

LCDC: Focusing on child development_MetroValley Newspaper Group - Thu 03 Jan 2008 _Page: 0008 - Section: Aldergrove Star - Community

Everyone needs a support system -- children particularly.

Families, friends and communities can provide it.

But if they don't, dangerous individuals, including gang members, may fill the void.

Joy Wilson, a co-ordinator of early childhood development, works out of the Langley Child Development Centre (LCDC).

The non-profit Langley Children's Society which operates the LCDC, was formed by parents and professionals in 1975, and has grown from a one-room pre-school serving 15 children to a multi-program facility serving more than 600 children and youth, aged from birth to 19 years. In partnership with families and the community, LCDC supports Langley's children and youth with special needs, to achieve their physical, intellectual and emotional potential. Programs and services are offered on the basis of inclusive, family centered practice.

Wilson says brain development linked to vision, emotional control, language and symbol cognition is complete by age three, and the ability to correct social and developmental problems significantly declines after age six.

And six per cent of all children born in a single year account for 50-70 per cent of all crime committed by that year's group later in life. Most of these children can be identified by age three.

It all points to a clear need to reach and help vulnerable children early.

Not doing so "is very expensive in terms of our societal costs. Investing early in kids is probably the best crime-prevention method that we can come up with," says Wilson.

Parents and caregivers play a powerful role in wiring a baby's brain for early learning, but raising a child is too big a job to do alone.

Wilson has plenty of good economic reasons why communities should pitch in with more professional help to young families.

The provincial school drop-out rate ranges from 18 to 30 per cent. And for every annual group of students who drop out, there is a \$4 billion lifetime loss to B.C. society.

Wilson says that for each \$1 invested in vulnerable children, there's a pay back of \$7 in societal savings on policing, courts, incarceration and other costs.

If quality early childhood education cuts school drop-out rates by 10 per cent, the overall benefit would be about \$1.2 billion, each year in B.C., she said.

Her statistics come from sources like Dr. Clyde Hertzman, who heads up The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), an interdisciplinary research network of faculty, researchers and graduate students from British Columbia's six major universities (www.earlylearning.ubc.ca).

"It is such a big picture, and that is why I think we need a total commitment from communities, for healthy kids.

"And kids don't live in isolation. They live with families. You really need a wrap-around approach, to support families."

One other surprising statistic: Ninety per cent of vulnerable children do not live in families with low income.

Wilson says all children and families may need help from time to time.

Families may be separated by great distance from parents. As a young mother living in B.C., Wilson herself was a long way from her family in Manitoba.

"As a young mom I went to a family resource drop-in centre.

"That's what parents need to do, they need to interact."

Parents are often unaware of the incredible impact of parent-child interaction, for example simple play, conversations and reading together, etc. It's not easy in an economy that often requires both parents to work.

"It's tough for families to spend time together," says Wilson.

"But this also tells us, it takes a community to raise a child.

"I have to say, credit to this community and the people in this community, they have been very responsive."

Many partners provide funding or programs for early childhood development, including: the two municipalities; the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Community Services in both Aldergrove and Langley; the School District, through programs like Strong Start and Ready Set Learn, and local libraries, all provide early learning services.

And Wilson is heartened by Dr. Hertzman's HELP research, which includes the Early Development Mapping Project, including 12 neighbourhoods of Langley.

"A key component of the mapping project is a checklist completed by Kindergarten teachers for each child in their class. This checklist has been implemented in all school districts across the province of B.C., to establish a baseline measure for children's school readiness and for early childhood development. The results are being used to help examine populations of children in different communities to assess how well communities are doing in supporting young children and their families.

"So we are able to look at our neighbourhoods and plan to meet the needs of all children," said Wilson.

"I think the magic of this research is that each of our ministries, Health, Education and The Ministry of Children and Family Development . . . have been brought together under the province's Early Learning Mandate."

Representatives of these ministries, along with community service providers like Aldergrove Neighbourhood Services, Langley Community Services, Langley Child Development Centre and Xyolhemeylh Aboriginal Services, have met to discuss priorities.

"We have collectively agreed that central Langley and Aldergrove have the greatest need. So we really want to make sure that our efforts are focused there."

Despite a variety of early childhood services, and some programs offered evenings and weekends, many parents, because of work schedules or lack of transportation have accessibility problems.

Wilson would like a Neighbourhood Centre for Aldergrove, which might incorporate not only Aldergrove Neighbourhood Services -- currently with a drop in centre in a portable at Shortreed Elementary -- but also include for example; the Ministry of Children and Family Development, an outreach office of Langley Child Development Centre, and Public Health.

Eventually a Neighbourhood Centre could accommodate services for youth, adults and seniors.

"A neighbourhood centre would establish a stable presence of services in the community," Wilson said.

"Families have to have access, and time and time again families have told us that services have to be at the neighbourhood level."

Citizens, municipal government, and business can all help to ensure early childhood development programs are available. Business owners can offer flexibility for parents with young children, and larger corporations can offer child care settings within their businesses.

Citizens can volunteer time or donate money.

The United Way's "Success by Six Initiative" does great work in early childhood development, and charitable donations can be designated to those programs.

"Sometimes, I think it is just hearing the message over and over. . . we need to pay attention to these early years."

Children need and seek love, respect, friendship, a sense of belonging, success at school, and outlets for their youthful energy.

If that can't be found in family and a healthy community, the vulnerable child may seek out these supports through membership in harmful peer groups, such as gangs.