Early Child Development in Vancouver

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Editor’s Note

As researchers working on the Policy Research Initiative’s project on New Approaches for Addressing Poverty and Exclusion, we were initially surprised by the extent of income mobility in Canada across generations. We may have been overly influenced by American and British data that show more intergenerational transmission of poverty than found in Canada. Low-income adults in Canada come from families at all income levels. This article is of great interest in that it explores what actually happens. Threats to healthy childhood development are found across the entire socio-economic spectrum, although at increasing intensity as one goes from high- to low-income levels. While the highest risk is found in the poorest neighbourhoods in Vancouver, the largest number of children at risk is more thinly spread across the (larger) middle class neighbourhoods. Consistent with these findings is research that shows the importance to early childhood development of factors other than low incomes. Clearly, policy responses based solely on parents’ income – or those targeted to poor neighbourhoods – are only one part of an overall strategy for tackling vulnerability in children.

Profound influences on early child development are found in the environments where children grow up, live, and learn. These environments, in turn, are strongly influenced by socio-economic, civic, and family conditions. In Canada, inequalities in child development emerge in a systematic fashion over the first five years of life, according to well-recognized factors: family income, parental education, parenting style, neighbourhood safety and cohesion, neighbourhood socio-economic character, and access to quality child care and developmental opportunities. Threats to healthy child development are found across the entire socio-economic spectrum, though at increasing intensity as one goes from high to low levels. Concern for a good start in life unites all families. Yet, despite general knowledge of the importance of healthy child development, until recently, we have had no way of monitoring how it unfolded in specific communities, or understanding how local circumstances could be changed to improve the life chances of children.

Human Resources Development Canada, Statistics Canada, and several academic research teams across the country have been working to fill this gap. Here, we summarize one such initiative: a population-based developmental assessment of kindergarten children in Vancouver, using the Early Development Instrument (EDI). Our work addressed neighbourhood differences in children’s school readiness, socio-economic characteristics, neighbourhood climate, early health risks, detection, and intervention, child care, literacy, and parenting programs, and school performance. The neighbourhoods were characterized by their socio-demographic status, developmental risk circumstances, and de facto access to services and facilities meant to assist child development. What emerges is a comprehensive understanding of Vancouver as an environment for early child development, rich in insights as to what we, as a community, should address to improve the life chances of our youngest citizens. The insights from Vancouver are worth consideration in communities across the country.

The Early Development Instrument

The EDI measures readiness for school across five dimensions of development: cognitive and language, social, emotional, physical, and communication skills in English. It is a group level measure, developed by Dan Offord and Magdelena Janus at McMaster University, and is completed by kindergarten teachers after several months of classroom interaction. Although one
is completed for each child, data are interpreted at the group level (i.e., school or neighbourhood) to help communities assess how well they are doing in supporting young children and their families. In February 2000, the EDI was completed by all kindergarten teachers in the Vancouver School Board on 3,921 children (97 percent of the children of kindergarten age in Vancouver).

In the full report, results were presented according to the child’s residence in one of Vancouver’s 23 social planning neighbourhoods. These were used because they represented, better than the school of attendance, the environments where children spend their early years. Here, we base our summary on the proportion of “vulnerable” children by neighbourhood. These are the children with low scores on one or more dimensions of the EDI and found to be less ready for school than their peers.

**FIGURE 1**

Vancouver – Proportion d’élèves vivant dans chaque quartier affichant de la vulnérabilité dans au moins une des dimensions de développement

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**Summary of the Findings**

- Developmental vulnerability follows a gradient across Vancouver, such that, as one goes from most to least affluent neighbourhood, the proportion of vulnerable children on at least one dimension of the EDI rises from 6 percent to 38 percent (see accompanying map). This overall difference parallels neighbourhood differences on each individual scale. For the language and cognitive development scale, no children were identified as vulnerable in the lowest risk neighbourhood, while 21 percent of children in the highest risk neighbourhood fell into the vulnerable category. For physical health and well-being, the range was 0 to 22 percent; for social competence, the range was 1 to 17 percent; for emotional maturity, the range was 2 to 16 percent; and for communication skills in English and general knowledge, the range was 0 to 16 percent. As rates of vulnerability rise, so does the frequency of multiple vulnerabilities that cut across more than one dimension of the EDI. Although the highest risk is found in the poorest neighbourhoods, the largest number of children at risk is found more thinly spread across the middle class neighbourhoods that, taken as a whole, have a much larger number of young children than the poorest neighbourhoods. If the purpose of an early child development strategy is to increase resilience, decrease vulnerability, and reduce social inequality, then a
strategy to provide universal access to the conditions that support healthy child
development is needed. This may mean addressing issues in different ways in different
neighbourhoods, but it does not mean focusing exclusively on the highest risk areas.
Such a strategy would miss most of the vulnerable children in Vancouver.

