

LET'S GROW...
EVALUATION OF AN AGE-PACED
DEVELOPMENTAL RESOURCE

Summary

Current research indicates that the net benefit of universal prevention as well as early identification and intervention, translates into lower expenditures by families, communities and governments on expensive, long-term residential and specialized services. Research has also confirmed that encouraging the participation of parents in the monitoring of their children's development through screening tools/parent questionnaires, not only strengthens families' sense of responsibility and empowerment, but also promotes primary prevention. A strategy to promote the earlier identification for developmental delays in children was developed by the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit. This strategy involved the mailing of age appropriate health information packages to support parental monitoring of healthy child growth and development for the first five years of their child's life. Summaries of evaluation initiatives regarding this mailout program are discussed in this article. Results indicate that a population-based mailout initiative has had a positive impact upon parenting skill development and the earlier identification of delays in children living in Grey and Bruce Counties.

Introduction

In 1994, several service providers gathered to discuss the impact of the loss of the vision, speech and hearing centers operated by the Public Health unit in Bruce and Grey Counties. The screening centers had played a valuable role in identifying children with developmental delays, prior to school entry. During this meeting, it was noted that children throughout Bruce and Grey Counties were being identified with developmental delays at school entry level and beyond. The service providers recommended that all health and social service agencies/organizations in the two counties undertake the challenge of identifying children with developmental delays at an earlier point in their development. The service providers also suggested that all agencies and

organizations with a vested interest in families with young children work together to coordinate service and educational initiatives for this population.

Research suggests that the years before five are the foundation for healthy growth and development, future learning and health.

Investments in the early years of life are as important as investments in education, post secondary education and health care.

The period from preconception to age five can be referred to as the "investment" stage for child development.

Following this initial meeting, an interagency committee was established to develop a coordinated system of services for all families in Grey and Bruce Counties with children prenatal to age six. The "Let's Grow" committee membership included all agencies in Grey and Bruce Counties with a mandate to provide services for families with young children (such as, the local health unit, Children's Aid Society, preschool speech and language services, Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario Works, Board of Education).

The Let's Grow Committee coordinates the management and delivery of three service components: 1. The provision of information about healthy child growth and development to the general public, 2. Support and services for all families based on need and 3. Community development to create a culture which supports and nurtures families with young children. Subcommittees and task groups plan and coordinate specific activities to support the overall vision of Let's Grow.

Let's Grow Mailout Program

The healthy growth and development information component of Let's Grow takes the form of age-paced developmental mailout packages for all children newborn to five years of age. Research indicates that parents play the most important role in providing the nurturing and stimulation that children require, but they need information and support to develop good and effective parenting skills.⁴

The Let's Grow mailout program begins with the birth of a child. All families in Bruce and

Grey Counties may subscribe, free of charge, to the Let's Grow mailout program in the hospital following the birth of their child. Let's Grow information packages are mailed to parents at age appropriate intervals for the first five years of their child's life.

In the past year (2000) approximately eighty-five percent of parents in Grey and Bruce Counties subscribed to the Let's Grow mailout program. A computer database of subscriptions generates a mailing list from which the issues are mailed to parents at the age appropriate intervals. There are currently 2710 families on the Let's Grow database. In 2000, 5558 issues were mailed to families in Grey and Bruce Counties.

There are 12 Let's Grow issues in total, spanning the age frame from newborn to five years. In each of the twelve issues, information is provided about child growth and development, speech and language skills, hearing, vision, safety, play and parenting skills. A Nipissing Developmental Screening Tool is included with each issue to encourage parents to monitor their child's growth and development. The Nipissing Developmental Screen is suggested by the Office of Integrated Services for Children for use as parent administered screening tool for healthy child development and learning, as outlined in the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Early Identification Guidelines (2000). If a parent has concerns with their child's development, he/she is advised to call the Public Health Unit, where referrals can be made to the appropriate community resources and/or services.

One Let's Grow subcommittee, the Let's Grow Writing Team, has written the text for the Let's Grow issues. The Writing Team consists of an infant development worker, a speech language pathologist, a local resource center coordinator, a children's aid society staff member, a member of the local Board of Education and a Public Health Nurse. A grade 3-5 literacy level is maintained in each issue to account for the varying levels of literacy among parents living in Grey and Bruce Counties.

The Writing Team works closely with a local graphic artist who designs the layout of each issue. "A picture is worth a thousand words", is the philosophy of this graphic artist. All

pictures relate directly to the text of the issue. Photographs depict parents and children interacting in age-appropriate activities that stimulate healthy child growth and development.

Evaluation Initiatives

The Let's Grow mailout program has been operating in Grey and Bruce Counties since 1998. During this time, a number of questions have arisen regarding the effectiveness of the mailout program such as:

- What impact has the Let's Grow program had on parental monitoring of child development?
- Do parents read the Let's Grow issues?
- Do parents discuss the content of the issues with each other?
- Do parents do the activities suggested in the Let's Grow issues?
- Are parents using the Nipissing Developmental Screen to monitor the development of their child?
- Did parents contact anyone about a concern with their child's growth and development?
- Would parents recommend the Let's Grow issues to other parents or caregivers?

