that values the role of parents and shares a responsibility for their success.

Clearly no one will have better insight into what will work than parents themselves. It is time we talked to – and listened to – parents.

The national survey in Phase II and the in-depth look at communities in Phase III will help to uncover what we believe to be the important relationships between community vitality, parents’ feeling supported in their parenting role and healthy children.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>One notable effort to describe the general population of parents and how they relate to their communities is the report by J. Douglas Willms (2005), *Understanding the Early Year: An Update of Early Childhood Development Results in Four Canadian Communities*, Social Development Sectors Branch, Human Resources and Social Development Canada. This report, which was not available at the time of the literature review for this report, is based on a national sample of Canadian parents and their children. The report links several aspects of tangible and intangible supports for parents with aspects of their children's development at age five. This increases our understanding in many important ways. We continue to have the opportunity to talk to parents about the community supports they want and need, to hear about fathers' perspective on community support and parenting, and learn about how community supports are viewed by parents from infancy onward.
- <sup>2</sup>Kingston, S., Mitchell, R., Florin, P., & Stevenson, J. (1999). Sense of community in neighborhoods as a multi-level construct. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(6), 681–694.
- <sup>3</sup>For example, Martinez, M. L., Black, M., & Starr, R. H. (2002). Factorial structure of the perceived neighborhood scale (PNS): A test of longitudinal invariance. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(1), 23–43.
- <sup>4</sup>Corter, C., Bertrand, J., Pelletier, J., Griffin, T., McKay, D., Patel, S. & Ioannone, P. (2006). *Toronto First Duty Phase 1 Summary Report: Evidence-based Understanding of Integrated Foundations for Early Childhood*. Toronto: Atkinson Centre, Institute of Child Study, OISE/UT.
- <sup>5</sup>Bornstein, M. H., Haynes, O. M., Azuma, H., Galperin, C., Maital, S., Ogino, M., et al. (1998). A cross-national study of self-evaluations and attributions in parenting: Argentina, Belgium, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, and the United States. *Developmental Psychology*, 34, 662–676.
- <sup>6</sup>Some examples include: Bryant, C. M. and Conger, R.D. (1999). "Marital Success and Domains of Social Support in Long-Term Relationships: Does the Influence of Network Members Ever End?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61:437-450; Franco, N. and Levitt, M.J. (1998). "The Social Ecology of Middle Childhood: Family Support, Friendship Quality, and Self-Esteem." *Family Relations*, 47:315-321; Lin, N., Ye, X. and Ensel, W.M. (1999). "Social Support and Depressed Mood: A Structural Analysis," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 40:344-359; Pierce, G. P., Sarason, B.R. and Sarason, I.G. (Eds.). *Handbook of Social Support and the Family*. New York: Plenum Press; Terry, D.J., Mayocchi, L. and Hynes, G. (1996). "Depressive Symptomatology in New Mothers: A Stress and Coping Perspective," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 105:220-231; Thoits, P.A. (1995). "Stress, Coping, and Social Support Processes: Where Are We? What Next?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 35 (Special Issue):53-79; Turner, R.J. and Avison, W.R. (1985). "Assessing Risk Factors for Problem Parenting: The Significance of Social Support," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 47:881-892; Wan, C.K., Jaccard, J., and Ramey, S.L. (1996). "The Relationship between Social Support and Life Satisfaction as a Function of Family Structure," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58:502-513.
- <sup>7</sup>Belsky, J. (1984). The determinants of parenting: A process model. *Child Development*, 55(1), 83–96.
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- <sup>12</sup> Sheehy, S. (2004). *Supporting men with parenting: Learnings from the fatherhood support project*. Adelaide, Australia: Australian Stronger Families and Communities Initiative.
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- <sup>14</sup> Corter, et al., op cit.
- <sup>15</sup> Miller, S., & Sambell, K. (2003). What do parents feel they need? Implications of parents' perspectives for the facilitation of parenting programmes. *Children & Society*, 17(1), 32–44.
- <sup>16</sup> Oldershaw, op cit., p. 91.
- <sup>17</sup> Willms, J. Douglas (2002). *Vulnerable Children: findings from Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, University of Alberta Press and Human Resources Development Canada, p. 336.
- <sup>18</sup> Sanders, M. R. (1999). Triple P-positive parenting program: Towards an empirically validated multilevel parenting and family support strategy for the prevention of behavior and emotional problems in children. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 2(2), 71–90.
- <sup>19</sup> Willms, op cit., p. 54. Willms shows 28.61% of Canadian children, 0 – 10 years of age were vulnerable. Invest in Kids calculated over 29% of children, 0 – 5 years of age were vulnerable.
- <sup>20</sup> Willms, op cit., p. 3-4, 45; Health Council of Canada, *Their Future is Now: Healthy Choices for Canada's Children & Youth June 2006*, p. 20.
- <sup>21</sup> Willms, op cit., pp. 164 – 165.
- <sup>22</sup> Willms, op cit., pp. 99 and 164.
- <sup>23</sup> Oldershaw, op cit., p. 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Op cit., pp. 3, 34, 44.
- <sup>25</sup> Op cit., pp. 16 – 17.
- <sup>26</sup> Op cit., pp. 60 – 62.
- <sup>27</sup> Op cit., p. 108.
- <sup>28</sup> Op cit., pp. 83 – 91.