- The urban environment can make an important difference for child development. Like
most major Canadian cities, Vancouver’s neighbourhoods are gradually becoming more
economically stratified. Families with young children (ages 0 to 5) are concentrated in the
areas of the city closest to commercial districts and transportation zones, rather than in
neighbourhoods designed for child rearing – largely due to housing affordability, zoning,
and vacancy rates. Also, the majority of non-market housing for families in Vancouver
has been built in existing low socio-economic areas - increasing the level of segregation.
These are the neighbourhoods at highest developmental risk. However, Vancouver is
also a showpiece for urban forms that support early child development. In two
neighbourhoods where middle class and non-market housing have been carefully mixed
together, developmental outcomes are better for all children. It would seem that children
whose family backgrounds put them at risk, but who live in mixed-income neighbourhoods,
tend to be protected compared to their counterparts in low socio-economic segregated
neighbourhoods. In other words, mixed neighbourhoods lead to lower levels of
developmental vulnerability than economically segregated neighbourhoods.

- Although Vancouver has a rich variety of child-care centres and child development
programs, funding levels are low, and programs are unstable. Neighbourhood
accessibility varies, capacities and population coverage are often impossible to
determine, and the mix of programs is ad hoc. For instance, there is a tenfold difference
in neighbourhood child-care accessibility rates across Vancouver (from 0.89 slots per
child to 0.09 slots per child). Ironically, the least-served neighbourhoods are found in the
working class areas of the east side, where child care accessibility would likely have the
greatest developmental benefit. Current spending in Vancouver on all child-care and
development programs for the 0 to 5 age range appears to be less than one fifth what it is
on public education starting at age 6.

- One of our most consistent findings is the role of “non-financial barriers to access” to
programs and services that might assist child development. These barriers are clearly
more significant in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods. As one goes down the socio-
economic spectrum, the data reveal that many developmental issues are not identified
and addressed until later in childhood. Yet, when it comes to child development, the
earlier a problem is identified and addressed, the better for prevention. We do not have a
thorough understanding of these barriers, although from ad hoc and indirect sources, the
following factors seem to be at issue: varying levels of parental knowledge and
understanding of early child development, work-life and home-life time conflicts that make
it hard to access services and programs at the times they are offered, transportation and
local access constraints, and language barriers and feelings of illegitimacy in the face of
middle class professionals. At the same time, several outreach programs in Vancouver,
including the local Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (Healthiest Babies Possible) show
that non-financial barriers to access can be broken down, and developmental
disadvantages overcome, through strategic program design and execution.

- At present, schools are society’s principal child development agencies. However, school
mandates do not start at birth and the notion of education is often interpreted much more
narrowly than development. In Vancouver, we have shown that as much as 60 percent of
the between-school variation in basic competency tests at Grade 4 can be explained by a
combination of kindergarten vulnerability rates, using the EDI and the socio-economic
status of the catchment area of the school. The proportion of children who, on entering
school, are vulnerable on one or more dimension of development is a powerful
determinant of a school’s success in assisting children to achieve their basic academic competencies.

- Creating the conditions for healthy child development will require a profound degree of inter-sectoral collaboration. The programs, services, and environmental influences on children’s development involve federal, provincial, and municipal governments as well as philanthropies, businesses, neighbourhoods, and families. Some factors, such as how the housing market affects the neighbourhoods that children grow up in, are rarely thought about in this context. Decisions made in one sector can have a profound influence on the effectiveness of other sectors in assisting in child development. For instance, when regional health authorities decide to eliminate kindergarten screening for hearing, vision, and dental problems, they may do so on the understanding that such services are not central to their mandate of patient care. However, the repercussions for the school system, and for the long-term health, well-being, and competence of the children affected, may be significant.

References


Note

1. The complete report, with 55 colour maps and graphics, can be downloaded from <www.earlylearning.ubc.ca>. (Accessed January 23, 2004.) For those who cannot download colour maps, a hard copy of the report can be obtained by e-mailing: earlylearning@ubc.ca.

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