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Childcare as Healthcare: Parents' Perceptions of Enriched Early Childhood Experiences

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Regina is a Registered Nurse and a recent graduate from the Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program. Her research project largely concerned social determinants of health, and more specifically, early childhood development. She has spent the past year exploring local parents' perceptions and opinions about the importance of enriched early childhood experiences. The focus of this research was to describe health benefits of enriched early childhood development that may shape health behaviours later in life.

CHILDCARE AS HEALTHCARE: WHAT DO PARENTS THINK?

The concept of social determinants of health is widely considered to be the cornerstone of practice in the emerging and growing fields of public healthcare and health promotion. Healthcare professionals along with the general public are becoming increasingly aware that good health is not simply a matter of good genes and the availability of healthcare resources. Rather, it is a summative outcome of many interrelated social, economical and societal factors, such as income, housing, employment conditions, education and nutrition.

So far, early childhood development has been clearly identified as one of the major social determinants of health. Although the health benefits and value of early childhood education may not be as obvious as other social determinants (such as income or housing conditions), many of today's public health researchers agree that experiences during pregnancy as well as early childhood have a profound effect on health behaviour and outcomes later in life.[1] Not surprisingly, positive stimulation early in a child's life can provide a solid foundation for healthy choices and practices that can continue into adulthood. From a primary health perspective, investing in early childhood development can be a powerful tool that has the potential to prevent adolescent pregnancies, tobacco use and substance abuse in adulthood, and a number of learning disabilities.[2] Many beneficial health habits, such as eating sensibly and exercising, are strongly influenced by exposures in early childhood, and in turn may have the potential to reduce the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease in adults.[3] Particularly among children from low-income families, high quality childcare helps to address many social inadequacies by promoting intellectual and interpersonal stimulation. In turn, children exposed to the beneficial effects of enriched development may feel empowered and enabled to make healthy choices as adults.[4] Currently there is growing interest in analyzing the short-term and long-term beneficial effects of early childhood development programs. [5]

Although there are emerging public health initiatives that recognize favorable outcomes from early childhood development programs, some aspects remain unclear. Do parents view access to early childhood development programs as an important determinant of child health? How do parents perceive the significance of enriched childhood experiences (such as the ones obtained by attending Ontario Early Years Centers) in contrast to other health determinants? Although there are many factors that influence a child's enrollment and attendance, the final decision to introduce the child to these programs is made by their primary caregivers. As such, it is important to understand how parents prioritize the opportunities for their child's growth and development. So far, the results are not particularly optimistic. A survey conducted by Toronto Child Development Institute found that "less than half of the parents [interviewed] are knowledgeable about providing enriched, sensitive environments for their young children".[6]

The introduction of the Ontario Early Years Centers (OEYCs) initiative is an attempt to bridge the gap between the differing levels of positive developmental stimulation children receive at home. Currently, there are over a hundred OEYCs in Ontario that provide a wide range of services to parents and their children from 0 to 6 years of age free of charge. The initiative is fully funded by the Ontario government and offers educational and informational resources for parents, as well as opportunities for their young children to learn through play.[7] Public Health Nurses, as well as allied healthcare professionals, play a very important role in articulating and delivering a strong message about health promotion to families that visit OEYCs. As such, sufficient knowledge regarding the role of early childhood development and social determinants of health is a cornerstone of public health practice. Today, health advocacy and policy development initiatives strongly benefit from

deepened knowledge of the participants' perspective of key determinants of health. In fact, research that examines participants' perspectives can be meaningfully used to develop effective health policies.

STUDY METHODS: QUALITATIVE FRAMEWORK

It is evident that parents play a crucial role in introducing children to enriched early childhood experiences, and this, in turn, may have a powerful effect in shaping a child's positive health behaviours later in life. The focus of the current research project is to explore local parents' opinions and perceptions about early childhood education and its importance. The author used a qualitative study design because it serves as an effective source of evidence in public health practice.[9] Within the qualitative framework, the method of interpretive description was utilized to describe and increase existing understanding of the phenomena. This simple yet unrestrictive method facilitates deeper understanding of the healthcare issue, as well as explores research participants' values and beliefs.[10]