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# APPENDICES

- A. BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW
- B. KEY INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED
- C. HIGHLIGHTS OF FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

## A. BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

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## B. KEY INFORMANTS

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## C. SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

### I. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

As part of the Community Vitality Initiative being pursued by the Unilever Foundation and Invest in Kids, the opportunity was identified to conduct research that would uncover what it takes for parents of young children (from birth to age 5) to be supported and feel supported in their role as parents in their communities. Our specific objectives were to identify and understand:

- Perceived levels of support;
- Differences between Moms and Dads;
- Differences between parents of infants versus toddlers versus pre-schoolers.

### II. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A total of five 2-hour focus groups were conducted in Toronto in early June 2006. All focus groups were moderated by Ms. Jennifer Bermingham of Strategic Navigator.

	Age of eldest child		
	Infant (0-1)	Toddler (1-2)	Preschooler (3-4)
Mothers	1 group	1 group	1 group
Fathers	1 group	1 group	

### III. KEY DISCOVERIES

1. **Upon becoming a parent, the neighbourhood becomes the most significant community in a person's life.**

For many women, the birth of a first child coincides with their own birth into their community.

*"I'm more present in the community." "I now have something to contribute."*

2. **There is an alarming gap between the relationship parents have with their communities versus that which they desire.** The respondent-generated collages below point to a lack of interdependence among parents within a community.

**Parents' CURRENT Relationship with Their Neighbourhood Community**

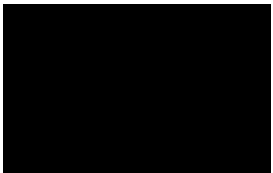


All looking in different directions,  
Keeping to themselves.

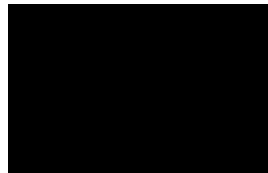


Bleak and desolate,  
You don't know what is there.

**Parents' DESIRED Relationship with Their Neighbourhood Community**

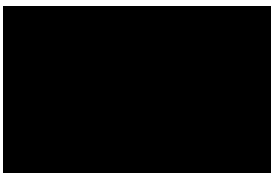


Fun, It doesn't matter what you are like.  
We are all involved and participating.



Happy, Together,  
Free, Relaxed.

3. **This gap frequently manifests itself as an overwhelming sense of detachment from the community, leading to feelings of isolation.**



I have people around me but we all go about  
our own business. So I am alone.

Fathers appear to feel this isolation most profoundly. With no clear bridge to the community they struggle with the inhibiting reality of spending more time at home.