A number of initiatives have been conducted in order to evaluate the success of the Let's Grow mailout program. The first initiative was a focus group, which took place in the fall of 1998. New parents were asked about format, content and readability of the Let's Grow issues. All feedback was positive.

Next, a telephone survey of Let's Grow parents was conducted in early 1999. The survey achieved an 81% response rate. A sample of 100 Let's Grow subscribers across Bruce and Grey Counties were contacted by telephone. Half of the sample had received the first package in the hospital and the remaining half had received more than one Let's Grow package in the mail.

Several questions were asked focusing on issue appeal, readability, usability and content. Ninety percent of the sample had read the Let's Grow issues and had kept the issues for future reference. All parents said they were able to use at least one piece of information respondents said they had consulted with a

from the issues in their parenting. Many of multipara parents said they wished they had received the Let's Grow packages with their first child.

A third indicator of the success of the Let's Grow mailout program is the average age of referral to developmental intervention services. The Grey-Bruce Integrated Preschool Speech and Language initiative reports that the average age of referrals to their programs has been steadily declining. For example, from April 1, 1999 to March 31, 2000, the average age of referral for speech and language services was 36 months. From April 1, 2000 to June 30, 2000 the average age of referral had dropped to 33 months. Likewise, from July 1, 2000 to September 30, 2000 the average referral age had dropped again, this time to 30 months. This trend may indicate that parental monitoring of child growth and development is resulting in earlier referral and intervention services.

The fourth evaluation initiative consisted of a parental feedback form in the 1 - year to 2 years Lets Grow issue to all parents who had subscribed to the mailout program in Grey and Bruce. Five hundred and twenty eight stamped evaluation forms were mailed to parents and one hundred twenty three responses were received giving a response rate of 23%. The form asked parents for feedback about appeal, content and usefulness of the Let's Grow issues. Parents were asked if the information in the Let's Grow issues had prompted them to seek out more information about their child's development. For example, did they call their family doctor or request a consultation with a child development professional? Results indicate that the majority of respondents enjoyed receiving the Let's Grow issues in the mail. They found the packages "useful and interesting", as well as "clear and easy-to-read". In addition, ninety-six percent of respondents found the activities described in the issues "easy to do". Parents stated that they learned more about their child's speech and language skills (85%) and physical development (93%), as a result of the mailout packages. Furthermore, the majority of parents used the Nipissing Developmental Screening Tool. One third of

professional regarding a concern they had about their child's development. Of those parents who contacted a professional, the family doctor was most frequently named, followed by Public Health Nurse and physiotherapist. Mom and Dad were the primary readers of the Let's Grow issues and they typically discussed the information with each other. Nearly all respondents reported that they would recommend the Let's Grow issues to other parents and caregivers. Some additional comments from parents were

"The issues were clear, concise and extremely helpful."

"The short but informative articles are super for a parent who gets little spare time for reading."

"I enjoy Let's Grow because I have discovered my son is progressing well – I use the Nipissing Screen in every issue."

"I especially like that the information arrives right at the time I need it. Also that it's concise and easy-to-read – even with a busy family!"

Future evaluation initiatives will include focus groups with parents in early 2001, and an evaluation feedback form provided in the final Let's Grow issue of the series (4 1/2 – 5 1/2 years).

Conclusions

Many communities throughout Ontario, and indeed, Canada are identifying the need for a health promotion prevention and early intervention activities as a means to identify developmental delays at an earlier stage of child development.

In Grey-Bruce the Let's Grow mailout program is a starting point for an earlier identification process. The new Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Early Identification initiative further supports the groundwork of the Let's Grow mailout program.

Bruce and Grey County services providers have undertaken a commitment to doing a better job of identifying infants and children with developmental delays and linking them with the appropriate community resources and services. However, there is still much work to be done.

SOURCE AND CONTACT

Since every newborn is vulnerable to some degree or another and since many developmental problems cannot be predicted at birth, ongoing care, support and education for every parent and child is essential. The Let's Grow mailout program provides age appropriate information to all parents. The program creates an opportunity for parental screening and self-identification of developmental delays. "Parents possess in-depth information and are in the unique position to conduct ongoing observations of their children. This makes them valuable partners in the screening process". Let's Grow also promotes linkages to community resources and services for intervention and treatment where appropriate. Let's Grow is population based and as, it does not discriminate between "at risk" and "not at risk" families. Parental support and education is essential for healthy child growth and development." It is clear that the early years, from conception to age six, have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent learning behaviour and health. Supportive initiatives for parents should begin as early as possible – from the time of conception- with programs of parent support." – Future studies focusing on school-readiness may further support the Let's Grow mailout program with its goal of earlier identification of developmental delays. The Let's Grow experience in Bruce-Grey Counties demonstrate that a population-based mailout initiative has had a positive impact upon parenting skill development and the earlier identification of developmental delays in children.

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5. Statistics courtesy of Grey-Bruce Integrated Preschool Speech and Language Initiative (2001).