A total of 12 parents whose children attend OEYCs were interviewed for this study, and the participants were purposefully recruited from three centers that serve demographically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse neighbourhoods in Hamilton, Ontario. Data were collected during the course of approximately 30-40 minute long interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and later analyzed using NVivo 8.0 software.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: SOCIAL AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF ENRICHED EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The parents who participated in the research study unanimously stressed that they perceive early childhood development as very important. Such findings could be due to the fact that the participants were recruited and interviewed while their children were attending specialized child development centers. Nonetheless, one of the goals of the study was to describe the specific ways that early childhood experiences can benefit child health and development, as viewed by the parents. According to the participants, the developmental benefits of early childhood experiences were limited to mainly social and intellectual aspects, while health benefits were much broader and included health education regarding nutrition and hygiene, opportunities for activity and exercise, improved immunity through exposure to other children, and access to health services. The examples of such benefits are summarized in Table 1.

Factor	Described Benefit
Development - Social	Opportunity to interact with other children; expansion of social support network for the parents
Development - Intellectual	Value through learn and play; "Domino effect" of staggered intellectual benefits
Health - Nutrition	Education about healthy food choices for children; nutritious snacks supplied by child development centers
Health - Hygiene	Hygiene education and reinforcement amongst children, particularly handwashing
Health - Immunity	Short-term benefit of "immunity boost" through exposure to other children
Health - Activity and Exercise	Specialized activity, exercise programs and equipment; access to the swimming pool and the gym
Health - Access to Health Services	Opportunities for parents to obtain health education and health teaching: referrals to various healthcare professionals

TABLE 1: Summary of early childhood education benefits, as perceived by parents participating in the research study.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS BENEFICIAL, NOW WHAT?

During the interviews, the participating parents mainly stressed developmental benefits of early childhood education programs, and recognized their long-term social and intellectual value. However, some participants demonstrated considerable difficulty articulating health benefits. Many described their perception of health as "eating right and exercise," and struggled with further definitions. Additionally, the described health benefits were viewed as being short-term and immediate, such as nutritional knowledge and improved immunity. As a social determinant of health, early childhood development has both short-term and long-term benefits. The investment into early childhood development yields long-term health advantages by lowering the rates of learning disabilities, mental illness and substance abuse in adulthood, and preventing adolescent pregnancies.[1,11] Parents recognized the value of early childhood education on young children, but did not perceive it as being an influential factor for their children's health later in life. From the perspective of primary health framework, the long-term value of early childhood development and its effect on health in particular need to be better communicated to parents. Healthcare professionals can play a vital role in transmitting these findings and can thus improve participation rates in enriched developmental programs.[12]

Although the study focused on the benefits of early childhood development on child health, the participants stated that such programs were beneficial for parents as well. Frequently cited advantages included better bonding with the child and understanding the child's needs, as well as an opportunity to socially interact with other parents, thus promoting knowledge exchange. Further studies are needed to determine improved parental outcomes

from children's participation in early childhood programs. However, these findings need to be shared with the parents and health policy stakeholders in order to improve attendance at childhood development centers, and in dealings with the issue of underutilization of childhood development programs.

Although healthcare professionals describe early childhood development as a foundation that impacts individual health behaviours later in life, parents and caregivers may not be fully aware of the full spectrum of developmental and health benefits that it brings.[13] OEYCs offer fully government-subsidized childhood development services, yet certain centres remain underutilized in some areas, despite noticeable efforts on the part of operational staff to expand attendance, particularly amongst multicultural, francophone, and aboriginal communities.[14] It appears that there is a lack of awareness among the public, in that they perceive participation in early childhood development programs as simply a form of childcare, and not as a potentially advantageous health promotion activity. The value of enriched early childhood development may not seem very apparent at first glance, yet its importance should not be underestimated. From the public health perspective, the investment in early childhood education may be a perfect example of "upstream" thinking: it makes sense to dedicate sought-after healthcare resources towards shaping positive health behaviours and disease prevention, rather than being confronted by the complex necessity of disease treatment.[15] As such, understanding parents' perceptions of early childhood development services has important implications for public health practice. This foundational research can shape the delivery and promotion of early health education—a practice that extends beyond individual health benefits and emphasizes the preventive role of the healthcare system in addressing health and disease-related outcomes.

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Reviewed by Dr. Linda O'Mara, RN, PhD

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