4. **We identified several key barriers to feeling properly supported within the community.**

<b>Tangible Barriers</b> Strain on the infrastructure Security Lack of clear linkages to the community Time
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<b>Intangible Barriers</b> Societal independence Low expectations placed on dads Low value placed on parents Judgments Fear of demands
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5. **Several important existing facilitators to feeling supported were also revealed.**

Parents have a profound appreciation for places and reasons to gather with other parents. These gatherings mitigate feelings of isolation while at the same time normalizing many of the emotions and behaviours parents are experiencing with their young children. Playgrounds, playgroups, the Y and other such communal supports are therefore significant in their ability to provide:

- ✓ Positive feedback
- ✓ People who can tell you what to expect
- ✓ Attention. “I feel proud.”
- ✓ Help without being asked

6. **While parents believe their neighbourhood community should play a role in feeding knowledge, skills and confidence, the lack of interdependence within today’s culture is so well engrained that parents keep their expectations low.**

Only through creative brainstorming were we able to uncover strategies to alleviate feelings of isolation. These include a return to traditional models for community support and targeted approaches, to ways of inspiring parents to step out and participate in the community.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Graham Clyne**, M.A. (Political Science) is a past Director of Planning and Allocations for the United Way of London and Middlesex, where he led the development and implementation of KIDS COUNT, a cross-sectoral partnership to improve the health and learning outcomes of children in low-income neighbourhoods, which won the 1997 Peter F. Drucker Award for Innovation in the Non-Profit Sector. More recently at the Foundation for Learning and Social Enhancement he was the Research Director for a national initiative known as the “Prevention Dividend Project” – an effort to encourage the understanding and use of economic evaluation in Canada’s non-profit and public sectors. As the leading proponent of economic evaluations Graham has published, presented and created multimedia resources on the subject, founding and creating a training organization – the Canadian Institute of Economic Evaluation. As a private consultant, Graham has mentored a broad cross section of public, private and non-profit organizations, assisting groups with strategic planning, organizational change, and a wide variety of team building, human resource and customer service challenges.

**William R. Avison**, Ph.D., is a sociologist with expertise in the sociology and epidemiology of mental health of families and children. He was awarded a Senior Research Fellow of the Ontario Mental Health Foundation from 1994-2000 and was the 2004 recipient of the Society for the Study of Social Problems’ James R. Greenley Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Sociology of Mental Health. Bill is a Past Chair of the Sociology of Mental Health Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA) and of the Psychiatric Sociology Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. He is currently a member of council of the Medical Sociology Section of the ASA and an Associate Editor of the Journal of Health and Social Behavior. He has also served as chair of the Children’s Health Review Committee of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and currently serves on the Selection Committee of the Canadian Child Health Clinician Scientist Program.

**Carol Crill Russell**, M.S.W., Ph.D., is the Senior Research Associate at Invest in Kids, where she provides leadership to two research initiatives: the Parenting Initiative and The Community Vitality Initiative, helps maintain Invest in Kids’ ties with Canada’s foremost researchers, academics, clinicians and policymakers in early child development; and, as a member of the Management Team, contributes to Invest in Kids’ strategic, operational and fund development planning. She is the recipient of a multi-year grant from The Lawson Foundation to support the research and development of “how to” programs that translate research knowledge about social, emotional and cognitive development of young children into effective programs. Prior to her position at Invest in Kids, Dr. Crill Russell served for over a decade as the Senior Research and Policy Advisor for Children’s Services in Ontario’s Ministry of Community and Social Services. In that capacity Dr. Crill Russell initiated and monitored population-based and intervention research on healthy child development. Dr. Crill Russell has served as a member of a number of Canada’s leading applied research projects, including Ontario’s Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project, the National Centre of Excellence on Early Child Development Directing Council, the Expert Advisory Group for Evaluating Ontario’s Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program and the expert Advisory Group for The Lawson Foundation’s TLC3 Project.